



Learning Polo: An introduction to the Spanish “metaphysician of freedom”

The late Spanish philosopher’s works encourage us to remain faithful to the constant, rigorous questioning required by the *philosophia perennis*.

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Spanish philosopher Leonardo Polo in 1996, with the covers of some books by and about his work.
[Wikipedia]

Despite having published more than forty books, the late Spanish philosopher Leonardo Polo (1926-2013) is not a household name—yet. This is almost scandalous, especially considering Polo’s prolific contributions to ethics, law, political economy, and business. Much of the reason for the oversight is that few of his works are available in languages other than his native Spanish. The task of translating Polo into English has thus become a central task for the small, tight-knit worldwide community of ‘Polian scholars’.

Today, Polo’s students and colleagues—many from his days at the Panamerican University in Mexico, the University of Piura in Peru, and the University of Navarre in Spain—can be found in places including the University of Notre Dame, Catholic University of America, and New York University. But it was only after Polo’s death in 2013 that work began in earnest among them to preserve his intellectual legacy and make future generations more familiar with his work.

However, in addition to the challenge of making Polo more widely available in English, there is the additional challenge of his complexity. There’s no denying it: Polo is difficult, even for native Spanish speakers. Like Eric Voegelin, the German philosopher of history, Polo demands a lot from readers—not only because of the breadth of sources from which he draws but also because of his assumption that all his readers are well acquainted with classical antiquity, the history of political ideas, and the rise of modern philosophy. Additionally, there is Polo’s unforgiving rigor when framing questions of epistemology and ontology, and the complexity of his fundamental methodological approach—which centers on what he calls “going beyond mental boundaries”.

To begin to understand this typically Polian formulation, it is important to recognize that his approach is fundamentally rooted in *realism*. Like his classroom teachings, Polo’s writings invite those engaged in the search for truth *back* to the origins of the philosophical quest, back to the *roots* of what is real—that is, back to “things in themselves”.

Polo’s works serve to remind us that when we speak of our given reality, we refer not only to the material, physical, or social reality around us but also to the reality that is found and rooted *in the*

human person himself. The mistake of too many modern thinkers is that they ignore this component of reality. This leads to an incomplete understanding of the whole—which, according to Polo, creates a *mental* boundary, which then produces the kind of boundaries that result in narrow, *ideological* thinking. For these reasons, some scholars argue that Polo should be approached first and foremost as a theorist *of the human person*—or, perhaps more precisely, as a “metaphysician of freedom”.

One of Polo’s tasks in life then was to teach his students to identify the “mental limits” within which they operate and to then teach them to go beyond them—thus ‘liberating themselves’ from both the limitations of human nature and the trap of ideology. Polo’s didactic task was thus an emancipatory one—truly a ‘philosophy of freedom’. According to the introduction to a 2014 English-language translation of one of Polo’s works, “freedom is found only in anthropology and as a reality that neither grounds nor is grounded.”

Unfortunately, this subtle understanding is not widespread. One reason for this, according to Polo, has to do with the *way* philosophy is taught today: with its over-reliance on the Anglo-American analytical method. This narrow and unimaginative approach, he explains, depends primarily on the memorization of key concepts and rigid methods, and succeeds in undermining truly speculative thought. “The analytical method ends in blindness,” says Polo, “and makes one unable to see things in an all-encompassing way.” (I hasten to point out that Polo is not *opposed* to the analytic method, though he considers it inadequate for philosophy.)

Anyone interested in the perennial questions of philosophy in the Western tradition should consider working with Polian source material. Once his often difficult writing style is penetrated, one will be delighted to find that as Polo seeks to rehabilitate philosophy—by extricating it both from the analytic tradition and the suffocating embrace of positivism—he also generously shares his own ongoing ‘conversation’ with other thinkers, such as Plato and Aristotle, Augustine and Aquinas, Arendt and Hildebrand.

Polo famously urged his students to understand that the true philosopher is “someone who is not satisfied easily, a person who does not settle easily but rather who is in pursuit of that which is the most radical, of that which is the greatest.” This is also important to keep in mind—particularly by philosophers—for the moment a philosopher is ‘satisfied’ with an idea, concept, or theory, “he stops being a philosopher: he becomes an ordinary thinker who settles for established formulas and who marginalizes himself from progress.”

This is truly a rather bold challenge to all thinkers. Polo’s criticism of modern philosophical approaches wakes us up from somnolence and reminds us *not* to remain within our ‘mental boundaries’. And, in the end, his works encourage us to remain faithful to the constant, rigorous questioning required by the *philosophia perennis*.

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Over the past several years, scholars from around the world have slowly begun collaborating in order to better explain Polo’s methodology and bring his works to the attention of academic audiences everywhere. This is something to be celebrated. So far, there is the fledgling **Leonardo Polo Institute of Philosophy**, established a few years ago in South Bend, Indiana. There are also the academic journals *Studia Poliana* and the *Journal of Polian Studies* (the latter now in its fifth edition).

In the meantime, the task of translating Polo’s works is ongoing and only a handful of Polo’s works are currently available in English. There is, however, now enough material available to satisfy the curiosity of English language readers.

In 2015, the Polo Institute published a chapter from the book, *El presente y future del hombre*, under the title *Why a Transcendental Anthropology?* This is a perfect introduction to Polo and his philosophical project. Last December, the Institute published *Rich and Poor: Equality and Inequality*, Polo’s critique of the egalitarian impulse that too often leads to efforts to ‘solve’ the ‘problem’ of poverty by implementing policies that seek to *impose* material and income equality. This, Polo argues, is mistaken and misguided, as it confuses equality with a narrow understanding of ‘justice’. And currently in the works is *Having, Giving, Hoping*, in which Polo—working through the lens of Christian anthropology—distinguishes between these three concepts.

So far there have been two international conferences on Polo, with the first held in 2014 at the Madrid campus of IESE Business School. The second took place last year, with scholars from Spain, the United States, Germany, Mexico, the Netherlands, and elsewhere gathering in Warsaw to present papers and discuss various aspects of Polian thought. Organized by the International Association for Philosophical Anthropology, the Center of the Thought of John Paul II (of Poland), and the Polo Institute, the conference considered the theme “Transcendence and Love for a New Global Society”, approaching Polo in the context of the philosophical anthropology as expressed in the works of St. Pope John Paul II. The third international conference is in the early planning stages and is expected to take place this year in the United States.

Given the admiration that other Catholic philosophers have for Polo, his importance is undeniable—and the whole of his philosophical project is really a robust reply to the so-called “anthropological question” of which St. Pope John Paul II, Emeritus Pope Benedict XVI, and Pope Francis have spoken so much about. So while he is certainly demanding, and his arguments often intricate and dense, Polo is—or should be—without a doubt an important part of our continuing efforts to renew the Western philosophical tradition.

To understand Polo and learn from him does require a serious commitment—and, as one well-known Spanish philosopher once cautioned me, even after years of study, Polo may remain somewhat elusive. But full understanding may not necessarily be the goal.

To read Polo is to enter his classroom at the University of Navarre in Pamplona. It is to join other generations of students who, through a meandering dialogue with ‘the master’ (and his sometimes dizzying queries), followed him along a path of real discovery, grappling all the while with the most important ontological and epistemological problems of mankind. And in this close student-master relationship (of which one can sometimes catch a glimpse in Polo’s works), it is always apparent that friendship, love, and the transcendent are the only things that really matter. *That* is Polo’s valuable legacy.

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