

Leonardo Polo, *El hombre en la historia*.

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Among the many questions that Polo explores in his *El hombre en la historia* (2008) some, such as the relation between the person and history and that between freedom and history, are particularly dear to him. In *El hombre en la historia*, Polo shows how the person is much more than his/her history. The person is found in the setting of history but is not precisely an historical being or a being-in-history as Heidegger would have it. History is the framework within which the person acts with and for others. Such activity then leads to the creation of culture. The person may look back in history in order to draw meaning and learn from the past. But since the person remains radically free he/she is a being mainly characterized by his/her outlook towards the future rather than the past. The person is therefore not constrained by history nor destined to a fate within the mere setting of his/her activity, but rather, open to truth and to a Providential God through faith.

In *El hombre en la historia*, Polo's primary concern is man and not history. In light of that, one of the most significant contributions he makes is the way he characterizes the primacy of the person's freedom over the historical context in which he is found. Polo accomplishes this by asking whether man's destiny can be found in the historical setting in which he operates. In his response to this question, Polo shows how in both recent and ancient times man has attempted to grasp in vain the basis (*fundamento*) and meaning of his destiny through an operational type of knowing (*saber operacional*), or that is, through a knowing he uses to operate in the world in view of controlling it, transforming it or subduing it as it were. Polo identifies several such intrinsically practical activities such as magic, myth, technological progress, poetry, and even ethics to a certain extent. All of these appear to promise an "infallible" way to understand reality and to overcome all limitations yet none is able to yield the *wisdom* necessary to uncover the reality of man's *telos* or destiny. For that, man must first turn to philosophy in order to attain a theoretical type of knowing. From the outset, Polo stresses that a blatant denial of philosophy entails a reduction of all human knowing to an operational knowing. And such a denial inevitably translates to a denial of man's freedom, that is, a denial of his ability to transcend himself and the world.

But, is a theoretical type of knowing through reason enough to safeguard man's ability to reach the basis of reality? Polo answers negatively. He shows how a theoretical type of knowing allows man to distinguish between truth and phenomenon, thereby being able to ground himself in that which is eternal and unchanging. That notwithstanding, Polo emphasizes that being as such slips away even from man's reason, a position contrasting a Plotinian or Hegelian kind of idealism which confuses being with man's idea of being. Only by means of faith, Polo points out, can philosophy be unburdened from needing to find the basis of reality in the consistency of a closed ideal system of thought.

For Polo, faith is a third type of knowing along with the operational and theoretical kinds that allows man to answer the pressing question regarding his own destiny. Polo holds faith to be a gift from God which enlightens the limits of philosophical knowing and therefore frees from necessity. More specifically, according to Polo, the light of Christian faith is key to safeguarding man's freedom because it allows one to recognize the person as a reality that stands outside of the cosmic realm. The reason for this, explains Polo, is that each human soul is created immediately by God. Hence, as such, each person is a reality that is constantly adding something new to creation. Thanks to the person's freedom, moreover, there is a fundamental *discontinuity* in history from one person to another and from one generation to the next. Man is therefore a creature that primarily looks to the future in order to find that his destiny is extra-cosmic and trans-historical. Properly speaking, in Polo's mind, man's end is a not a philosophical matter but rather one that must be addressed from a theological point of view. In

summary, for Polo, history is both unrepeatable and unable to culminate from within; and these two conclusions dispel the ever-cyclical Classical view history as well as to the more recent Marxist stance whereby the end of history is to be found within it.

A significant contribution Polo makes in *El hombre en la historia* is undoubtedly the way he elucidates the philosophical conditions necessary for properly conceiving of human freedom. The high regard he has of human freedom, however, should not be misunderstood. Polo is a realist when it comes to man's way of exercising his freedom. In the chapter where Polo discusses the relation between ethics and history, he points out that human action is not autonomous but created. In other words, through action, the person does not determine the structure of reality, not even his/her own; if anything, the person possesses nothing more and nothing less than the ability to *perfect* reality. The underlying presupposition for Polo is therefore that reality must always be able to be perfected through free human action. At the same time, however, Polo realizes that man's free will has been weakened by original sin and observes that as a result, man is unable to apply his freedom in perfecting the world as he should, that is, with the greatest intensity possible. In essence, original sin stems from man's deplorable and hopeless project to stand in God's place and determine, as it were, the very structure of reality (i.e. to determine what is good and evil) by an equally hopeless means for such an end: an operational type of knowing. Original sin does not kill freedom, however, it only damages it. To Polo all in all, therefore, both the person's ability to be free and to be open to a redeeming, transcendent principle remain, which implies, that the person's natural rights and responsibilities with respect to the world also remain.

One would have liked *El hombre en la historia*, to have been a systematic analysis of Polo's theory of man in history, yet it is not. *El hombre en la historia*, by contrast, is a collection of various Polian *sources* published here for the first time in which his theory on history is embedded and from which it is left to his readers to gather. Each chapter, written at different times throughout Polo's career, is an essay developing a specific idea linked to the problem of man and history. But far from lacking a common thread, the five chapters in *El hombre en la historia* are unified by Polo's understanding of the person as a being open to the transcendent and thanks to that, they actually serve to introduce the reader to Polo's *Transcendental Anthropology*, the pinnacle of his work.

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