NOICA AND WHITEHEAD: CONCEPTUAL AFFINITIES

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ABSTRACT: The article starts with a short presentation of the distinction between the traditional substantialist paradigm and the present-day functionalist one to which both thinkers belong. Then a few of their fundamental concepts are discussed through the lenses of their functionalist approach.

KEYWORDS: metaphysics; substantialism; functionalism; actual occasions; becomance; God.

Goethe said that to succeed in practical and theoretical life, the greatest art is to change the problem into a postulate[1]. Transforming the problem into a postulate means to see a problematic situation that confronts you, not as a puzzle but as how things really are. For example, something breaks up in your home and needs to be fixed. At first sight, this is a problem. If you transform it into a postulate, you no longer want to repair the broken thing but discover a better use of it in that broken condition. In the same vein, concerning the present-day climate change problem, transforming this situation into a postulate would mean to see the new climate change that we go through as irreversible and, therefore, requiring us to adapt to it not by searching for means to bring things back into old settings but for ways to survive in the new conditions.

Something similar happened in modern ontology concerning the passing from the category of substance to that of function in our understanding of things. In this period, we witness a paradigm shift, to use Thomas Kuhn's expression. The Copernican revolution is an important part of this transformation. Copernicus faced the problem that the amount of new data was so large that it conformed with increasing difficulty to the old Ptolemaic interpretation of planets' celestial motion. The old approach had sought to interpret and reduce that motion to a view of heavens based on Aristotle's cosmology. Copernicus rejected (partially) such reductions[2]. Previously, the epicycles, introduced to make the data obtained through observation compatible with Ptolemaic astronomy, were meant to solve the

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[1] Ernst Cassirer, *Substance and Function. Einstein's Theory of Relativity*, authorized translation by William Curtis Swabey and Marie Collins Swabey, New York, Dover Publications, Inc., 1953, p. 371.

[2] For a presentation of the relationship between the Copernican view and the Aristotelian cosmology, see Th. Kuhn, *The Copernican Revolution: Planetary Astronomy in the Development of Western Thought*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, Harvard University Press, 1995.

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irregularities in the planets' motions, irregularities thought of as consequences of the planets' specific spatial distribution. When Copernicus conceived of the planets as revolving around the Sun, he gave up looking at those irregularities as problems and took them instead at face value, asking himself what would be the consequences of such a new inquiry. The consequence was that those irregularities, expressing now a different spatial relation between Earth and the Sun, could not only more easily be solved, but also that his new explanation had a systematic character. This character meant that all planets' motions were mutually interdependent, and that a change in the explanation of one planet's motion entailed a disruption in the interpretation of all the others' movements, which did not happen in the old epicycle-based astronomy.

The first premises of the new functionalist paradigm had already appeared at the end of the Middle Ages during the quarrel between realism and nominalism and the latter's final victory. This quarrel originated in the way God was thought of. Because theologians considered more and more that God's being could not be limited in any way, the theoretical consequence was that human knowledge could not grasp reality as it is because only God could truly know his own creation. The necessary consequence was that our knowledge could no longer be seen as knowledge of the eternal substances embodied in things but as grounded in our senses.

This change in the understanding of God led to a transformation of our concept of knowledge and the role of thought in it. If the intellect had been considered a capacity able to penetrate the kernel of things in the past, with nominalism the intellect started to be seen as separated from them. Only our sensations were now considered as staying in contact with them. Descartes was the first to introduce this transformation: he separated the intellect as a "thinking substance" from the "extended substance," from the concrete, "material" things. However, to maintain the concept of knowledge as correspondence between the intellect and reality, he resorted to a speculative trick by saying that a loving God would not want to deceive humans. Apparently, with this explanation of Descartes, we are still in the old view concerning the relationship between God and the human mind and being. However, there is a big difference. If in the past, God did not want to deceive humans and revealed himself in nature by means of the substances that were embodied in things and which the intellect was able to grasp immediately, now, with Descartes, a still loving God allows us to know things but by a specific operation of the intellect acting on sensations. The topic of the pineal gland is a witness in this shift.

Thus, in modernity, the problem was: how can we still know reality since our mind is no longer related to the substances lying within things? The solution was a postulate: there are no such substances, but what was called a real substance is only a question of the mind. Human knowledge was reinterpreted, from an activity of penetrating into the kernel of things to an activity of putting or creating order in our

perceptions. The acme of this stream of thought is Kant's transcendental philosophy.

Both Whitehead and Noica develop their philosophies in the horizon opened by this new postulate. Giving up the idea of objective substances led in modernity to an increasingly marked evolutionist conception of reality, to a processual understanding of it, in which stability was not based on eternal substances that got embodied transitorily into the material world, but was exclusively the result of a dynamic intertwining of mundane realities.

The functionalist view is not centered on things themselves but on the relations between things. In other words, a thing does not have an independent identity, but gains this identity through the network of relations in which it is involved, through their *system*. As a consequence, relations should be seen as playing a much more important role, ceasing thus to have only an external meaning and transforming into internal relations as Bertrand Russell pointed out[3]. We see the importance of relations in the combination of a musical composition's sounds: an isolated musical note sounds completely different than the same note as part of a musical creation. When Noica says that Being is a "structuring nothingness,"[4] he means precisely this functional and relational sense of Being, namely the fact that things become what they "are" only within networks, that there are no things and substances existing by themselves, independently from their environment, as traditional substantialism had thought. A function or a relation cannot be seen, touched, or felt. It is not concrete. A relation or network of relations is a logical field in which things are integrated. Like the gravitational field, it can be seized through its manifestations, through how it affects things. To a certain extent, from this point of view, Noica's *Being* can be equated with Whitehead's *Creativity*. Both are an ultimate, while both cannot be defined. In Noica, things are *transient* substances, shaping themselves as a result of the environment in which they stand.

The importance of relations grew so much that, at the beginning of the 20th century, Einsteinian physics could be seen as introducing the highest level of abstraction in science in that it no longer required a universal benchmark (considered as having an absolute existence, like that of Newtonian absolute space and time) in relation to which one should compare all other systems, but considers that everything is relative to everything else, that all systems are relative to each other[5].

Even the possibility of applying different types of geometry to reality does not concern any ontological correspondent to them, but it is rather a question of measurement[6]. In this new view, following Kant, we may consider that, in general, our concepts of "space" and "time" as they are used in science do not correspond to

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[3] *See* B. Russell, *Pragmatism* (1909) and *The Monistic Theory of Truth* (1906–07).

[4] C. Noica, *Becoming Within Being*, translated by Alistair Ian Blyth, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Marquette University Press, 2009, p. 185.

[5] Ernst Cassirer, *op. cit.*, p. 392.

[6] *Ibidem*, p. 440.

real space and time, but are ideal means to conceptualize temporal and spatial events. Measurement is only the final expression of a certain conceptualization. Different types of measurement involve different concepts and, thus, different understandings of phenomena. These understandings can be based on different thought categories. As such, they are different "perspectives" on things, based on different functions that endow things with corresponding meanings.

If these ideas were developed initially within the sphere of epistemology, where we deal merely with our concepts, both Whitehead and Noica transfer this view into ontology, into the inquiry of what exists objectively and not only subjectively, or in the human mind. For both of them, reality has a functional nature. As a consequence, reality is much more dynamic in their thought than it was previously considered to be. An astonishing consequence appears as a result of this functionalist view: reality has an atomic character for both of them. In the case of Whitehead, this is stated openly. In Noica, this aspect is not discussed, but results from his functional understanding of reality. If we assume that functions grant being to things, then the "being" deriving from one function cannot be identical with the being deriving from another function. In Noica – as in Whitehead – every individual is a "bunch of universals," i.e., functions, that makes it completely unique. Neither Whitehead nor Noica define things any longer through what they could be in themselves but only through what they do, through their effect on other things. They are identified through their manifestations. Therefore, their "being" consists in how they interact with their environment. Similarly, if we leave the epistemological level and speak of what there objectively "is," we could say that things assume an identity as a consequence of their environment. As in Hegel, the passing from one way of being to another takes place through a "leap," a "qualitative leap," through which something, after a quantitative accumulation, transforms into something else.

In the philosophies of Noica and Whitehead, we no longer deal with a pre-given universal order of reality but with an order that fluctuates, changes, that is accomplished through a multitude of paths. Both of them claim to have affinities with Hegelian philosophy. Whitehead could be said to reach similar results as those of Hegelian philosophy. Noica, on the other hand, acknowledges a sense of evolution, which he terms "becomance." Hegel claimed that there is a sense of universal history, consisting in the self-knowledge of the human person as a free being. Although there was no such unique sense of history for Noica, through his concept of "becomance" he acknowledged an immanent sense of history as consisting of the constant endeavour of reality to reach enduring forms, to reach sustainable configurations that could reproduce themselves and thus imprint their forms into other types of existence, as well as an endeavour of reality to overcome itself.

Something similar is stated by Whitehead in his philosophy. Although what he calls "creativity"[7] could seem at first sight only as the unrest of reality crystallized in continuous change, if we think of creativity in connection with what he calls God's primary and consequent nature, we may state that Whitehead conceives of the evolution of reality as an increase in complexity. God's primary nature consists of the lure exerted by God on reality, i.e., on all actual occasions composing reality, toward higher complexity. This lure ends in an increase in complexity for several reasons. First, there is the thirst for novelty inherent to all actual occasions. Second, there is the universal memory of reality. This memory builds God's consequent nature. A third reason is associated with God's action to help reality not collapse into chaos due to the conflicting egoistic tendencies characterizing actual occasions.

In Noica, becomance signifies the same growth in complexity. Becomance is the process of becoming of reality that is not simply change but a change involving both stability and development, i.e., sustainable development or an increase in complexity[8]. Noica, too, admits the universal but considers it as transient (unlike the traditional philosophy, for which universals were eternal). These transient universals play the role of Platonic Ideas or rather Aristotelian secondary substances since they do not come from without but emerge from within reality. When describing becomance, Noica has a Hegelian ontological approach in that he is not interested in showing the "material" resorts that make possible the emergence of those universals or what brings them to light but only in showing their "logical" connections. Of course, these logical connections relate to a foundational order of forms and not ratiocinations.

Due to his "phenomenological" approach[9] (in Hegel's sense), through which he is able to show such a foundational order, Noica can also speak of an active nothingness: "Thus there everywhere exists an ontological function of nothingness, in the sense that things also come-into-being through that which does not exist"[10]. In other words, we cannot see the entity producing all the infinite and ordered variety and complexity of reality. Still, we are faced with its results, with the "phenomenon" of its activity. In the past, theology thought that all this complexity originated in God's transcendent action as Supreme Being. Noica rightly refrains from making this step. Even Hegel, whose philosophy has at its core the Absolute Spirit, God, claims to deduce historically the identity between the human spirit and the Absolute Spirit and not simply to posit it through faith. Therefore, Hegel's approach is an immanent metaphysics.

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[7] *See* A. N. Whitehead, *Process and Reality. An Essay in Cosmology*, New York, The Free Press, 1978, chapter II, "God and the World."

[8] C. Noica, *op. cit.*, part III, chapter 39, "Becoming, Becomance, Being."

[9] *See* „Fenomen și ființă sau despre înțelesul fenomenologic al ontologiei lui Noica", în Claudiu Baciu, *Funcționalism și ontologie*, Bucharest, Romanian Academy Publishing House, 2014.

[10] *Ibidem*, p. 304.

Similarly immanent is Whitehead's conception of God. Such a concept transforms God from an absolute or infinite Being, i.e., an omnipotent and omniscient Being, into a limited one. His limitation consists in His benevolence. In other words, Whitehead's God is bound to be good since He is the entity that saves the world from itself, and this rescuing translates into an increase in complexity. Therefore, when God saves the world from absolute collapse, He does not simply put it again on the waterline, but brings it, so to say, into different waters.

There are features of Noica's philosophy that reflect his Christianity. One of them is the use of the term "holomer" (from Greek *holos* = whole, and Greek *meros* = part), an essential term of his late logic. This term signifies an individual that is more than an individual, being highly relevant for a whole community. It is, therefore, simultaneously a general. Certainly, each individual carries within itself general features. However, certain individuals seem to best embody the general features of a community. Noica exemplifies this holomer with Eminescu, whom he called the "complete human being of the Romanian culture." In his view, Eminescu gave expression to the most significant Romanian features. One may assume that such reasoning comes in the wake of a Christian belief that Jesus is for the whole of humanity what Eminescu is for Romanian culture, namely the "complete human being of the mankind" in general. Indeed, Christianity considers Jesus as being the second Adam, while seeing in the latter the archetype of the human being, the Idea of the human being that all humans embody.

The "holomer" is an application of the idea of the "element" from Noica's ontology. The element is a field that gives its identity to all the individuals of the corresponding class. Such an element is, for example, language. In language, all words are expressions of the underlying field of function, of the element. The universal is in Noica a function that generates its specific variables.

Noica tried to make the new evolutionism compatible with the old substantialism. He considered that elements could take over, to a certain extent, the role that the old substances played in traditional philosophy. The latter were seen as immutable and eternal and, what is more, as embodied in individuals. Of course, Noica's elements are not immutable and eternal, except (perhaps) for the supreme element, God. They are more or less comprehensive and, therefore, more or less lasting in time. In this sense, Noica's approach is a Hegelian one because he is not interested in how such elements occur. He is interested only in the logical meaning and relationships of the elements. From this point of view, his approach is also similar to that of Whitehead, as some Romanian commentators have already highlighted[11].

Both Noica and Whitehead were process thinkers. However, in Whitehead's approach, change comes much more sharply to the fore than in Noica's. If

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[11] See D. Giulea, *Fiinţă şi process în ontologia lui Noica*, Bucharest, Humanitas, 2005; Constantin Stoenescu, „Devenirea ca procesualitate la Constantin Noica", in *Studii de istorie a filosofiei româneşti*, Issue 13, Bucharest, Romanian Academy Publishing House, 2017.

Whitehead emphasizes change and the interactions of the "actual occasions" with each other, Noica is more Hegelian in his approach. Of course, he also considers that beings interact and change each other, but this change leads then to constants (the elements, universals) that determine things from within and claim more of his attention.

For both thinkers, the individual has a decisive influence on the environment. The individual is no longer a simple embodiment of a higher-settled ontic entity, its substance, and thus devoid of freedom ultimately, but is, to a certain extent, left on its own and creative. Therefore, in both philosophies, each individual is meaningful and important for the world's existence, however humble and frail it is.

This freedom of the individual is not devoid of theoretical difficulties. Noica deliberately avoided developing a concept of God in His relationship with the world and the human individual. Whitehead tried to elaborate an immanent concept of God, a God who is hard to see as God, i.e., as the absolute actuality of the world, since He rather resembles one of the Greek gods that have only partial divine power.

In Noica, God is the supreme element, the supreme function of reality, the function that gives the specific value to all individuals in reality, without being in any way influenced by these individuals. In contrast, Whitehead considers God as an actuality that changes, too, due to His relation to the world's dynamic. In Whitehead, God is the supreme entity that helps the world not to collapse since the latter manifests a constant tendency to fall into chaos. He is that ultimate actuality that helps the world recover and rise to a superior level of complexity based on past failures. However, this entity does not precede the world. In other words, it did not create the world, and therefore neither did it call into being all the failures and tragedies in the world. God is not a transcendent entity in Whitehead but an immanent one. Such a concept of God is an expression of God as to how He appears if we consider Him from within the world, not from without, as Christian and other monotheistic religious traditions constantly did in the past. From this point of view, according to Whitehead, Christianity constantly slid into the Oriental manner of considering divinity, as an absolute despot and tyrant. It had no other options: an absolute Creator necessarily controls all his creation since he is the only one that knows how it has been made: there is no logical escape.

In this respect, the supreme element that is God seems to assume in Noica the same role as in Christianity: He has an absolute character and an autarchy that resembles the unmoved mover of Aristotle. In contrast, in Whitehead, God seems to be influenced by the world's dynamics since He constantly intervenes in the latter's evolution to save it from itself, though Whitehead doesn't claim that God created the world. Of course, such an intervention is assumed in Christianity too, but is seen as being associated with an atemporal decision made *in illo tempore*, at the moment of creation, that envisioned the world as falling and being saved too. In Whitehead, the world evolves by itself, and God intervenes only in the critical

moments, as a true *Deus ex machina*. From this point of view, God has the same role as the ancient Homeric Gods, allowing, for example, Odysseus to follow his path and saving him when he seems to collapse. The war for Troy was not predetermined, and the Olympian Gods, although they intervened several times during the conflict on behalf of one party or another, did not know from the beginning who the victor would be.

Noica avoids discussing God in his philosophy, most likely due to communist censorship. However, here, God, as a supreme element, cannot be thought of as *entirely* immanent. He is certainly immanent, i.e., immanently active, since, as an element, He coordinates and gives the specific content and character to each real being. But Noica stops intentionally at the edge of theology, i.e., before the speculative immersion in the nature of this ultimate element. As with Whitehead, Noica suggests that God is a necessary all-comprising medium that moves things from within, without further determining this relation's proper character.

Another aspect that is worthwhile to highlight is how the two thinkers assess language. Noica spoke in this respect about the "Romanian Feeling of Being," a feeling crystallized in many specific Romanian words and expressions. Emil Cioran rejected the idea of such a feeling. When he teased Noica with the question, why not a "Paraguayan Feeling of Being?", he assumed that philosophy is the medium of universality, whereas a national "feeling" would be something particular. However, as a particular, the "Romanian feeling of Being" would claim a universal legitimacy, which is a contradiction in terms. In fact, what Noica meant by "feeling" was a specific experience of the world, of Being, that we could find in those linguistic items. Here, "feeling" certainly did not refer to emotions – which are subjective in character – but to a way of grasping the whole surrounding reality, which, despite its linguistic correspondent, rarely reaches complete conscious recognition. Romanians live immersed in that feeling and this entails a specific way of thinking and behaving.

Similarly, Whitehead stated that philosophy must see in the language of a community its particular way of experiencing the world. From this point of view, both thinkers follow Wilhem von Humbold's theory that the "Weltanschauung" of a people settles in its language. Whitehead, too, uses "feeling" in a much broader sense than it is used commonly, namely as "experience." For him, there is no given structure of subject or object. As in pragmatism, he, too, considers that, to a certain extent, subject and object grow from their mutual experience. However, the reverse is also true: the subject influences the experience concerning the object through which he is accustomed to feeling or thinking about it. Both these processes can happen because the subject has a temporary structure that can change and does change depending on a manifold of factors, like new experiences, a specific temperament, a certain education, the values and ideas that he shares with his community, and so forth. What is more, from all these factors, a creative individual, an artist, can create a new vision of reality that spreads into his

community, persuading others to feel and think similarly and thus contributing to shaping their world experience and worldview.

For both thinkers, language is a medium that gathers experiences and is a source of experiences. This is a consequence of their fundamental relativism that avoids acknowledging ultimate ontic factors.