

## ■ reviews

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# Ricardo Horneffer: *El problema del Ser: sus aporías en la obra de Eduardo Nicol* Facultat de Filosofia i Lletres, UNAM, Mèxic, 2013, 225 pp.

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It is most likely that the best way to describe the current perception of the history of metaphysics these days is by using Borges' story "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius", according to which "There is an abundance of incredible systems of pleasing design or sensational type. The metaphysicians of Tlön do not seek for the truth or even for verisimilitude, but rather for the astounding. They judge that metaphysics is a branch of fantastic literature".<sup>1</sup>

Philosophy has denied the legitimacy of metaphysics as a science or rigorous knowledge, sometimes rightly (and sometimes wrongly). And it is in our era when it is most regarded with contempt and is most discredited. In such a science-orientated moment, or rather, techno-science orientated moment like today, the word "metaphysics" is inevitably misinterpreted. It usually gives rise to suspicion and dislike. In fact, however, the situation for metaphysics has never been easy and yet has persisted over twenty-seven centuries, as Aristotle defined it, as a first or highest science.

Alongside the error of confusing the legitimacy of a "discipline" with the (more or less serious) mistakes presented by the "theories" that it itself promotes, one must realise that metaphysics responds to a vital need, and that, through it, humans raise fundamental questions. And as a result of these two facts it makes sense today (and at any other time), to question the most radical metaphysical problem: the Being. Not in vain Ricardo Horneffer's book, entitled *El problema del Ser: sus aporías en la obra de Eduardo Nicol*, is a rigorous study of the Catalan-Mexican philosopher's work and, at the same time, an extension of the history of metaphysics that responds to the human need —perhaps "too human"— for wondering about what is essential. A book in which one perceives rigour, systematicity, criticism and a method. These aspects provide a ra-

1 Jorge Luis Borges, *Ficciones*, Joaquín Moritz/Emecé, Mèxic, 2006, p. 29.

tionale for his analysis and also for the vital concern that every thinker develops when approaching what is essential.

To approach the problem of Being from a new perspective while assuming the philosophical tradition, Nicol proposed the “return to metaphysics”, through which he deemed it a “prima scientia” of Being and Knowing; whilst tackling, in a single operation, the problems of its foundation and the unity of knowledge.<sup>2</sup> In this manner, he believed that, in order to overcome the point of exhaustion that metaphysics had reached in the twentieth century, a “revolution in philosophy” was necessary, through which he adopted dialectical phenomenology as a method<sup>3</sup> with the primary purpose of demonstrating the phenomenal nature of the Being, from which it follows that entity’s temporary deployment does not prevent insight. This is the key to Nicol’s metaphysics, from which, in the same way as in any other thought that clings to approaching positively to the limit, the most significant problems of interpretation and breath-taking conclusions arise: the aporia.

In our view, Ricardo Horneffer’s book which we are reviewing here responds to the same situation in which Nicol took action. We have found rigorous analysis of the changes, situations and circumstances that Nicol undertook in his attempt to formulate and conceive the Being accurately. Each formulation literally leads to one a-poria. That is, an extreme situation in which it seems that there is no way out or path for the thought to take; which compels it to retrace its steps and find (perhaps create) a new path. And, although the Catalan-Mexican philosopher stated that the Being is not a problem (because we can see it with our eyes) Horneffer recalls: “On the contrary, it is a problem precisely because, while there is logos, it is an inseparable part — whatever it is named — of the human being and his history”.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the author reminds us that while the Being is in sight, each comprehension of it is historical. In each formulation of the Principle (or, if you prefer, Substance, God, Eidos, Spirit, Nothingness or Being), and in the search for each of its attributes, the being of man is involved historically and vitally; something which is not superfluous. Consequently, Horneffer also deals with an important part of the history of metaphysics, highlighting the works of Heraclitus, Parmenides, Plato, Aristotle and Heidegger.

To understand the aporia resulting from the problem of Being in Nicol’s work, and as a permanent exercise of the discipline, Horneffer very carefully analyses what Nicol’s statement, the sight comprehends the Being, means. According to this central idea, all that has continuity (i.e. permanent)

2 Vid. Eduard Nicol, “El retorno a la metafísica”, *Ideas de vario linaje*, UNAM, Mèxic, 1990.

3 Vid. Eduard Nicol, *Crítica de la razón simbólica. La revolución en filosofía*, FCE, Mèxic, 1982.

4 Ricardo Horneffer, *El problema del Ser: sus aporías en la obra de Eduardo Nicol*, UNAM, Mèxic, 2013, p. 212.

is seen through changes (in what is ephemeral). It is not hidden nor does it need any methodological operation to be comprehended. There is no need for a methodologically purified or trained reason to deal with what it is, “legitimately”. Consequently, the Principle precedes any science and any operation of reason that wants to show it. All sciences, even the first one, are based on the principle “de facto”. Hence the search for the Principle is, according to Nicol, a nonsense.

Horneffer takes this fundamental idea from Nicol’s metaphysics and engages in deep dialogue with the Catalan–Mexican philosopher. He makes a productive effort to understand Nicol critically (which adds very significant value to the analyses made) and takes the dialogue to a deeper level with the aim of deciphering “the reason” of what he says. In this manner, he can approach the postulations and commitments taken by Nicol in his philosophy while he recognises (when appropriate) the originality and the radical nature of his thought. Horneffer then ascertains that, although the project of a revolution in the philosophy proposed by Nicol aims to “break” the metaphysical tradition from Parmenides to Husserl, he inevitably maintains a number of postulations that actually extend this metaphysical tradition. While Nicol put forward a radical change in recognising the ontological “weight” of appearance, which had been traditionally discredited, the development of this fundamental notion gradually led him to question issues such as attributes and the precise assertion on how to “express” the presence of the Being.

Primarily, according to Horneffer, Nicol finds himself with the necessity to justify the attributes of eternity and infinity of the Being, as the whole metaphysical tradition had done before, since he shares the feeling of helplessness resulting from the human being’s intuition that he comes from and goes to nothingness. Nicol insists on giving the Being a “transcendent meaning”, making it infinite and eternal — the two main attributes — in order to deny, thus, the possibility of contradiction before and after life. In this manner, he moves away from his own phenomenological precept which focuses only on what is given. The real motive to reach both attributes of the Being is emotional rather than phenomenological, says Horneffer. They stem from the horror generated by the pure possibility of contradiction, rather than real evidence.

Horneffer rightly realizes that Nicol’s indecision in identifying or distinguishing the Being from reality “at once” is due to a combination of theoretical and existential reasons. And this is why he always encounters aporia. On the one hand, the Barcelonan philosopher draws the “deductive” conclusion in that the Being does not have any attributes and, on the other, he “feels” compelled to recognise the need for these attributes. If the Being is patent and nothing opposes it (because nothing escapes what is absolute), it is not related to nothingness. Therefore, it cannot be distinguished from nothingness nor can

one define it. The intention of giving attributes to it would be equivalent to confusing Being with an entity. Determining what is undetermined. However, we must distinguish them because, “by definition”, Being and entity are not the same. And theoretical demands, rather than phenomenological evidence, lead Nicol to find the attributes of Being and to entangle himself in a web of aporia. In an attempt to confront that which is essential, there is a to and fro between “evidence of reason” and phenomenological evidence, which leads to the arguments of problems that seem unsolvable and, moreover, provide Nicol’s metaphysics with life and movement. That is to say, they denote their true development, which is established when one perseveres in problems, rather than in solutions.

The criticism developed by Horneffer based on this set of theoretical reconciliations, unveils the ontological commitments undertaken by Nicol. If the Being is not the same as the entity, according to Heidegger’s formulation, the attributes of the Being and those of the entity cannot be the same. They must even be opposed. If the entity is finite, the Being is thought as infinite. If the entity is changing and temporary, the Being is eternal... However, these clear and logical differences, built on “conceptual” opposition, do not work when we move from the logical to the ontological field. Consequently, as Horneffer says: “This is aporia, because if it is true that human and entity ‘appear’ together, there is no ‘relationship’, properly speaking, between them”.<sup>5</sup>

Undoubtedly, the most interesting part of Horneffer’s book is when the “logos” comes into play. So interesting it is that the book could have been entitled “The problem of Being and logos...”. Because what its author demonstrates is that it is not just the “apophansis” of Being (the means by which it is visible and acquires meaning), rather, strictly speaking, “in reality, the Being ‘does not occur’, rather it precedes the ‘logos’ from the absence; Being ‘is’ in the ‘logos’, lives and re-creates itself in the ‘logos’ in infinite ways”.<sup>6</sup> In Horneffer’s view, the thought, followed by the word, will inevitably re-create their object and will not be confined to re-reflect their presence. The presence of the Being, which would be a donation (or an act of gratitude) always requires that someone is able to comprehend this donation and to re-think it. Therefore, he says, the logos complements the phenomenon. The Being is visible and in sight. That is, phenomenon. It is impossible for all that is sensed in a “complete”, simple, immediate and instantaneous way is re-created as it is in the logos. The only way to do it, although it is always imperfect, is by “starting from” the logos. And this is the reason for the historical diversity of ways of speaking of the Being.

Leaving Horneffer’s proposal (which “is in sight” and each reader can re-formulate it) aside, the other formulation he makes remains unresolved: that

5 Ibidem, pp. 106-107.

6 Ibidem, p. 212.

of de-nominalise — if one can call it that — the Being and refer to what “is while it is”. Horneffer’s book offers a good analysis of the quintessential metaphysical problem, that of the Being. In addition, the value of carefully thought out and rigorous work must be attached to it. It also retains the momentum in making more extreme that which seemed to break the canon from the start.

Nicol’s reader always has to deal with a kind of thought that goes on to create a counterpoint between some canonical ideas of the history of philosophy and the ground-breaking ones. And this is why he finds it hard to conform to statements like the following: “The Being is phenomenon”, “the Being has existed since there are men”, “error and truth have the same foundation”, or “appearances are a legitimate source of knowledge”. And now (if this was not enough) Horneffer corrects them and adds new ones, according to which “the Being precedes the Logos”, “without human beings there are no phenomena”, “strictly speaking there is no perception without logos”, and “the Being is an absolute complete, although unlimited”.

Horneffer’s book can be regarded as those narratives in which stories start with the end, which typically create uncertainty in the reader and trigger curiosity. When the end is so different from what is “usually expected” it is almost impossible not to wonder: What happened to have reached this point? Thus, every twist in history is surprising and lives up to the expectations for the next twist because we already know the ending. Undoubtedly, this is not a resource that a serious philosophical text like Ricardo Horneffer’s can afford; but this book review’s aim is to motivate the reader to go into the book in depth with enthusiasm and encouragement. As for the remainder, the text is itself sufficient.

Finally, as we believe in philosophy that criticism is courtesy, we must say that for us Horneffer lacks not having dealt with one major aporia. Undoubtedly, his analysis is correct when he insists on the fact that the distinction between the Being and reality involves many problems. Now, he almost always tackles it from the attributes perspective, and not from the view of its phenomenal nature. One should not forget that when Nicol claims the ontological strength of appearance, mainly in the texts of *Los principios de la ciencia* and during that time, he usually does so with regard to the identification of the Being and reality.<sup>7</sup> The ontological weight of phenomena lies in this identification and this is, to put it briefly, its foundation. Later on we do not know exactly how phenomenology is “laid out” and the legitimacy of the appearance of phenomena, and whether it is necessary to insist, even if it is done differently, on the ontological difference.

7 Vid. Juliana González, *La metafísica dialéctica de Eduardo Nicol*, UNAM, Mèxic, 1981.

