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Leonardo Polo and the Mind-Body Problem

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ABSTRACT: The mind-body problem is not only a philosophical problem but also a cultural one. Polo's philosophy offers an ambitious and profound frame to the study of the body and its place for the human person. His approach is not only confined to a single dimension of its philosophical method –the abandonment of the mental limit— but to all of them. A central aspect of this view is seeing the body not as a thing but as life, that is vital activity. Considered from the person, what we call body is 'received life', while 'added life' is the continuation that makes it apt to being the essence or manifestation of that person. In order to understand the body from this point of view, notions as synchrony and inhibition are central, as well as the question whether Polo's proposal is a kind of dualism.

KEYWORDS: Mind-Body, Dualism, Monism, Synchrony, Body, Added Life, Received Life, Inhibition.

What we usually call the mind-body problem is not just one of the main topics in contemporary philosophy, but is also the hallmark of a cultural debate of major consequences. What is at stake here is our vision of humanity and its place in reality, and this is not merely a theoretical issue. Our understanding of what is good and possible for human beings, and the kind of society we can and want to build, depends on the answer we give.

As this problem appears today, it depends on a particular theoretical framework. In my opinion, western philosophy has poorly explained the role of the body. However, the fact that mind and body are considered as things that are different enough to be understood separately, but are too difficult to conceive of together, is the consequence of certain theoretical and methodological paths that the main streams of thought within philosophy have undertaken in the last centuries. So it is necessary to bring them to light if we wish to solve or, at least, clarify the problem.

For analytical philosophy of mind, the mind-body problem can be traced to Descartes and his sharp distinction between the *res cogitans* and the body. **Descartes' ideas on this topic need to be kept in mind** because they reflect the theoretical framework still used by many scientists and a considerable number of philosophers. According to the general interpretation of the philosophy of Descartes, the body had to be studied with an objective and external methodology that could make it mathematically tractable. On the other hand, the mind, the point of view of the subject that experiences reality and intervenes in it, appears to us as a different and independent kind of reality, which, however, cannot be directly perceived from the outside.

It is a fact that human subjectivity is also linked to a body, but for Descartes there is no adequate unified intellectual methodology by means of which both realms of human experience can be understood together. The interaction between body and mind appears only as a mere fact, and the way it occurs as obscure and unintelligible. It is true that Descartes also attempts a metaphysical approach: both the objective body and the subjective soul have in common that they are substances created by an infinite and omnipotent God, but this does not seem sufficient for us to make the way they are put together intelligible.

Thus the grand rift is open. As a proof of this difficulty, other philosophers such as Spinoza, Malebranche, Leibniz and Kant, although

they accept the main features of the Cartesian view, feel constrained to propose different ways to solve this problem. Kant will accept the impossibility of reducing it almost as a philosophical method while others, such as Spinoza, will dare to make the leap of entering the very mind of God. The Cartesian approach, however, will continue to be a point of departure and a constant reference for the thinkers who came after.

In my opinion, the importance of the Cartesian view is due to its connection to Cartesian project of establishing a firm grounding for that new way of investigating reality that has resulted in modern science. **In short, modern science's success consists in having discovered** useful ways of objectifying, reducing and modelling phenomena in such a way that we can aspire to discover the laws that undergird them. But the clarity of this enterprise and the utility of its outcomes can obscure its limitations.¹

In fact, especially among natural scientists, but also among philosophers, there is a trend towards taking as the orthodox view the assertion that we can only accept the existence of a mind to the measure it is scientifically tractable, and that, among the various scientific approaches, the fundamental one is neuroscience. At the end everything is to be reduced to a fundamentally naturalistic explanation.

Even a shallow knowledge of the history of philosophy provides one with many objections and inconsistencies that affect this position.² The question is then why the “orthodox” position is so resilient and why many scientists and philosophers, sometimes against their profoundest convictions, find themselves with nothing to oppose it with intellectually.

I think the reason must be sought more in a cultural framework than in philosophical insights and argumentations: this situation is not due to new discoveries or to a new philosophy that seeks to prove its theses, but rather to the lack of philosophical formation both theoretical and historical among scientists and even some philosophers.

1 MURILLO, J. I.; ¿Son realmente autónomas las ciencias? In Aranguren, J., Borobia, J., Lluch, M. (ed.), *Fe y Razón*, Eunsá, Pamplona 1999, 473-480.

2 MURILLO, J. I.; El organismo inteligente: malentendidos en torno a una paradoja. In BOROBIA, J. J., LLUCH, M., TERRASA, E., MURILLO, J. I., *Idea cristiana del hombre*, Eunsá, Pamplona 2002, 86-103.

Some time ago positivism and naturalism were philosophical opinions, but now they are the default view among scientists, along with an impoverished kind of pragmatism. The intellectual debate has by and large simply abandoned the big questions and left them to the subjective realm, concentrating on scientific topics instead. God, soul, creation, morality..., these are relevant only to the extent they are tractable by what we call, here and now, science. Any attempt to think outside this scientific methodology (experiments, standardized observation, statistics, etc.) should be considered as something esoteric or else mere literary fiction.

This lack of an ambitious approach to the problem in contemporary philosophy makes Polo's proposal all the more interesting. In order to address the mind-body debate in properly Polian terms, we would have to look not only to his anthropology but also to his metaphysics, his theory of knowledge and his ethics; that is, to his entire philosophy. As is well known, Polo's main philosophical contribution is the method he proposes: the abandonment of the mental limit. But Polo's method is not univocal; in fact, its main advantage is its capacity to uncover and to deal adequately with transcendental plurality, that is, with the most radical distinctions. However, the mind-body problem is, in different ways, connected with all the dimensions of this method. In my opinion, there is not a single dimension of this method that exhausts our knowledge about what we call "the human body".

In fact, Polo has addressed several aspects of what we have called the body-mind problem in different parts of his work, and he returned to some of those approaches in the third part of the second volume of his transcendental anthropology. I recall that, during the time he was writing that book, he used to repeat "it is necessary to speak more about the body".

My purpose here, however, is only to offer an introduction to Polo's view on this topic. My paper is centered on some of his main theses about the human body and its relationship with the person to whom it belongs. More than a complete exposition of the ideas of Polo about the mind-body problem, I will present some of the ideas I have learnt from his philosophy, that are, in my opinion, especially relevant for enriching the intellectual debate on this topic.

A prior step to explaining this approach pertains to the understanding of what the body is in reality. The very notion of body is

dangerous, presupposing that the body is something well defined that lies in front of us. The German philologist Bruno Snell remarks that in Homeric Greek the term soma refers properly to the corpse and not to the living body.³ The body is mostly referred to via its members and organs, thus pointing to its functions in a way that seems not to recognize the body itself as something having a complete unity. In my opinion, this is coherent with one of Polo's theses. He doesn't understand the body as "something", but rather as life, and life is not a thing that is possessed by us, but the way through which possession is possible: "Living is activity: praxis and habit. We do not possess life, but we possess by living".⁴

From this point of view it appears clearly that the body must be seen more as a coordination of movements and activities than as a concrete and defined thing. This is a change of perspective, which entails a lot of consequences. One of them is that the term body is only a first phenomenological characterization, whose real meaning remains to be clarified.

But is it possible to distinguish between the body and the spiritual dimensions of the person? Interestingly, Polo also does not describe the spirit as something already completed, but describes it from the point of view of activity. This is why **time is so important in Polo's** characterization of the role of the body in the person.⁵

For Polo the human person is the act of being (*esse* or *actus essendi*) of the human being. He distinguishes carefully between being, understood as the actuality of the essence as it is presented by our mind, and the act of being, which is a real activity dependent on God and which is the *terminus ad quem* of the act of creation. In his opinion, the real distinction between the act of being and the essence is only intelligible from this point of view. Creatures, being distinct from God, who from a metaphysical point of view is the real correlate of real Identity (that is, not mere 'logical identity'), are in themselves and intrinsically inidentical. In the case of the person, this inidentity

3 SNELL, B.; Die Entdeckung des Geistes: Studien zur Entstehung des europäischen Denkens bei den Griechen. Göttingen: Vadenhoeck und Ruprecht 2000, 13-20.

4 POLO, L.; Antropología transcendental, tomo II: La esencia de la persona humana. Pamplona: Eunsá 2003, 289.

5 See POLO, L.; *Quién es el hombre. Un espíritu en el tiempo*, Madrid: Rialp 1991.

can be expressed as the inidentity between the person and its manifestation or its radical activity and the potency that follows it.

As we have seen, what we call ‘the body’ is a kind of life, but this does not exhaust human vitality. For non-personal living beings to live is to be. But for us, personal living beings, the life that comes through generation is received by the life which is added by the new person, which is directly created by God. These concurrent aspects of life are called by Polo respectively ‘received life’ and ‘added life’; together, both the received life and the added life configure the essence or manifestation of the human person.

It would be a serious mistake to understand this as meaning that the added life existed prior to the body, or else received life, being somehow in a state of expectation for it. The human person exists by receiving the body he or she is. The spiritual dimension of what we call soul is nothing but the life that is added to this received life. From the point of view of added life, received life is an inspiration that is continued by spiritual activity. From the point of view of received life, the added life is what frees received life to some extent from physical causality and thus makes received life apt for an unlimited growth. This reception distinguishes the personal body from the bodies of other living beings.

For Polo the distinction between the created person and the universe is transcendental. They are both created, but to be created is not the same for each of them. The universe is a created first principle. It is really distinct from God –this means in fact to be created and to exist–, but it is not a personal being, and its essence is not a personal manifestation, but a unity of order that can be analyzed as a concurrence of different causal meanings: material, formal, efficient and final cause. Thus material living beings are con-causalities that belong entirely to the universe. Polo calls them “tricausal substances” or ‘natures’ because they are not only, as Aristotelians use to say, hylo-morphic substances, but also include causal efficiency as an intrinsic cause. Natures of this kind are ordered by the final cause of the universe and cannot occur apart from it.

In the case of human beings, however, the body, although it belongs to some extent to the universe, orients itself to presence, which, as an activity that derives from the added life, does not depend on the

universe. As received by the soul, the body is characterized by Polo as “an attempt to overcome the delay of physical time”.⁶ This delay is introduced by matter, which is the “before” that confronts the “after” represented by the final cause.

What does this “attempt” consist in? To answer this question we have to look to the body, to its way of being. This is, by the way, a key point for all anthropology. Attention to the flesh⁷ and its concrete way of existing is the touchstone of a realistic anthropology. Another possibility is to try to explain man by focusing on the objectivities and mental constructions we use in practical life, or else on the poetic expression of our subjective experiences, thereby creating a structure where the real body is a stranger.

Nevertheless, the enterprise of understanding the body as it is encounters a serious difficulty. Our body does not appear completely in front of us. We have, to some extent, a direct experience of our bodies, as phenomenology has pointed out, with its notion of “lived body”. But this is partial, and even to have a single and unified view of the external aspect of our body we need mediations, such as a mirror in the case of sight, or a systematic exploration in the case of touching.⁸ In the majority of our sensory experiences the body is a condition but not the theme. In the case of intellectual presence the mind requires the body but leaves it un-thought. This is for Polo a unique sense of facticity that is irreducible to other facticities.⁹

What we know about our body depends mainly on the same methods that we use to understand all living bodies. This is the reason why it is easy to confuse ourselves with other material living beings. However, if we carefully inspect the human body, we find many characteristic features that are clearly visible. First of all, it is im-

6 POLO, L.; *Antropología transcendental, tomo II: La esencia de la persona humana*, Pamplona: Eunsá 2003, 295.

7 I use here the term ‘flesh’ with reference to the material body apart from the different connotations it can adopt.

8 In fact, for some phenomenologists, such as Hermann Schmitz, describe the immediate experience of the body as plural. See, for example, H. SCHMITZ, R. O. MÜLLAN AND J. SLABY, “Emotions Outside the Box—the New Phenomenology of Feeling and Corporeality,” *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, 10 (2011), 241–59.

9 See POLO, L.; *Antropología transcendental, tomo II: La esencia de la persona humana*. Pamplona: Eunsá 2003, 277 ff.; (2006, 3rd edition) *Curso de teoría del conocimiento*, tomo III. Pamplona: Eunsá, 295 ff.

portant to realize that we can approach the body from different perspectives. From the point of view of the connection between anatomy and behavior, Polo has emphasized the Aristotelian view of the human being as being the animal with hands. In addition he stresses, among other topics, the relationship between hands and brain and the importance of having a face and the possibility of speaking.¹⁰ But he has also investigated the body, so to speak, in a more (scientifically) fundamental way.

From this perspective the body has a unity that is not to be confused either with the unity of ideas or with that of concepts. The unity of ideas is an objective and mental one, that is, the unity of the objects as thought of by the mind. The unity of the concept, that is, the “one in many” can be conceived of as a result of the consideration of the objectivities abstracted from the sensibility with reference to the matter as a causal principle by which those formalities exist outside the mind. But these kinds of unity do not exhaust the forms of ‘being one’. As I have pointed out before, the body does not have an objective unity the way ideas do, nor is it “one in many” as the concept is. On the contrary, the body has to be plural in order to be dynamic. This entails a process of differentiation whose unity consists in an “organization by parts” or in a “one that organizes its parts”.¹¹

Polo offers some examples of this particular kind of unity. One of them is the unity of the genetic code. As is commonly said, the genetic code is in all the cells of the body. But Polo remarks that, at the same time, each cell is a part of the unity of the genetic code. In fact, each cell expresses only a part of the code and this differentiation is, at the same time, organized at a second level. So the development and growth of living beings is a result of the unity of the living body, which is a unity that, at the same time, multiplies and unifies.

The body is one in parts that are different from each other, and its organization is not static: it is a process oriented to the presence. Polo characterizes the reality of the body as ‘synchrony’. Synchrony is not presence, but it is the way by which life defeats the delay introduced by the material cause.

10 See POLO, L.; *Ética: hacia una versión moderna de los temas clásicos*. Madrid: Unión Editorial, 1997.

11 POLO, L.; *Antropología trascendental*, tomo II: La esencia de la persona humana. Pamplona: Eunsá 2003, 297.

Polo considers that presence does not belong to the material universe: it is only introduced by the mind, that is, by the way we present physical reality. The fact that mental presence begins by abstraction means that our intellects begin by presenting formal causes. The formal cause is the cause of the distinction, but in the mind its causal value is substituted by mental presence. But these causes can be properly understood as they are in reality because the mind is capable of understanding them in their interaction with the other causes, as matter, efficiency and finality. This implies that all material beings are real in and through movement. Some of them, such as, for example, living beings, incorporate movement, and so we can apply to them in an exact way the Aristotelian statement “*vita in motu*”, life in movement. Synchrony is especially clear in life. We shouldn't forget that synchrony is a dynamic process. But all vital processes we describe are coordinated in living beings. As realized in the physical world, synchrony is not a spiritual activity that can avoid temporality; rather, it is realized in and through physical movements. It is, so to speak, a synchronization of movements.

But where synchrony appears most clearly is in the nervous system. In the nervous system the kind of growth we have referred to is not central. For Polo, this suggests a different kind of growth and coordination. One can say that the function of the brain is processing information and converting it into an adequate response to the challenges of the environment. But the real question is: how it can do that? The brain is not a machine that is ready for that purpose; instead, its main advantage is its plasticity and its capacity for reconfiguration and adaptation. From Polo's descriptions I will pick out two suggestions.

The first is that the brain's unity cannot be understood as a totality. The brain is composed of neurons and thus it is a clear case of the way the body transforms itself into a formal potency, by division and incorporation into a unity. But in this case, the receptive activity of the brain does not produce new neurons; instead it profits partially from each of them and incorporates them into functional unities. This partial activation and use of the neurons, which is compatible with the participation of the neurons in other functional unities or circuits, shows that the unity of the brain is not that of a totality, but rather is de-totalizing. Polo also suggests that this model can be useful to understand other realities around us, such as social interactions. In sum, the unity of the brain is not that of a set of parts already orga-

nized, but rather that of a process that can produce new responses and coordinate in new ways.

Secondly, Polo suggests that intentionality, which is the characteristic of human knowledge (at the level of sensation as well), does not correspond in the brain to activation but mainly to inhibition. Activation corresponds to efficiency, but life—and especially human life—represents an increasing of formal causality. In the brain and in human behavior, the formal cause does not mean only configuration but also control. But control depends on the capacity to inhibit neuronal activity. A proof of this is the singularity of the human brain. It is often said that a salient and distinctive characteristic of the human brain is the development of a large prefrontal cortex (PFC), which **plays a decisive role in “higher” brain functions. Some neuroscientists call it the “executive brain”**.¹² It is involved in activities such as reasoning, planning, judgment and control of behavior. But the PFC often intervenes by inhibition. In his book on the PFC Joaquín Fuster says: **“Throughout the central nervous system, inhibition plays the role of enhancing and providing contrast to excitatory functions. That pervasive role of inhibition is evident in sensory systems (e.g. the retina) as well as motor systems (e.g. the motility of the knee). (...) In the prefrontal cortex, inhibition is the mechanism by which, during the temporal organization of actions in the pursuit of goals, sensory inputs and motor or instinctual impulses that might impede or derail those actions are held in check”**.¹³ This is also consistent with the response of Ramón y Cajal to the question about the differences between the human brain and other **animals’ brains**. He pointed out the large number of interneurons, which seem to be the kind of neurons involved in this kind of control.¹⁴ In my opinion, these observations could be better explained by following the suggestions of Polo about inhibition as the cerebral realization of cognitive intentionality.

As I have said, the reception of life from the parents orients received life towards presence, and this proximity of received life to presence is realized as synchrony. Synchrony is the means to achieve

12 See GOLDBERG, E.: *The Executive Brain: Frontal Lobes and the Civilized Mind*. NY: Oxford University Press 2001.

13 FUSTER, J., *The Prefrontal Cortex*. Edition 4th, Elsevier, 5.

14 FAIREN, A., Cajal and Lorente de Nó on cortical interneurons: Coincidences and progress, *Brain Research Reviews* 55 (2007), 430-444.

the domination of the formal cause over the other causes. But synchrony acquires a special significance in the human body, especially in the human nervous system and the objectivities of human sensibility. As an example, Polo mentions the images of space (regular extension) and time (regular duration).

Although this is a complex topic for a brief presentation, I wanted to refer to Polo's approach to formal causality because, in my opinion, this is one of his major contributions to the classical approach to the mind-body problem. Most classical non-reductive and non-dualistic approaches to this issue usually follow the Aristotelian thesis of the intellectual soul as formal cause of the body. However, this assertion would be misunderstood and thus useless if we understand the soul as an ideal form, that is, as a static and separated principle. On the contrary, in the physical world, causal forms are real in and through movement, and the spiritual dimensions added by his or her condition as a person are also acts: habits and praxis.

At this point, some contemporary philosophers or scientists would deem Polo's proposal to be a kind of dualism. As we have seen before, although the theoretical framing of the body-mind problem is dualist today, the position that denies real existence to the *res cogitans* is very common, and is even frequently presented as the scientific position, because it does not prejudice the possibilities that empirical science might solve the problem. It holds that all is nature and nature is to be studied by empirical science.

This position, which allows a lot of variations, can be characterized as monism. Truly, once we have uncritically adopted the methods of science as being the only possible methods, monism can then appear to be mere common sense. But in reality monism faces a lot of problems. First, the conception of nature it presents is nothing but a construction: a mixture of the mental and the physical. On the contrary, however, in order to understand reality we have to accept real distinctions. In fact, we cannot ever suppress plurality in any realm of reality. So dualism itself is in this respect weak. We understand the physical world according to a manifold causality. Among the senses of causality, the formal cause is the cause of physical distinctions. In metaphysics, we need to accept the real distinction between essence and existence in order to accept the real distinction and compatibility between the creature and God. In the case of anthropology, Polo affirms that duality is transcendental, that is, it does not derive from

the imperfection of the human being, but from his or her own personal condition, from him or her being intrinsically a second creature. In fact, human persons are created in a universe, so they do not only coexist with other persons and their creator, but also with the material universe. For this reason Polo characterizes the human act of being as ‘being additionally’ (*‘ser además’*).

This impossibility of avoiding real distinction –that makes monist approaches to reality arbitrary and impossible– can be applied also to our knowledge about God. In fact, according to Christian faith, God is also not alien to distinction. On the contrary, it is precisely inside the divine intimacy where the sharpest distinctions abide.

But this acceptance is not a kind of dualism. In the case of the body-mind relation, we need not accept two substances that interact in a mysterious way, but rather we should recognize the reality of different levels of activities. The irreducibility of the person to the physical world is a consequence of his or her personal condition, and his or her destiny cannot be reduced to the order of the physical universe. But the human person coexists with the physical universe. Added life and received life are totally compatible. The suggestions of Polo about their manner of being represent, in my opinion, a major contribution to the classical and contemporary reflection on the body.

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AIMS AND SCOPE

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