

Hope for Students in an Information Age

An introduction to Leonardo Polo's article "Hope".

Daniel B. van Schalkwijk
Amsterdam University College
d.b.vanschalkwijk@auc.nl

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ABSTRACT: In this introduction, I will situate Polo's article on hope within the context of the project to introduce Polo's thought to English-speaking educational institutions. To this end, my aim is four-fold. First, I will highlight the relevance of Polo's thought for education. Second, I will relate the article on hope to Polo's thought more generally. Third, I will provide an overview of the content of the paper. And fourth, I will discuss the significance of this paper for young people in our information age.

KEYWORDS: Leonardo Polo, Education, hope, information.

INTRODUCING LEONARDO POLO TO ENGLISH SPEAKING EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

The Leonardo Polo Institute of Philosophy was initiated with the hope of introducing an English-speaking audience to the thought of Leonardo Polo. Next to publishing the *Journal of Polian Studies*, it coordinates efforts to translate Polo's texts from Spanish to English.

In 2020, my contribution to this project was to translate "*lo radical y la libertad*" ("Root and Freedom") to English and write an extensive popular introduction to it. The introduction and translation were published under the title "Freedom in Quarantine" (Bernardus & Polo, 2020). This text has been used for a long time in education at the university of Navarre, and I thought that this translation would be useful to schools and universities wishing to teach philosophical anthropology to their students.

So far, this initiative has resonated most in three institutions: Amsterdam University College, where I teach; Paref Southridge School, located in the Philippines; and The Heights School, situated just outside of Washington D.C. The Heights School has even published a podcast on the book. It is my hope that more institutions can profit from this work with time.

While "*lo radical y la libertad*" contains a brilliant overview and synthesis of the tradition of western philosophical anthropology, as seen through the eyes of Leonardo Polo, the text does have its limitations. Some notions that Polo mentions, for example when talking about causes, need further elaboration. To my mind, one of the greatest drawbacks of the text is that it does not give a sense of the dynamism of human life, which is a key feature of Polo's thought. Indeed, Polo has been characterized as the "philosopher of hope". When I came across Polo's article on Hope, I thought it could supplement this deficiency in "*lo radical y la libertad*". This is why I have taken on the current project.

THE RELEVANCE OF POLO'S WORK FOR EDUCATION

Polo's thought has a proven track record at the University of Navarre. As mentioned, "*Lo radical y la libertad*" has been used for education in philosophical anthropology at that university.

This seminal work of Polo offers an overview of western thought, highlighting key notions of what it means to be human in modern, classical Greek, and Christian thought. Beyond its merely historical significance, Polo's overview challenges students to consider which of these understandings is most fundamental for them personally.

More broadly, Polo's philosophical methodology of "going beyond mental limitation" is a methodology that provides a new epistemological access to the world around us and ourselves as human persons. Through this methodology, Polo also overcomes some of the key shortcomings that are frequent in modern thought. Especially ideologically motivated reductionisms, that are currently rampant in educational institutions, do not stand up against this methodology. The human being "is always more" than any of its conceptualizations, according to Polo, and his method illustrates that.

For public schools, there may be a question whether it is suitable to study a thinker that is so firmly rooted in the Christian tradition. Polo's appeal for these schools can lie in giving a sympathetic yet constructively critical outside perspective on modern and contemporary thought. Polo values the importance of key notions like the 'result' and 'production' in the modern view of man. Taken by themselves, however, these notions lead to many of the complexities our society is currently facing. Polo shows how these key insights can be purified by putting them in creative tension with classical and Christian thought. This can be inspiring, even for non-Christians.

For Catholic or otherwise Christian schools, there may be a question of what the added value is of another thinker on top of the rich tradition from which students can already draw. Polo himself says that in his work he is trying to serve perennial philosophy by continuing it, by liberating it from the long imprisonment in which modernity has put it (Polo, 2018). Every age has its own challenges, and philosophers are called to address the issues of the age. Polo makes a decisive attempt to think through modern (and post-modern) thought and see how it both contributes to and is corrected by classical Greek and Christian philosophy. Perhaps more importantly, the philosophical method he proposes allows others to follow in his tracks. These contributions are important for any Catholic or

otherwise Christian school aiming to be in touch with –yet not overwhelmed by– present-day society.

THE ARTICLE ON HOPE

Although the study of philosophical anthropology is an academic endeavor, it is never a purely academic endeavor. After all, the way we view our nature philosophically has a profound impact on the way in which we view ourselves personally; and this, in turn, will influence the direction of our lives. Indeed, the interaction between life and thought is in no way simple. Polo's article on hope addresses this issue head-on.

Polo's philosophical methodology invites us to focus our attention on reality itself. Beyond merely conceptual knowledge of the world, he wants the reader to contemplate reality directly: the world around us, the world within us, and the other persons who inhabit the world and with whom we are in relation. A consequence of this methodology, as well as of the Spanish academic tradition more generally, is that Polo's expositions tend to be structured around associations as they arise experientially. While there is an underlying order to his thought, the logic is often hidden to the immediate outline of his works. With this in mind, the reader is advised to grip his texts as one would hold a bird: strong enough that it doesn't escape, but not so tightly that he kills it.

DIMENSIONS AND PRECONDITIONS OF HOPE

In this article, Polo starts by exploring the dimensions of hope and the preconditions that allow those dimensions to be possible in the first place. It is characteristic for his philosophy to be very careful about these preconditions. In his own words, "The genius of philosophy consists in focusing on the obvious." (Polo, 2015) In the following paragraphs I will indicate the main dimensions of hope that Polo investigates in this article.

First, Polo considers the dimension of optimism, and finds that this requires several preconditions: an openness to the future; a world that can really be improved; the capacity that human beings have for unrestricted growth, inherent to our intelligence

and will; and a certain dissatisfaction with the current state that promotes that growth. He points out the incompatibility of these requirements with the philosophy of Leibniz, because in his philosophical system the world only develops and cannot really be improved: there is no room for novelty. In this way reflecting on the preconditions for optimism becomes philosophically important.

A second dimension of hope is the conviction that the future depends on human action. The opposite of this conviction is the belief that a particular future will arrive irrespective of the actions human beings take. Polo here takes issue with utopian explanations, and specifically Marxism, whose conceptions of hope he says are actually a form of alienation. This is because in their thought, the future depends on necessary laws of history, and not on human action. Therefore, utopian explanations are incompatible with this second dimension of hope.

A third dimension of hope that Polo mentions is that of the task: "the future entails a task and (...), without this task, the future will not come about". (Polo, 1998) The task, in turn, requires resources to bring to completion. Those resources are often insufficient, which means that the help of others is required to bring the task to completion. The lack of resources also introduces an element of risk and adventure. Reflecting on the task, therefore, brings out further important preconditions of hope.

Polo then takes on this last theme to describe human existence insofar as it is articulated by hope as "constitutively epic". He elaborates on this by describing the overarching structure of epics, in which one's resources are not enough, and in which the main character has a past and an impulse towards an end, defined by the task that has been entrusted to him. As Polo points out, in epics there also always appears a helping element. Polo further adds that in a Christian understanding of life, the one who assigns the task is an excellent friend who is most interested in its coming to fruition. And this in turn explains the importance of prayer, turning to the best helper and friend that one encounters inside oneself. Before embarking on the last part of the article, Polo addresses some difficulties that may arise in the face of hope; namely, the "doubter" and the "clueless", who are two human types incapable of living with hope. He concludes that

from a hopeful perspective, society is a positive-sum game, and that therefore hope-filled activity is a gamble that doesn't overwhelm. "It is a joyful gamble that is worth taking chances on because everyone wins. The final element of hope, therefore, is joy." (Polo, 1998) In this way the epic becomes an articulation of what a hope-filled existence looks like.

THE PERSONAL DIMENSION OF HOPE

In the final section of the paper titled "hope's love", Polo explores hope as understood from "the person", which he elsewhere has called the Christian root. (Bernardus & Polo, 2020) In accordance with this notion, what most fundamentally makes us human is our personhood, which refers to both our unique individuality and how that individuality is lived in the context of close relationships. Polo characterizes the person using four "personal transcendentals", which are personal co-existence, personal knowledge, personal freedom, and personal love. (Polo, 2016)

What Polo makes clear in this section is that understanding the human being as a person involves the shift from the hope of obtaining the goal of an epic quest to the hope for the loving response of another person. To try and make clear what he means, Polo invents the term "destining", which can be understood to mean: trying to give yourself to another person. However, as the verbal tense indicates, the activity of "destining" is never complete in itself, it can only be completed by the positive response of the other. The word "destining" is also opposed to the passive "destiny": we do have an active role when "destining" ourselves, because we use our capacity for offering ourselves. So, in personal hope, our activity is important, but always only one half of the story.

In this new meaning of hope, there is also a certain dissatisfaction, which leads to not tiring of giving, which can especially take the form of sharing and helping others to grow. But whom should we help? Polo replies by referring to the biblical notion of "neighbor": neighbors need to be looked for. When living a personal hope, we can allow other persons to irrupt into our lives and change our routines.

HOPE IN AN INFORMATION AGE

It is my hope that the philosophy of Leonardo Polo can help inspire young people to have a new and more profound look at important questions, starting from a deeper understanding of themselves as human persons. In an increasingly digitized world, perhaps Polo can challenge young men and women to reconsider how they relate to others and how these relations can provide meaning to their lives. With Polo as a guide, they may make a start in answering such questions as: To what extent do they want to be “productized” by informatics companies? Is it worthwhile to take a step back and see what epic goal their lives would want to strive for? Where would they meaningfully want to direct their attention, and how could that take shape in practice? And finally, social media can certainly foster connections, but does it foster the deep connectedness that comes from personal relationships? What neighbor could they meaningfully share with and help to grow?

Still in its incipient stages, the philosophy in the article on hope has inspired at least one foundation, called Canyons and Stars, to help students face reality and discover their personal calling. This initiative will itself have to search out its neighbors and see how it can best contribute both to the students with whom it works and with the other initiatives, which will hopefully spring from the common source of Polo’s thought.

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