



INTRODUCTION TO LEONARDO POLO'S PHILOSOPHICAL MOTIVATION

John Branya

The purpose of this article is to give a brief bird's eye view of L. Polo highlighting the motivation and originality of his philosophy. We do not intend to assess how original he was and whether his claims are accurate or not. That will require a longer and deeper study which goes beyond the limits of this article.

There are many good articles explaining the origin and development of Leonardo Polo's philosophy: "(Selles Dauder, n.d.)", "(Corazón González, 2011)", "(Cruz-Cruz, 1992)", "(Yepes Stork, 2005)", "(Falgueras Salinas, n.d.)", "(Falgueras Salinas, García González, Padial, & Universidad de Málaga, 2003)", "(Piá Tarazona, n.d.)" to quote but a few. This article does not add much to the previous ones. It is mainly intended for a non-Spanish audience, who probably know little about L. Polo's philosophy. It's main value is that it is based on Leonardo Polo's explanation of his own thought. In the prologue to the first volume of 'Antropología Transcendental' Polo looks over his shoulder after his retirement. He considers the two volumes of 'Antropología Transcendental' to be the apex and last stone of his philosophical undertaking. We include translation done by Derrick Esclanda of this prologue at the end of the article. The translation of the texts in the body of the article are mine.

The article has two distinctive parts, the first one gives his historical background, the second is a quick analysis of his own autobiography as he gives it in the prologue to the first volume of 'Antropología Transcendental'.

Historical sketch

In order to understand L. Polo better it is fitting to present a short sketch of his life and the thematic development of his thought. I found it pedagogical to classify his life in six stages; childhood, university studies and discovery, first works, years of silence, mature works and retirement. Polo himself values personal history to understand a philosopher as he states in 'Lecciones de Ética':

"Memory is very important for man, because man depends of his past and his present way of understanding today's reality is impossible if one does not take into

account the past. What has happened to me has improved or deprived me.” (Polo, 2013)

Childhood (1926 to 1945)

In this stage the intellectual development was forged first in Madrid where he studied in, the [Lycée](#) Française, in Madrid which initiated him into foreign languages when he was still a child. He had to move with his family in 1937 to in Albacete due to the strenuous war circumstances in Madrid. After the war in 1939 the family moved back to Madrid where he studied in the Instituto Cardinal Cisneros. He had to repeat one year, so he had plenty of time to read on his own. He finished with an award for Extraordinary Performance. When he was 14 he was initiated to philosophy by reading the book of a clear and deep philosopher of the previous century, Jaime Balmes. From them on he continue reading avidly the philosophy books that were available both in the well-stocked library of his grandfather and from the equally well equipped library of the Instituto, at that time the best public school in Madrid.

From the vital point of view, the Civil War surely left profound marks in his life, seeing his family in danger –his maternal uncle who was a member of parliament for Melilla was killed, and his father who also held public positions during the republic had to seek refuge in South America and died abroad.

University and Discovery (1945 to 1962)

This second stage corresponds to his university studies. He did his undergraduate in Law which he studied to follow his family tradition. His father and two uncles were very good lawyers and his surviving uncle encouraged him to study law so that he could work in the family law firm. Leonardo was more inclined to study mathematics but he decided to follow his family tradition. Nevertheless, when he finished in 1949, and after working for a little while in the firm he realised that his heart was not for it, and decided to follow an academic life. He got a grant to do a PhD in Law.

While he was studying Law he continued delving on philosophical topics as he remembers from time to time in his books, as this quotation suggests:

“Here is an old idea I thought about when I was about 20 years old . It can be developed futher, though. How many times man gets the opposite of what he wanted because he finds a legality that is not technical. The means have to be related to norms. This is a legality that if it is not resepcted, the opposite happens. It is almost certain that man is incoherent when he does not respect the legality; the relationship between the means and the good. From evil one cannot get good, because the good is spoiled.”

While he did law he continued reading avidly philosophy and in 1950 he had an answer to his many questions. It was his Aha! moment. It was like a sudden intuition

that opened the door that made it possible to join the achievements of the modern and classic philosophies thanks to the discovery of a new method. At this time he was 24 years old.

“... it suddenly occurred to me, period. I was pondering about thinking and being, and about what being had to do with thinking; then I realized that we cannot arrive at being if one does not abandon the supposition of the object, because the supposition makes the object limited and a limited knowledge cannot be a knowledge of being if this is taken in the transcendental sense.” (Cruz-Cruz, 1992).

He called his discovery the discovery and abandonment of the mental limit.

“Many years ago I made the proposal to find a method to overcome the limits of the mental presence in man. This proposal brings the fact that human beings have knowledge powers superior to those “present-showing” and these are the habits. Certainly this proposal is not easily acceptable to thomistic philosophers. Nevertheless, among the many reasons to support it are the following. Firstly that habits cannot be limited to be a mere static repository of knowledge. Secondly that from long time ago –remember Plato- the knowledge of truth is something like a transcendental memory. But this transcendentality is not proper of the human mental presence, that in no way intrinsically penetrates into the remembrance of truth”. (Polo, Epistemologia, Creacion, Elevacion, unpublished).

This method will give access to the new transcendental fields of Anthropology maintaining the classic metaphysic but above it.

“In order to open the new area of what is transcendental is necessary to use the method that I call the *abandonment of the mental limit*. This is a proper name because the mental operations are the inferior acts of knowledge and therefore what is known through these operations has naturally to be limited. This limitation can be discovered from the intellectual habits that are superior powers of knowledge than the operations. Nevertheless the knowing operation is commensured with what it knows – what is called the object-. If one takes the limitation of the object, when one abandon the limit imposed by the operation, one reaches the trans-objective themes. If one takes the limitation of the operation, when one abandon the limit imposed by the operation, one reaches the trans-operational themes. The first corresponds to the metaphysics, the second to anthropology.” (Polo, 1999).

This intuition needed much work and this is why probably he concurrently to his phd studies he started and undergraduate degree in Philosophy. The phd grant allowed him to go to Rome, where he lived with St. Josemaria, a great source of inspiration for his life and his philosophy. There he read and wrote extensively, some 10 to 12 hours a day. During his stay in Rome he wrote the manuscript ‘*The Real Distinction*’ that contained his main discoveries and parts of which will eventually be the source of most of his works. He never finished his doctorate in Law. Once the grant was over, he started working at the recently started University of Navarre. The first year he taught in the Faculty of Law, and the following year 1955 in the Faculty of

Philosophy which was just started. He finished his degree in Philosophy in 1959 and obtain a doctorate in Philosophy under the professor Millan Puelles in 1961. His doctoral dissertation, which won a prize, became his first published work "Evidencia y Realidad in Descartes" in 1963.

His reading during this period, and probably afterwards was so intense that he used to comment that he did not need the University to allocate funds for buying books for him, as the following anecdote corroborates:

It was commented that when he was helping Prof. Alvaro D'Ors in the organization of the Humanities Library, whenever faced with some problem he will joyfully say: "why do we need so many books if I have already read them all?" (Castilla de Cortazar, n.d.)

First published works (1963-1968)

This period corresponds with his first three published works and the appointment of the professorship to the new established seat of philosophy in the University of Granada in 1966, where he taught until 1968. He went back to the University of Navarre, this time as a professor.

The first published of his works 'Evidencia y Realidad in Descartes' is based on his doctoral thesis. In it he gives a rather new to Descartes motivation. He defends that Descartes rationalism is actually hidden voluntarism. The second of his works 'El acceso al ser' was to be the first of a series of five explaining his method and main achievements. It develops the intuition of the method that opens the way to reach reality, the existent, the being. The new method, which he calls the 'abandonment of the mental limit' reaches the existence and essence of the world ('extra-mental reality' as he calls it, and then the existence and essence of the person. Each of these 4 topics will have been a new book. During this period he only managed to published the first one 'El Ser-I, la Existencia Extramental'. The poor reception of the books and probably mental fatigue made him stop publishing for about 14 years.

Silent years (1968-1982)

During these years he continued lecturing in the University of Navarre. During the summer months he started traveling to some universities in South America where some of his past students, would invite him to assist in the training of faculty members. He would not be idle; he kept on working on his manuscripts in order to present his method in a better way. He was preparing the foundations of what would later become the five volumes of 'Curso de Teoría del Conocimiento' (Theory of Knowledge Course) –one of his master works- and later the two volumes of "Antropología Transcendental" which he considers the culmination of his work.

Mature works (1982-1996)

In 1982 one of his students, a nurse by profession, requested her classmates to record Polo's classes which she could not attend because of her work shifts. The students realised that the transcription of the lectures could be easily published once the professor had corrected them. This gave a new impulse and confidence to the professor, who then started publishing again. It was this students' initiative that led to the publication of the five volumes of Theory of Knowledge and later the culmination of his work, and the two volumes of Transcendental Anthropology. The motivation and opinion L. Polo had on these books can be seen in the paragraphs 23 to 25 of the translated prologue in the Annex.

Retirement (1996 – 2013)

In Spain it is mandatory that professors retire at 70. D. Leonardo had to do so, but he continued having an office in the Faculty, where he went from time to time. Most of his time was spent at his home in the city where he continued receiving colleagues, disciples and friends. With the help of some of his past students he corrected the manuscripts of the books transcribed from his lectures and conferences. Following a suggestion of one of his disciples he prepared a new book in which he applies his philosophical findings to the theology of Christ, perfect man and perfect God. This book is still unpublished to date.

Analysis of the Prologue to Transcendental Anthropology

There is no better account to the life of a philosopher than his own memories. Leonardo Polo does it in the Introduction to the first volume of his "Antropología Transcendental".

We analyze it and give the complete translation as an annex in order to keep the integrity of his text for easy reading.

Structure of the prologue

The prologue has 27 paragraphs and its structure is as follows:

- a) Purpose of the book # 1-2
- b) The risks undertaken # 3-7
- c) Core of his philosophy #8-9
- d) His philosophy as continuation of the perpetual philosophy #10-14
- e) Value of modern philosophy #15-20
- f) The culmination and explanation of his main works #20-24
- g) Style considerations regarding the book #25-26

h) Thanking his collaborators #27

Position of 'Antropología Transcendental' in his philosophical enterprise.

When L. Polo mentions that from the beginning of his career he was trying to see the proper relationship between metaphysics and anthropology he is probably recounting his first philosophical readings that started when he was 14 by reading the Fundamental Philosophy volumes of Jaime Balmes.

The fruit of his search was to discover the impossibility of dealing with the human being using classic Greek conceptual tools: the metaphysical transcendentals. He himself used the transcendental classic method of distinguishing categories and transcendentals but at a new level the personal level. This is why he named his way of doing anthropology, transcendental anthropology, and the new transcendentals 'personal transcendentals'. In the same way that the metaphysical transcendentals, transcend the categories and therefore are found in all beings, the anthropological or personal transcendentals apply to all persons, as persons, not just as mere beings. The—personal-being- is different from the being of the non-persons, he indicates it is co-being or co-existence. This is the main topic of this first volume of his Antropología Transcendental.

Looking over his shoulder regarding purpose and reception

After two brief paragraphs Polo then switches to the difficulties he faced to reach this point of finishing his philosophical enterprise, which, as anything worthy, required vast efforts and some natural misunderstanding. He politely calls the obstacles he faced 'risks'. The four risks Leonardo Polo highlights in his preface correspond somehow to the stages of his life discussed above.

The first one was strength. Such a grandiose work he envisaged in his years of Rome, required a revision of most of the modern and contemporary philosophy. He tried very hard while in Rome, but his body resented it and he had a serious bout of mental fatigue that took a long time to overcome, and that from time to time would recur.

Within the first risk he includes the risk of not being understood, which actually happened. If it is true that he has a number of followers who understand and value his contribution, they are few and mainly those he personally taught. It is clear that mental fatigue and being misunderstood are different type of risks, but probably the emotional weight of being rejected and isolated contributes to the lack of strength to continue struggling in a daunting task. This may explain why he comments that he tried to avoid discussions to minimize disputes.

The second risk has ethical connotations. If he was wrong, he would mislead people. Freedom is the key to understand transcendental anthropology and of its

proper understanding depends the goodness of people of society and the good work in philosophy and theology. In passing he comments that he does not follow the Hegelian way of doing philosophy, which probably was one of the things that lead to some misunderstandings.

The third risk brings to light what was already suggested in the previous one, and he does not elaborate on it further.

And finally the fourth which has also some ethical connotation, he is trying to refute the claim that his philosophy is just a personal attempt to be singular, original, which may smack of vanity. On the intentions one cannot judge, so one has to trust the author and see his work. There is no doubt that Leonardo Polo is original, but as he said, most of his thoughts can be traced to philosophers he has read and assimilated. His new achievements put together with the new light of his method, what was already insinuated in many other authors, and he refers continuously to them in his works and acknowledges their achievements. He also clearly points out where he thinks they fall short and, from his new vantage point, suggest where they have to rectify. This seems to bear the mark of a great philosopher. What may give rise to the misunderstanding of thinking that Polo wants to be original is the use of new expressions, and the new meaning he gives to traditional philosophical and common terms. In this they have a point, because it is not easy to find which use he gives to each word and one has to be very careful on the context. One cannot read Polo in a hurry, or just once. Furthermore he takes gives many things for granted when he writes, expecting the reader to be as conversant with the classic philosophers as he was, or to have read as much as he did. The remembrance of one of his students can give weight to these statements.

“In 1975, while still an undergraduate and perhaps with some youth vehemence I went to D. Leonardo and told him that I had decided to make my doctoral dissertation on aspect of his thought. D. Leonardo looked at me over his glasses and warned me not to think of doing such a thing. I probably showed some kind of shock, because he found it necessary to explain that until I knew classical thought well I would do well to refrain from so great audacity. Although at first my disappointment lead me to rebellion, I accepted to try to befriend Aristotle, who even today I still have as a master.

This personal anecdote serves to show something substantial in the work of D. Leonardo: to know more of the classics, to deepen on them, is really to go deep within yourself, because they are the source of philosophizing, a perennially renewed origin, with latencies, but without opacities.” (Yepes Stork, 2005).

Continuity with classical philosophy

After having a recount of the difficulties he makes a clear statement of the fundamental key to understand his philosophy, which stems from the highest point of classical philosophy.

Specifically, my approach stems from the real distinction between being and essence formulated by Thomas Aquinas, which is the last important finding of traditional philosophy.(Polo, 1999)

He sees his philosophy in continuity with classical philosophy and especially with Thomas Aquinas, which was present in his thought since he read Jaime Balme at 14.

“Together with other thinkers of the XX centuries he worried about the formalism of the late Scholastic Philosophy. He managed to get to the root of the problem with the method of ‘reaching the being’, while other ten years later some neo-Thomistic philosophers in the 60s discover that the key to Thomas Aquinas thought is the distinction between essence and being. How many times he repeated that ‘a thought cow does not give milk’, or that the ‘I thought does not think’! Proving that the idealism does not work and showing the importance of abandoning the mental limit to reach REALITY which is the proper place of BEING.” (Castilla de Cortazar, n.d.).

His continuity with classic philosophy is clearly indicated by one of his best disciples the late R. Yepes York in a short article he wrote for the general public after the Congress organized in Pamplona in honour of Leonardo Polo’s on his retirement in 1996.

“From here we can see that Polo knows the great philosophers well. Some like Parmenides, Eckhard o Descartes passionately occupy some period of his life. Others like Heidegger have inspired him. But he has thought deeply on three.

Firstly on Aristotle, with whom he has special affinity and who marks the lines of Polo’s theory of knowledge and ethics.

Secondly, Thomas Aquinas, from which he takes a great portion of his corpus and specially the distinction between being and essence which he takes to its limit.

And in third place Hegel, who is the apex of modernity. On him the modern ideal reaches its peak. ‘Hegel formulates his speculative ambition raising reason to its maximum height. But we have to note that mental presence of man is a limit. If one manages to abandon the limit, the Hegelian attempt is over and one has a new departure point. This is my proposal”. (Yepes, Aceprensa 1996 ?)

The problems of classical Thomism

Nevertheless he thinks that in order to progress the classical Thomism, including Thomas himself has to be redirected because it cannot progress unless it recognizes the mental limit and becomes transcendental in anthropology.

“The weakening of the historical Thomism is due to the fact that their understanding of ‘being’ is weakened by the mental limit. Thomism is a synthesis of Christian philosophy in which limit has not yet been detected and that, therefore, it slowed down the impulse toward transcendental anthropology.

Thomistic philosophy still focuses on the study of man as nature and substance. Although Aquinas overcomes the Greek understanding in metaphysics, he does not apply it to the human being.” (Polo, 1999).

The solution is to overcome the limitations of the Greek metaphysics and go beyond them by abandoning the mental limit which will also achieve a new way of composition higher than the Aristotelian hylemorphic.

Thomism is a synthesis of Christian philosophy in which the mental limit has not yet been detected and that, therefore, it slowed down the impulse toward a transcendental anthropology. (Polo, 1999)

The problems and value of modern philosophy

Nevertheless a continuation of the traditional philosophy cannot ignore the thought and developments of modern thinkers. They have something to contribute. There should be a positive dialogue so that what is not accurate can be discovered and what is missing in the classical philosophy can be incorporated. This is a necessary task for any philosopher.

“the proposed continuation of Thomism -which ignores the transcendental aspect of freedom- , cannot progress without a critique of modern philosophy.”

The contribution of modern philosophy, as Polo sees it, is to show clearly the limit, the impossibility of continuing doing philosophy in the classical way. The new method will show the limits of both ways of doing philosophy and open the door to continue doing classical philosophy in a new way.

Idealism brings out in a clear way the mental limit, whose detection is essential for the continuation of traditional philosophy. Again, the mental spotting of the limit is not independent of overcoming idealism. (Polo, 1999).

The culmination and explanation of his main works

In the following paragraphs L. Polo states the work he had given himself after he had the intuition of the new method, and how it changed over the years. He does it considering mainly the thematic approach, but we should take into account some of the points mentioned when considering the stages of the vital development, which no doubt, also influenced his works.

“I cite the book on which this method is exposed and the thematic plan for its development and the changes that the original plan suffered.” (Polo, 1999).

Rather than repeating his words, we include a simple sketch that summarizes the text.

El acceso al ser (1964):

- El ser I (Extra-mental Existence) (1965)
- El ser II (Extra-mental Essence)

- Teoría del conocimiento, v. IV first part (1994)
- Teoría del conocimiento, v. IV second part (1996)
- El ser III (Human Person) drafted 1970, Anthropologia Trascendental I (1999)
- El ser IV (Human Essence) drafted 1972, Anthropologia Trascendental II (2003)

Style considerations

L. Polo was not a good writer. His mind was too fast, too elevated for writing or typing. He was a good speaker, thinking as he was speaking. His first books “El acceso al ser” y ‘El-ser-I’ are paradigmatic. The books and articles based on his lectures and conferences are easier to read. Aware of this in this late book he makes two interesting remarks; one that the book has many sources ‘plurality’. Some of his books are collections of notes from different times and lectures that he later put together, rather than going into the pain of writing again. It seems that his fear to the pen also motivated the second point he makes, that of citing himself frequently. In spite of these remarks the books flows well and what is more important, gives light to his previous works. This makes it advisable for those who want to read his main works to read then backwards, starting from the two volumes of ‘Antropología Trascendental’ followed by the five volumes of “Curso de Teoría del Conocimiento” to finally try ‘El Ser-I’ y ‘El Acceso al Ser’.

“I must admit that together with formal defects due in large part to the plurality of its immediate sources, there are many references to my own books.” (Polo, 1999).

Gratitude to his collaborators

He finalizes acknowledging the work of his immediate collaborators and in a special way the Dean of the Faculty, who constantly encouraged him, even after his retirement, to finish writing his originally planned series of works. No wonder Professor Angel González is now in charge of Leonardo Polo’s intellectual legacy.

We hope that this brief introduction would generate some interest in reading and translating the works of this humble, innovative and generous philosopher and help to make his contributions better known in the English speaking world.

Bibliography

- Castilla de Cortazar, B. (n.d.). Blanca Castilla de Cortázar: «A Leonardo Polo, con agradecimiento in memoriam de un gran maestro, líder a largo plazo» | Profesionales por la Ética. Retrieved March 25, 2013, from <http://www.profesionalesetica.org/2013/02/blanca-castilla-de-cortazar-a-leonardo-polo-con-agradecimiento-in-memori-am-de-un-gran-maestro-lider-a-largo-plazo/>
- Corazón González, R. (2011). *El pensamiento de Leonardo Polo*. Ediciones Rialp.

- Cruz-Cruz, J. (Juan). (1992). Filosofar hoy. Entrevista con Leonardo Polo. Article. Retrieved February 16, 2013, from <http://dspace.unav.es/dspace/handle/10171/687>
- Falgueras Salinas, I. (n.d.). 5. Escritos sobre la filosofía de Leonardo Polo. Retrieved March 26, 2013, from http://webpersonal.uma.es/~jifalgueras/Leonardo_Polo/Portada.html
- Falgueras Salinas, I., García González, J. A., Padial, J. J., & Universidad de Málaga. (2003). *Futurizar el presente: estudios sobre la filosofía de Leonardo Polo*. Málaga: Universidad de Málaga.
- Piá Tarazona, S. (n.d.). La antropología trascendental de Leonardo Polo. *Studia poliana*, 1, 101–15.
- Polo, L. (1999). *Antropología trascendental I*. Pamplona, Spain: Universidad de Navarra, Facultad de Filosofía y Letras.
- Polo, L. (2013). *Lecciones de ética*. Pamplona: EUNSA.
- Selles Dauder, J. F. (n.d.). Philosophica: Enciclopedia filosófica on line — Voz: Leonardo Polo. Retrieved March 25, 2013, from <http://www.philosophica.info/voces/polo/Polo.html>
- Yepes Stork, R. (2005). Leonardo Polo, Su vida y escritos. *MISCELÁNEA POLIANA*, 1. Retrieved from <http://www.leonardopolo.net/intro.html>