

Leonardo Polo (1926-2013)

Fernando Múgica

Don Leonardo has died and left us. And there are many people — colleagues, former students, and those who find a living font of inspiration in his philosophical thought — who, with his loss, realize how much we are in his debt and how much the department of philosophy at the University of Navarra had its origins in him, as well as constant support. I will discuss a few aspects of his legacy that I consider particularly noteworthy and which continue to enjoy full force.

Don Leonardo [as he was affectionately called by his friends and admirers] loved philosophy and had a liking for theory. He convinced those who got close to him to ‘submit to the experience of thinking’ and to dare to ask questions. He taught us that every question has meaning and adds value — especially when the exercise of philosophical thought is directed not at destructive criticism but at criticism for constructive improvement. As long as one is willing to go beyond the theoretical level, no question is preposterous. He was eager to invigorate souls and take them along paths of questioning in search of truth.

I think this eagerness presented itself as a way of thinking in which the claim to truth and the encounter with the philosophical experience were one and the same thing. That is why he always taught and practiced the belief that philosophical criticism should be used to reveal the desire for truth enclosed in the very act of thinking on the part of everyone. It was meaningless to say that the theoretical act lacked all possible relationship to truth.

His constant concern for the education of his students, doctoral candidates, and younger university professors was complimented — perhaps even strengthened — by his respect for personal freedom. Don Leonardo never tried to win anyone over; he did not seek personal followers or fleeting loyalties. The paucity of praise and the extremely sober enthusiasm that he expressed for the work that we, his young students, did — whether they were oral or written statements — were not part of some strategy of detachment. Rather, they formed part of an educational concept — one

that led him to repeat again and again the now famous expression: “all success is premature”. Success is one of the forms of recognition that young people seek for a sense of security and it acts as a “behavioural reinforcement of a psychological nature”.

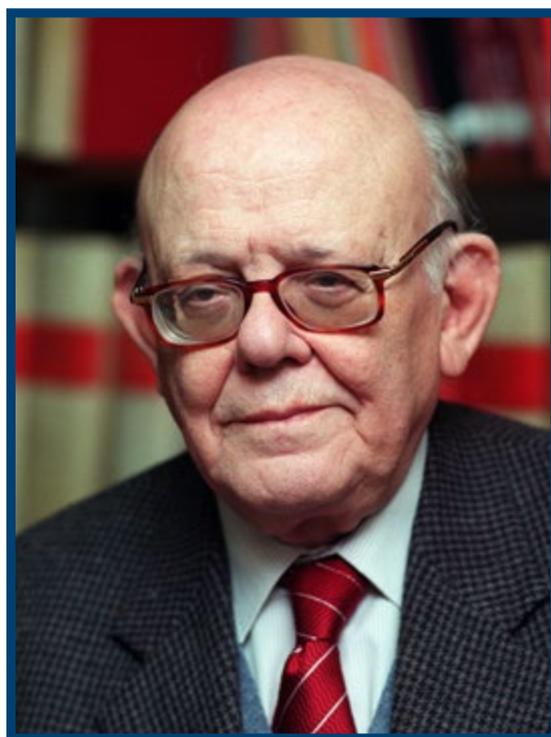
As a philosopher, Don Leonardo lived for a time with little or insufficient recognition by others. I think this led him to find his own sense of security by deepening his approach both to his own work as well as to his role as philosophical teacher and adviser in his relationships with others. His insistence that his ideas did not enjoy an “author’s copyright” may be subject to various interpretations. In the context of this particular

tribute and in accordance with my main argument, I suggest it should be understood in this way: “make these ideas your own only if you understand them and if they convince you but not because they are mine”.

The presence of Don Leonardo in the department of philosophy was legendary, tangible, friendly, calm — and silent. I doubt anyone was ever afraid of knocking on his door out of fear of bothering him. Although he spent long hours alone, studying and writing, he never exhibited — nor did he make others feel — that he had any desire to be left alone. On the contrary, when someone sat and talked with him, he soon lost track of time. I think many of us, with the perspective that time gives, now appreciate the great generosity — extravagance, even — with which he lavished his time on us. He made us feel as if he had nothing else to do but to help you at that moment.

In a similar way, I appreciate the great love for personal freedom he exercised in a very unique way: paving and helping us navigate the road that goes from close to distant friendship. Don Leonardo knew how to gracefully accept the fact that our paths in life would cross according to the changing rhythms, steps, proximity, and distance that occur with the different phases of life. It is characteristic of a great soul that he knows how to love without absorbing; to help with true selflessness and with his entire being, unconditionally; to be genuinely concerned for what might happen to someone — and yet to let him be and allow him continue on his way.

Magnanimity teaches serenity and respect in dealing with others (especially the young). I never



Leonardo Polo at the University of Navarra.

*Photograph courtesy of the Instituto de Estudios
Filosóficos Leonardo Polo in Málaga, Spain.*



Leonardo Polo was honoured by the president of the government of Navarra in 2008. *Source of photograph unknown.*

heard him complain of a friend's disloyalty because that person had grown distant. And that is because he really loved and lived personal freedom — with all its unexpected consequences.

Without a doubt, one of his guiding passions was to combine this love of freedom with his desire for a harmonious coexistence within the department of philosophy at the University of Navarra. Since he was present from the department's inception, it was logical for him to have had this combination — of love of freedom and desire for harmony — present there as well. But even though he maintained a deep respect for the past, he did not depend on these memories; "the best is yet to come", he repeated continually. This stance — one foot rooted in the University's origins and the other striding towards the future — allowed him to fully understand changes, anticipate and solve problems, and provide solutions that have shown to be effective.

He also knew how to accept with humility and grace when others — much younger and in some cases trained by him — took on managerial tasks that impacted him. He always insisted on avoiding labels and clichés when referring to colleagues, and through his actions he taught me that unity is the natural — though arduous — result of loving *both* personal freedom and the natural differences in the thoughts, modes of being, and behaviours of all human beings. He knew how to mediate when necessary, and always did so with respect and sensitivity, without invoking "gallons of seniority". However, when the proper consensus or understanding of a problem was required, the weight of his intellectual and moral authority was felt.

Don Leonardo, always a good 'university man', lived through the University's crisis, when its future

as an institution of higher education was in question. He was concerned yet hopeful, and there are numerous texts and interventions that demonstrate this. But perhaps he was more explicit in his personal and oral teachings.

It is often said that great spirits have a capacity for foresight; I think in his case, it's true. He anticipated with remarkable acuity the need for the University's administration to balance the roles of executives, managers, and academics, without one group benefitting at the expense of the other two; he cared enough to make us appreciate the role — and the undeniable place — of philosophy in the whole of knowledge and within the University; and he endeavoured to make sure we continuously preserved the University's research activities, as well as its doctoral programme, and the quality of doctoral theses. Although it is too much to sum up, I think these three aspects summarize much of his efforts on behalf of the University.

A perfect expression of his commitment to the University's doctoral programme was his effort to implement cooperative agreements at the doctoral level with various Latin American universities, and his personal involvement in these negotiations from 1985 until his last trip to the University of Piura [in Peru] in 2002. He spent many hours talking to his closest collaborators abroad, observing first-hand each of the universities and their programmes, and following with great interest the regulatory and administrative aspects required for these agreements.

I cannot, nor do I want to, ignore the one aspect of Don Leonardo that for me stands out above all others and which explains almost everything: He was a Christian with a deep spiritual life. How often in the many trips we made together would he collect himself in silence while I drove! I surmised that he had begun to pray. Indeed, his comments and reactions in the face of adversity demonstrated Christian hope to those of us around him.

Rest in peace, Don Leonardo — you who bequeathed so much to us and who was so generous with the gifts he received. ■

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