

WHY READ BLAGA'S PHILOSOPHY?*

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Abstract. The study is an act of suggesting some ways in which Blaga's philosophy merits the attention of Anglophone philosophers. Blaga avoids also the two dangers of the more synthetic approach: immediate generalisation which produces impressively sounding *dicta* yet fails to test them, and moving in a world of abstractions without any concrete illustrations. "The Mioritic Space" could be an example of how Blaga seeks empirical illustration. The investigation approaches also Blaga's terminology of "paradisiac" and "Luciferian" knowledge, "integration into mystery", "abyssal categories of the unconscious", "stylistic matrix", "Mioritic space", and so on, let alone Blaga's metaphysical interests and terms – "the Great Anonym", "divine differentials" and "transcendental censorship".

Keywords: Lucian Blaga, "The Mioritic Space", "Luciferian" knowledge, "integration into mystery", "abyssal categories of the unconscious".

Just over one hundred and ten years after his birth (in 1895) and more than forty years after his death (in 1961), the philosophy of Lucian Blaga is hardly known in the English-speaking world, and this collection is the first published English translation. The question inevitably arises as to what claims Blaga and his philosophy may have upon our attention. I suggest the following:

1. Blaga offers what Anglophone philosophy often lacks, *viz.* a more synthetic and synoptic approach. We tend to break up the subject-matter of philosophy into relatively distinct disciplines, especially as regards the study of man himself. We have philosophy of mind, which also deals with questions of the body-mind relation and occasionally broadens out to a philosophy of action; we have ethics which treats of human duty, and less often of human good; but we do not cultivate a philosophical anthropology which brings together these facets of human being and which also locates and differentiates man in relation to the rest of existence.

Of course, there are exceptions, such as Charles Taylor, Alastair MacIntyre and Iris Murdoch, but for the most part, we deal piecemeal and serially with separate questions and problems without trying to bring them together.

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Yet Blaga avoids also the two dangers of the more synthetic approach: immediate generalisation which produces impressively sounding *dicta* yet fails to test them, and moving in a world of abstractions without any concrete illustrations. “The Mioritic Space” could be an example of how Blaga seeks empirical illustration and support for one of his contentions.

Furthermore, Blaga situates himself in history. *The Dogmatic Aeon* is a survey of the major forms and developments in European thought since the Hellenistic period, which culminates in a consideration of the general problems raised by the theory of relativity, whose philosophical significance Blaga immediately grasped, and outlines of a new way of thinking – “transfigured antinomy” as prefigured in Christian theology but now generalised, and “minus cognition” which deepens mysteries – and of a wholly new intellectual climate, a “post-dogmatic” age we might say, which Blaga sees as emerging. Likewise in *Science and Creation*, Blaga surveys different conceptions of science that have appeared in history, as well as aesthetic styles.

2. As a more specific example of Blaga's equally analytic and synthetic approach, we may cite his treatment of the theme of culture. Man essentially exists in a cultural world, which he creates, inherits and transmits. But we do not consider culture in its own right, whereas “the philosophy of culture” was the title of the chair created for him at Cluj when he turned from diplomacy to teaching. Consequently, Blaga considers notable cultural forms such as religion, myth, magic, art, and science, but not just serially. In them, he finds the expression of “style”. For us “style” at best would be a theme for aesthetics and even then would probably be shuffled off to the history of art. Yet, for Blaga it has a profound significance. For, abandoning those epistemologies which assume a passive mind, and being fully aware of what we bring to bear upon experience, Blaga sees “style” as a central feature of all human activity. Long before Kuhn introduced us to “paradigms” in science, Blaga showed how style pervades all the activities of man, science as much as art. It is that which constitutes culture, man's specific mode of being, and which differentiates one culture or period from another.

3. Anglophone philosophy, like most philosophy since Descartes, has been primarily concerned with knowledge, and especially with “justifying” claims to knowledge, and in turn by seeking its “foundations”. Now that we are supposed to have abandoned the last at least, there may be more sympathy for Blaga's approach which, by and large, is to focus on the emergence and differentiation of new forms of knowledge, and upon the *knowing*, the cognition, rather than upon the *known*, upon *how* we know rather than how we *know*. Blaga is especially concerned to differentiate two forms of cognition, “paradisiac” and “Luciferian”, the latter being peculiar to man, and to emphasize the category of “mystery”, which is not a problem to be solved but something to be revealed as the mystery

that it is, and perhaps to be deepened, by “minus-cognition”. Blaga's initial example, which led him to this formulation, is the antinomy of the new physics of light, which required it to be thought of as both “corpuscular” and “wave-like”, terms which exclude each other. What is required at that point is not yet more “plus knowledge”, of adding facts to facts to be understood by existing conceptions and explanations, but the recognition of this mystery which has been revealed, a mystery which lies beyond the scope of our present modes of understanding. Minus knowledge is a function of Luciferian knowledge, which is not content with resting happily in what is already known (“enstatic” intellect) but seeks to go beyond it (“ecstatic” intellect). What 'minus cognition' recognises is that, firstly, we have encountered something that we can understand with existing methods, principles and conceptions, and which calls for a leap into the unknown and to a higher level of thought, and, secondly, that, even when we have attained such a higher level, there still remains the core of the mystery itself which outruns our knowledge of it and our attempts, inevitably partial, to clarify it by our theoretical constructions. Blaga's theory has been termed an “ecstatic rationalism”, which is to say that it has none of the absolutist pretensions usually associated with rationalism, which would exhibit a Luciferian conceit in our own abilities.

Blaga is therefore one of a number of philosophers in the 20th century who realised that human knowledge, precisely because it deals with a real world independent of itself, has its inevitable limits, horizons and tacit dimensions, and that its operations cannot be reduced to sets of explicit rules. Algorithms apply only to what is routine. The novel, especially that which breaks our existing rules, requires a creative invention of new procedures and conceptions altogether, which no existing rule can tell us how to do. Nor does our success at doing this once or twice permit us to imagine that at any point we have reached a final and absolute level of understanding on which no further mysteries will be encountered and where, from now onwards, all will be routine, the dream of modern epistemology from Descartes onwards. Blaga's account of the negative side of Luciferian knowledge (its temptation to think that now it has dissolved mystery for ever), can be applied equally to Hegelian claims to absolute knowledge devoid of mystery, and to Positivist and Reductionist claims that what cannot meet their requirements for clear and precise knowledge is therefore either non-existent or not worth knowing (*e.g.* E. L. Thorndike's explicit claim that what cannot be measured is unreal).

We also note that Blaga, by applying something very close to Popper's principle of falsification to metaphysics, would reject Popper's use of it to demarcate science from non-science. Blaga perhaps did not feel constrained by Positivist rejections of all metaphysics, but such rejections are simply refusals on the Positivists' part to spell out and submit to examination what they in fact and unquestioningly take to be the ultimate constituents or sources of the world and

the ultimate level of explanation. Blaga at least tried to offer an explanation of why mystery is an inevitable ingredient in human knowledge.

4. In particular Blaga goes beyond Kant, with his fixed and invariable scheme of categories, to an additional set of categories in the unconscious, in partial or “para-” correspondence with the former, a set which is far from invariant. These deeper or “abyssal” categories have the function of a “stylistic matrix”, that is, of generating the “styles” which colour and control over ways of apprehending and acting within the world. For example, Merleau-Ponty, for one, has shown how we do not live in an abstract and undifferentiated geometrical space, though the formulation of such a space is a great human achievement, but in a space orientated and vectorised by the lived body. But Blaga, following morphologists of culture and going beyond them in linking their proposals to a general theory of knowledge, also discerns different ways in which space, and also time, have been unconsciously perceived in the lived experience of different people and ages as manifested in their works. Blaga thus combines an interest in essential structures of the mind with full awareness of the variability of more specific ways in which it has manifested itself in history, a combination which is likely to be particularly helpful in the “post-foundationalist” and “post-modernist” climate of today.

In the very act of suggesting some ways in which Blaga's philosophy merits the attention of Anglophone philosophers, we have probably put a certain sort of “hard-headed”, “no nonsense”, philosopher completely off it. We can easily see such a one bristling at Blaga's terminology of “paradisiac” and “Luciferian” knowledge, “integration into mystery”, “abyssal categories of the unconscious”, “stylistic matrix”, “Mioritic space”, and so on, let alone Blaga's metaphysical interests and terms – “the Great Anonym”, “divine differentials” and “transcendental censorship”. Such a philosopher would feel himself justified in dismissing Blaga at the outset as just another obscurantist, mystery-mongering, poetic, metaphorical, and typically Latin pseudo-philosopher. When he learns that Blaga was also a poet (one of Romania's finest) and a playwright, then his worst fears will be confirmed.

It is true that Blaga wrote philosophy in something of a poetic manner, just as he wrote poetry on philosophical themes, and, as usual with Latin writers, one cannot make him sound in translation like an Englishman writing in English, unless one substitutes quite another voice for his. But the playful spirit in Blaga cuts both ways: if he seems to like using a colourful terminology, and to delight in metaphysical construction for its own sake on his part and that of others, he also sits lightly to it. As he said in one of his aphorisms, he was the freest of his followers. We should therefore look through and beyond the words to what he was talking about, and not reject all of his thought because we cannot accept some of it.

Some Notes on Michael Polanyi and Lucian Blaga

These notes are based on what I have learned about Blaga at the Workshop organised by the Black Sea University and the extracts from his works which I was kindly given. I may well have misunderstood some things and am certainly ignorant of many more.

Polanyi and Blaga were alike in having wider interests outside philosophy and in refusing to treat it as a self-enclosed academic specialism – Polanyi trained as a doctor in Hungary, became a research chemist in Germany, went to England in 1933, gave up science for philosophy in 1948, and wrote also on politics and economics. As for the contents of their respective philosophies, the following seem to me, within the limits of my knowledge of Blaga, to be the principal points of convergence.

They were both interested in the deep structures of the mind and its knowledge, structures of which, they both emphasized, we are not normally aware yet which guide our proximate knowledge and action. Both of them were thus radically opposed to those Empiricist theories which, in Locke's words, regard mind as a "blank tablet", passively receiving "impressions", and to Positivist philosophies which deny the very existence of frameworks of thought and interpretation of experience. Equally and unlike Kant, they had a sense of historical and developing character of those structures and frameworks, yet, unlike many post-modern thinkers, they also emphasized our commitment to truth and to revealing the real world that is independent of our knowing. These are the lines that any genuine philosophy must take.

In particular, they both recognised that reality transcends our cognitive abilities and that it cannot be confined within any formula. Blaga regards mystery as an essential and distinctive feature of man and human awareness, a permanent background to all our knowledge. He criticizes theories of cognition, and especially of science, which reduce all knowledge to what he calls Type 1 (or "paradisaic") knowledge, in which certain categories, not varying greatly across history, are applied fairly straight-forwardly in perception and action. In contrast, science also requires Type 2 (or "Luciferian") knowledge which applies deeper categories, relating to man's distinctive existence within a horizon of mystery and revealing those mysteries. These categories are much less fixed and general, and are themselves guided by yet deeper, "abyssal", categories which form a "stylistic field". Blaga rejects the positivist characterisation of such categories, e.g. teleology in biology, as "useful fictions", and stresses that they function to reveal mysteries. Polanyi likewise emphasizes the roles of intellectual frameworks and the activity of the knower in the formation of our knowledge, and also is aware of their variability while insisting that we aim at truth with universal intent", although we can never quite get there, a point that Blaga also makes. Polanyi

again criticized the “pseudo-substitution” offered for the notion of truth (“economy”, “simplicity”, Kant's “regulative ideas”) which tacitly trade on the notion of truth which they are supposed to replace. He also maintained that reality outruns our attempts to know it and that it cannot be confined within our formulas. He developed a doctrine of degrees of reality: that the more an object reveals hitherto unsuspected aspects of itself, the more real it is; so that minds are more real than stones. And in his account of tacit knowing (of which I gave an outline in my paper for the Workshop) he showed that “We know more than we can tell”, that aspects of both the object known and of our activity of knowing it cannot be made explicit and put into words and formulas. In that respect he too holds that mystery is an essential part of man and his life in the world.

I was very interested in Blaga's conception of “minus-knowledge”, the function of which is not just to show that certain questions, problems and lines of research are empty or fruitless (the discovery that there is nothing to be discovered) but to reveal that there is a mystery and not a final formula, more to be known, and a deepening of the revealed mystery.

A question arises about “minus-knowledge”: How can we know what we do not know? For, it seems, either we know something or we do not, either it is revealed or it remains unknown. Perhaps Blaga provided an answer to this question. Polanyi certainly did. All our knowledge is the tacit integration of one set of things *from* which we attend into a focal apprehension of that *to* which we attend. For the most part, we are not, and usually cannot be, explicitly aware of the former set, but we know them only in using them as clues and pointers to the focal object. This means that our knowledge can progress, *which it could not do if everything we knew were focally and explicitly known*, when we tacitly sense the presence of some further and focally unknown reality to which in fact our present knowledge is pointing. We can then try to attend from what we previously attended to, and thus to use it as a clue towards what we sense it is pointing us. If we are successful, the hitherto unknown object, tacitly sensed, then comes into the focus our attention. It is in this way that we can reveal and penetrate the mysteries of things. These, then, are my first impressions of Blaga in relation to Polanyi. I hope to learn more about Blaga and then to revise and extend these notes.
