

DISCOURSE ON METHOD

Questions on Polo's Method of the *Abandonment of the Limit*

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After studying a few authors of the 'System Philosophies' —the family of views that draw inspiration from Descartes— an aspiring young philosopher remarks: why are these people obsessed with the theory of knowledge instead of tackling the real issues? The youngster could have been wrong in his observation, yet all agree that the obsession for the method over thematic questions is the hallmark of the modern thinkers...with Kant marking the so-called critique/dogmatic divide... Is it any wonder then that they seem to be quickly running out of line? Consider the following example: after seeing a slithering cobra coiled up in a corner of your tent on waking up in the morning in a camping expedition would you first stop to think of whether the eyes are reliable enough to be taken on their face value? Would you not rather be more inclined to think that the matter in hand is weightier than a consideration of the conditions for the possibility of seeing it? What is more important: the disease causing organism under observation or the electron microscope the researcher is using to observe it? Why the obsession for method with the consequent relegation of the real topics to a distant second place? We know that thinking is important but should we stay the course of our inquiry just in the thought process? Would the following expose provide an answer to this puzzle?

The Dynamic of the Principle of Immanence

Be it as it may, one could be prompted to ask: why did philosophical inquiry end up in this rut? Is the principle of immanence to blame? Let us see whether we can find

out. Indeed the principal sign of this pathway is the consideration of thought as the foundation of being. As any thought process necessarily involves the act of thinking itself and the corresponding subject matter, one simply gets overawed with his idea and stays the process there. The classic approach —thought grounded on being— is inverted:

- The human mind attains no other object than its own representations (ideas, phenomena, empirical impressions) —the only 'reality' it can contemplate.
- The mind concentrates on the intelligible species as object *quod* to the detriment of the *quo*^[2]. Notice that if one is constrained within the realm of the *quod* he somewhat cuts himself off from the world without. The *quod* becomes a limit of his very quest to know the trans-ideal world.
- Thus any philosophy may be considered *immanentist* which does not admit the transcendence of being (*ens*)
- *Immanentism* is possible because human mind, according to Aristotle, is *quoddammodo omnia* (somewhat all things) and as such is capable of constructing a replica of reality within itself.
- The formula of the principle of immanence is articulated as the Cartesian *cogito*^[3] and the "generic I think" of the Kantian transcendental subject.
- With this principle, both being and truth, as the agreement (*adaequatio*) of the mind with reality, suffer a dramatic reduction. However much one scrutinizes his thought he will never derive there-from one single iota of the reality without. One is condemned to remain in the dream world...

Its Historical Evolution

In the last two or three centuries this principle, although spawning families of views, has taken on contrasting forms. It has been understood as the evolution of ideas or

world-views (*historicism*); as a constructive and methodical system of thought (*logicism*); as a rationalisation of nature (*scientism*); as a linguistic structuring (*Analytical Philosophy, Structuralism*); as a product of the individual or social consciousness (*Psychologism, Sociologism*); *Eclecticism, Pragmatism* ... eventually disembarking into *Nihilism*, a counter-position of the (collapsed) rationalist optimism, which viewed history as triumphant progress of reason^[4]. Let us take a look at all this more attentively...

- *Rationalism* is the first step of the philosophy of immanence. Being is reduced to the object of knowledge —an emphasis on the *quod* aspect of the intelligible species as opposed to its aspect *quo*. That which is known properly and directly is the idea (the ideal equivalent of *essence*). Sense experience, as a source of knowledge is cut out. Reflection is the only scientific pathway to knowledge —the new method; hence the tendency of philosophy to be reduced to a theory of knowledge. Hence also the fragmentation and polarisation of knowledge (thought/extension; object/subject; individual/society). The main representative is Spinoza. By concentration on the object rather than the subject in the Cartesian subject-object dichotomy, he moves from epistemological to cosmological immanence: *cogito naturam, ergo ... (I think of nature, hence... the nature as it appears to my mind)*.
- *Empiricism* (the view that experience, especially of the senses, is the only source of knowledge) comes about as a reaction to rationalism, but still under the supremacy of consciousness —the ideal order of things is still dominant. The Empiricist goes from intellectual intuition to sense intuition (Hobbes, Locke, and Hume). *I sense (feel), therefore I am...* that is to say, I have this or that impression of the world about me, therefore...
- *Critical Idealism*, also called *Transcendental Idealism*,^[5] is a convergence of rationalism and empiricism —an attempt at reconciling both. Kant, the main figure in this family of views, worked out a Copernican revolution with his system—he claimed to have reached a synthesis between rationalism and empiricism. For him,

being (*esse*) is not a real predicate but rather the absolute positing of a thing before, and for, the knowing subject (being = positing of thought). The foundation of being is situated in human subjectivity. Access to transcendent objects is reserved to *Practical Reason*, which establishes (by way of *postulates*) the objective reality of *freedom*, the immortality of the *soul* and *God*, objects otherwise of faith, not of knowledge. *Transcendental ego cogito...*

- In *Absolute Idealism* the immanence of thought becomes complete master of reality. Consciousness becomes an Absolute, which transcends all partial determinations, and which is called 'God' (thus Fichte, Schelling and Hegel). The absolute immanent character of this claim is the fact that there is no distinction between the finite and the infinite. The finite is an essential *moment* of the infinite.
- *Dialectical Materialism* is the convergence of anthropological and materialistic reductionism with the dialectics of Hegel^[6]. The principle of immanence is presented in a new version in which human praxis acquires a central role (*I do, therefore I am*). For Marx, man generates himself by his work. Truth is not given; it is created by practice. Being is not given; its place is usurped by a dialectical becoming.
- *Voluntarism, Existentialism and Positivism*: The dynamic of the principle of immanence now turns to the will: *volo, ergo sum*. "The doubt was a will to doubt, and it was a will to doubt because it was a will to power" (Nietzsche, Schopenhauer). In *Existentialism*, Heidegger tries in vain to recover being: "being is not that which is present, but the *presence* of that which is present",^[7] that is to say, the appearance of being to consciousness. In spite of his very noble attempt — to retrace the steps back to being— Heidegger still remains confined within immanence.
- *Religious Immanence (Modernism)* began with Luther. He had no interest for *God-in-himself* but rather *God-for-me*. This culminates in *Modernism*, for which religion is a

vital phenomenon originating from the movement of the heart called *sentiment*. "I feel (for God), therefore..." The resulting evolving consciousness is similar to Hegel's Absolute.

- *Critical Idealism* tries to adopt the principle of immanence, and from it recover realism which would then be *critical* as opposed to the old form of (*dogmatic*) realism.^[8] This is an impossible task. If one begins with thought, one cannot progress beyond beings of thought (from *esse* one can get *intelligere* as an act, but not the other way round). So the starting point must be abandoned if one wants to do metaphysics. Representatives of this school of thought have been mainly Cardinal Mercier, Maréchal and Karl Rahner. *Mercier* starts from the *cogito*. What is primary is our thought. On reflecting we observe sensations—which are passive. By applying the principle of causality, we postulate the existence of the external reality. *Maréchal* wished to arrive at realism from a Kantian transcendental analysis—reality can be reconstructed by analysing the formal object of the mind. He is the forerunner of *Rahner*. His claim: the object of metaphysics is an a-thematic perception of being—an indeterminate being understood along the lines of formalistic scholasticism. In this a-thematic perception, the Absolute would be implicitly affirmed (*neomodernism*).

Beyond the World within

Now the big question is: would Polo have fallen victim to all this? I do not think so; yet on reading him one cannot help but feel that he gives much too much weight to method over thematic issues. My fear is that I may not have understood him at all. Thus the main purpose of this paper is to expose the areas where I may have missed the point altogether so that the seasoned *Poloists* may come to my help. My incursion into *Poloism* has had a very bumpy ride, not least because of his love for making simple matters overly complicated but above all because of the resistance of my mind to assimilate his thought. Indeed, I have no doubt in my mind that Polo has something to say; besides, he is genuine about it. Nevertheless, one cannot help but

think that the modern philosopher tends to write for the gallery, for a reading public that is disappointed if things are too simple and plain. The honest seeker is only confused by this endless labyrinth of words. One is then left wondering if scholarship would not be overplaying its hand with such reconstructions.^[9] Furthermore, one is faced with a situation which is similar to a stomach which rejects something which by all estimates could be a delicacy. Is the stomach upset (read the mind so ill-disposed as to turn down a good Philosophy)? Or rather is it the food that is not good enough?

Here is a summary of what I understand of Polo's doctrine and my difficulties with it. I am relying heavily on *El acceso al ser* but I have also read other works in my relentless search for an entry point to his thought: thus, *Evidencia y realidad en Descartes*, *El ser I*, *Antropología transcendental I*, some excerpts of *Teoría del conocimiento I* to IV, ...

My main problem is with the method: *el abandono del límite mental*. The method is mentioned in almost all his works but especially in *El acceso al ser*. He calls it the method of metaphysics. *El acceso al ser* is largely about the so-called innate habits of the first principles (tied-up with the Aristotelian Agent Intellect). These habits, according to Polo, afford us a higher manner of knowing and help us gain access to the three basic realities (*realidades principiales*) namely, *persistence* or act of being of the universe at large (principle of non-contradiction), *originary being* or act of being of God (principle of identity) and the link of dependence between the two: *transcendental causality*.^[10] It is therefore about a way of knowing that is superior to that of reason. For it is in the faculty of reason where one finds the so-called limit that bars one from gaining access to the world without. Modern philosophy has come up against this limit without ever abandoning it (overcoming it) giving rise, therefore, to a condition of the mind which he calls *perplexity*.

By *method* Polo does not mean the manner of (linguistically) expressing thought. Rather it is all about the use of a mode of knowing which is little known and rarely exercised. It is a method discovered by Polo in order to gain access —according

to this new approach— to the principal themes of reality (the act of being of the universe, essence of the universe, the act of being of man and the essence of man). This method or approach has a clear and precise name as we have seen: *the abandonment of the mental limit* (*abandono del límite mental*). By now the reader would be dying to ask: but what exactly is it? By mental limit he understands reason's 'operational' manner of knowing, that is to say, the type of knowing that is carried out according to the immanent operations of the mind. These operations are characterized by the fact that on knowing they objectify — form an object, outcome as it were, of the act of knowing. The object so formed is measured up (inextricably bound up) with the immanent operation and is intentional —points at or bears a certain likeness and association with respect to— the real order of things from which it is abstracted.^[11] Polo argues that there is a mode of knowing that goes beyond this one (the mere operational way of knowing, also known as abstraction). It is a knowing, as discussed here below, which is superior to the knowing according to the mental object. He has a special term for the immanent operations: he calls them "presence" because they illuminate or form an object. Other times he calls them "*to have or the condition of having*" (*haber*) because they are possessive of the ideal object. He applies the term "presented" (*presentado*) to the formed objects.

Operational (objectifying) knowing is the more common type of knowing. It is the ordinary mode of knowing used especially in the day to day living situation because the process of forming objects which are bereft of spatio-temporal conditions make for the easy resolution of day to day problems, those that is to say, that involve space and time. Accordingly, this way of knowing, far from being negative or prejudicial, is natural to man and helps him run his normal life. Yet Polo argues that, in order to know in a higher manner than the one afforded us by the operational mode of knowing, one has to detect that the latter approach is a *limit*, constraint, as it were, for any further knowledge (*la prosecucion cognoscitiva*). In order to know more, one must detect that this level of knowledge is a limit. The limit must be discovered in such conditions as to allow itself to be abandoned (*cabe abandonarlo*). There are several

ways of abandoning the ideal limit and with each way one happily bursts forth into the formidable world of the real existents mentioned above. The method consists in isolating and laying bare the "mental presence" (*haber*) in order to open oneself to the world without, thus gaining access to the being beyond the ideal world.

In page 28 of *El acceso al ser* Polo explicitly argues that there is a way of reaching out (to being) even from *Agnosticism* (?!)... there is therefore no reason to despair. He proposes a method to "*desvanecer la perplexidad*"—a method of banishing the condition of perplexity to oblivion. Note that Polo does not ask about being. His point of departure is *why* concept (cf. *ibid.* 29). The task consists in eliminating the condition of *having* ("el haber") that which the *having* affords us (the possessed, the intentional object) in order to fully carry out the return ("devolución") of the known object, to the thing existing outside the mind. According to Polo, genuine knowledge begins from within the mind and tries to grope for the real through the three stages of what he calls "la via racional": conception, judgment and *fundamentation*. But then one comes up against a cul-de-sac...beyond *fundamentation*, rational operations are barred because from the abstract object one cannot advance towards the knowledge of the real. But, suddenly, one detects the limit in very specific conditions as to be able to overcome it and then, *voilà*, he abandons it in order to make true philosophy, a philosophy which will enable us to gain access to the world of the real. Notice that the whole approach is fixated with "el saber", "el concepto" and "la presencia"....all of which are conditions of the mind.

Doesn't this approach remind you of Mercier's *Critical Idealism* mentioned above? Didn't it rather strike you as a futile exercise? Sample the following reasoning sequence. In operational thinking one comes up against pure presence, the objectified dimension of pure thought. He is dazzled and confused, perplexed! He *detects* that he has hit a cul-de-sac in his quest for the real that lurks without; he has come up against a dead form of act (pure actuality) which leads nowhere. He then **abandons** the limit, as it were leaping over pure actuality of the object in pursuit of act

(activity). Suddenly he is aware... thanks to the innate habit of first principles — to be precise, in the case of trans-ideal existence it is the habit of the principle of non-contradiction—... he is aware of something else beyond the limit: the principle of non-contradiction which grounds the *existence* of the universe or otherwise also known as *persistence*. Eureka! He has managed to burst forth into the awesome world of real things...by just abandoning the limit on time! This is only the first dimension of the method of the abandonment of the limit...[\[12\]](#)

The big questions are: why start the whole quest with an inquiry into the concept? Why not just open oneself to the reality about you and let it talk to you... and only then explore the conditions for the possibility of knowing it? Granted that both at the stages of “detecting” and the “awareness” one could speak of a knowledge process of sorts, but what about the crucial stage of the act of abandoning? Is it an act of the mind or of the will? And if the latter, why the sudden onset of a non-rational behaviour while the whole inquiry has all along been about a cognitive process? Doesn't that suggest a tinge of voluntary arbitrariness in the whole enquiry? [\[13\]](#)

Yet this is not all. When thought becomes the focus of inquiry it is important that one keeps his attention “focussed”. It is in this vein that Polo often speaks of “*concentrar la atención*”. Should one lose concentration, all knowledge *activity* degenerates into an *actuality* (something proper of the mental object and fruit of the rather base operational activity of the mind); it becomes presupposed (given, dogmatic), a pure assumption and therefore null and void —a non-reality. This is why activity (mental activity) becomes the central issue, the basis for anything that is worthy of the name ‘transcendental’. Would this suggest that the act of thought (*intelligere*) sustains reality (being)? Perhaps this is why for Polo being and movement are equivalent (cf. *El ser I*). Perhaps also this is why he insinuates that Agent Intellect and *esse* in man (co-existence) are equivalent.[\[14\]](#) One is then left wondering whether man has taken the place of God for whom thought (*intelligere*) and being (*esse—actus*

essendi) are equivalent. By his eternal and infinite act of thought God creates and sustains the universe...God is principle of the universe...

In effect the term principle can have many meanings. Principle can have the meaning of a comprehensive and fundamental law, doctrine, or assumption. It can be a rule or code of conduct. It can also be a law or fact of nature underlying the working of an artificial device. Yet principle can also be taken as a cause, thus the principle of any effect is the cause that produces it. It is in this vein that it can also be considered as an axiom or a logical fundament. Polo seems to apply it in the latter sense. In this sense the act of being of the universe (*persistence*) is a first principle identical to the principle of non-contradiction.^[15] So when he talks of '*ser principial*' the term principle has the nuance of a logical cause —Aristotelian *cognitio certa per causas*— as used in logical constructs (syllogisms). This suggests, albeit obliquely, an identity between the logical and real orders —some allusion to the Hegelian Absolute?

By their fruits you will know them

Polo argues that metaphysical *esse* (*persistence*) is trans-objective (beyond the objective limit) and is clearly distinct from the human *esse* (*co-existence*) which is trans-operational (beyond the thematic operation of the intellect). By going beyond his intellectual operation man reaches out into the inner recesses of his being; he discovers his co-existence, a being which contrasts sharply with the being of the things without. But if this is the case, how do I distinguish the being of a cow —a trans-ideal reality— from the being of another human who exists outside me? Would the being of another human be a *co-existence* or a *persistence*?

Furthermore, he would seem to claim that what intellectually references the mind to reality is the habit rather than the idea. But from the Thomistic point of view, the intellect itself does the "referencing to reality" by means of the second operation of the intellect: judgment. When I say: "the dog I see before me *is* white". The "is" is not a logical "is", a dead act of the mind; rather it refers to the actual *esse* of the dog... This

is the method of *separatio*. There is no need of a habit to do this! The role of habit is to facilitate the operation. Operation is more *actual* than the habit, at least in the thomistic scheme.

Yet there is something else which makes Polo's approach puzzling...even suspect: the seamless merge he seems to place between the natural and supernatural orders. For example, he argues that personal growth (as opposed to natural or essential growth) can only be achieved by an act of 'elevation'. And just who might grant such precious gift? God, of course. This suggests that the improvement of any person —whether in the state of grace or not— stands in need of a supernatural intervention. Likewise, he seems to provide a "natural" explanation of the mystery of the Trinity from his system of dual correlatives!

In conclusion, I would allow myself a little digression....

Entering by the main avenue of the old cemetery, to the left there is a large tomb with the following inscription: "DE NIHILO NIHILUM IN NIHILUM NIHIL POSSE REVERTI" (Nothing can change nothing (anything) into nothing from nothing). "What on earth could have been the ultimate meaning of life for this man?" I ask myself, as I stare in awe at the most vivid expression of the most radical nihilism ever etched out in stone. Thus far has the principle of immanence led us! Yes, the dynamic of this option has been a process, each time more radical and hence more empty, of the principle of immanence: thought, sensation, affectivity, praxis... nothing!^[16]

The immanentist philosopher wishes to re-invent the wheel, to restart the whole process of knowing in the name of *criticism*. On beginning again from scratch, he is given an option, not between faith and reason, but rather between being and thought. On applying the methodical doubt he suspends belief, and by extension, being as an intensive act (*esse*), the nucleus of all truth, natural and revealed—because anything received without the watchful control of reason is presupposed (an assumption) and hence null and void. Yet the paradox is that the very starting point of

this pathway, this option, is another act of faith. A faith in the opposite direction, a faith in my own will to power^[17]....an act of raw will.

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