ONTOLOGY, HISTORY AND THE PHILOSOPHY OF NATIONAL IDENTITY AT CONSTANTIN NOICA

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Abstract This paper proposes an outline of the history of Constantin Noica's ideas in order to identify the origin of his thoughts and discover the place of his writings on Romanian cultural identity within his philosophical system. I will prove that in his first writings (from the 1930s) Noica follows Kantian idealism, while in his later work (1940s, and mainly beginning with 1950) he is closer to Hegel, also announcing the premises and the structure of his future ontological system, while his texts dedicated to Romanian cultural identity (1970–1978) are dependent in their ideas both on Hegelian idealism and organicism and on the Romanticist philosophy of language. At the same time, I will demonstrate that Noica's anti-political attitude is a result of his philosophy as well as of his philosophical biography.

Keywords Constantin Noica, hermeneutics, identity, history, culture.

Alexandra Laignel-Lavastine, in her work much discussed in the Romanian culture[1], interprets Constantin Noica's ontology from the point of view of political thinking, reaching the conclusion that the Romanian philosopher gives incorrect answers to many current political problems. Lavastine claims that Noica's entire ontology could be deduced from the fact that philosopher remained a totalitarian spirit and a nationalist, even after he left prison, and his texts on Romanian national identity resulted from the fact that he embraced nationalist ideas which were also supported in that age by the Ceaușescu regime.

In what follows, I will bring into discussion the thesis of Lavastine's book, trying to trace the genealogy of Noica's ideas, both those on ontology, and his writings on national

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[1] Alexandra Laignel-Lavastine, *Filozofie și naționalism. Paradoxul Noica* (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1998).

identity. The relation of the two projects must be revisited also against the ideas of some of Noica's admirers, who claim that his real philosophy is only his ontology, while the other project is secondary. Some of these interpreters – for instance, Sorin Lavric – also think that Noica's ontology could be understood without any reference to his books on the Romanian spirituality.[2] As a second intention of this paper, I will also show, against this interpretation, that Noica's two projects do have a profound philosophical connection. More precisely, I will show that there is a continuity between Noica's ideas before and after the war, but the philosophy of national identity is an organic part of his ontology, and not inferior to it, while it does not provide any ideological reasons for the development of his ontological project.

The system argument: ontology and the philosophy of national identity

The first argument for the idea that Noica's ontology and his philosophy of the national spirit are intimately linked can be discovered precisely where Noica describes the structure of his philosophical system. In the "preamble" to his *Tratat de ontologie* (*Treatise of Ontology*) written in 1950 and published only in 1981 with the title *Încercare asupra filosofiei tradiţionale* (*Essay on Traditional Philosophy*), Noica lists four stages of becoming within being (of reason), which are precisely the parts of his philosophical system. The first three illustrate modes of humanness: subjective ("man itself in its particular self", regarded as a person); objective (or community); absolute (humanness itself, represented by religion in the past and the "consciousness of planetary solidarity" today). These stages are analogous at Noica with the "subjective [...], objective and absolute of German philosophy". The fourth stage adding to these three surpasses the human hypostasis of becoming within being, namely "the becoming within being of absolute reason", a reason localised in the very order of the world. This time we no longer deal with the human meaning of the absolute but with the absolute itself, endowed with its own dialectic.[3] Consequently, as Noica summarises, we have "the person, the historical community, humanity as a whole, and the logos of dialectic".[4] Their connection is formulated in the following terms: "Reason exists in everything, it brings into being all these stages of reality: but in the first three stages it is incorporated in the human-individual, human-historical and human-absolute matter, while in the last stage it is its own object." Noica himself confirms that it is his ontological sketch in his *Autoprezentarea* (*Self-presentation*) he wrote for the Italian journal *Filosofia oggi* from Genova, no. 2/1985.[5] This sketch is Hegelian in nature, and it lets us understand that the discussion of the philosophy of nationalism is not only justified but obligatory, as it is analogous to what German idealism called the objective spirit. The application of ontology at the level of the objective spirit is part of the system. Just as

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[2] Sorin Lavric, "Arta de a arunca cu piatra în Noica," *Idei în dialog* 2 (februarie 2005).

[3] Constantin Noica, *Devenirea întru fiinţă*, vol. I: *Încercare asupra filosofiei tradiţionale* (Bucureşti: Editura Ştiinţifică şi Enciclopedică, 1981), 144, 159.

[4] Ibid., 163.

[5] Constantin Noica, "Autoprezentare", transl. by Vasile Voia, *Tribuna* 50 (10 decembrie 1987), 6.

Hegelian ontology was not limited to the *Science of Logic*, but it was part of the whole system, for Noica as well the construct from his *Treatise of Ontology* means the exposition of ontology in a restricted sense, of the system of becoming within being, of reason itself, but the whole of Noica's ontology must also comprise the other three registers.

In the period of texts dedicated to Romanian philosophy, the ontological project which comprised all four stages was only developed on the objective (community) stage of becoming within being. We can say thus that Lavastine's interpretation is one-sided, but not because she transformed a discontinuity existing in Noica's system into a false continuity, as Sorin Lavric seems to think, but because she inverses the ontological order of its registers, the only order in which his work *as a whole* may be meaningful. For this exact reason it is absurd to think with Lavastine that Noica constructed his ontology merely as a means to impose his "legionnaire", "fascist", "collectivist", "nationalist" ideas. However, a careful look at the process of his thinking leads to a completely different idea. I propose therefore, in what follows, to reconstruct the inner history of Noica's thinking, in order to grasp: a) how he approached or distanced himself from the philosophers of classical German idealism; b) how he reached to the four-fold division of his philosophical system; c) the different thematisation of history in his writings and their relation to the way he thought about the problem of national specificity.

The historical argument: from idealism to the philosophy of spirit and ontology

In his first works, Noica was a follower of Kantian idealism. In his *Mathesis sau bucuriile simple* (*Mathesis or the Simple Joys*, 1934), his affinity for Kant is expressed by the idea that reason can get out of things what it had placed in them. In other words, the world has a meaning only insofar as conscience gives it one. According to Noica, this "Copernican revolution" in search for a *mathesis universalis* should be extended to the level of the entire life. Life should be led according to the principles of this mathematical-type culture, whose main representative is precisely Kant.[6] On the contrary, a historical-type culture is about solidification, presence and givenness, fatality. Still, history can be saved if we integrate it into an order of possible worlds. By being raised to the possible, man can be saved from the tyranny of brute facts.

Noica also follows idealism in his work *De caelo* (1937), in which he criticises metaphysical dogmatism, expressed by the faith that brute facts possess a truth independently from conscience. History is itself an anonymous power, a multitude of laws and rules coagulated into a petrified whole.[7] It misses out on becoming and life. History treats us as objects, not as its actors. The remedy, according to Noica, is to project towards the future, that is, towards the possible, through which we can regain our status as subjects.

The beginning of Noica's interests moving from Kant to Hegel, that is, from idealism to the philosophy of the spirit, can be identified in a radio conference from 1937, where the

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[6] Constantin Noica, *Mathesis sau bucuriile simple* (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1992), 27.
[7] Constantin Noica, *De caelo. Încercare în jurul cunoaşterii şi individului* (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1993), 84.

return to the subject is regarded as the return of the spirit to itself. "Spiritual life is everywhere", contends Noica: in religion, morals, politics, school, pedagogy, career, and family, in all of man's activities.[8] In another conference from 1940, we find out that "The spirit is not a totality, but a unity, an organism", and "the individual is part of this organism".[9]

This kind of re-evaluation of history from this frontier position between idealism and the philosophy of spirit appears also in Noica's work *Schiţă pentru istoria lui Cum e cu putinţă ceva nou* (*A Sketch for the History of How is Something New Possible*, 1940), where the philosophical ideas are projected into the integrative history of *ingenium perenne*, which lies at the basis of any philosophical construct. This vast actualising intellect could thus be brought to the surface from the most obscure and unconscious zones of the history of philosophy. The history of the spirit is not yet doubled by the thematisation of the maladies of the spirit (criticising even Jacques Maritain, who proposed something similar), but in his later writings Noica came to develop such a project as well.[10] In this work on the unconscious zones of philosophy, the history of the spirit has a transcendental function. The message of this book is thus Noica's attempt to complete the philosophy of conscience with the philosophy of the spirit, yet granting a special place to transcendental idealism.

In the 1940s, Noica's turn towards Hegel intertwined with his concerns with the definition of Romanian spirituality, a problem was considered important in the age as well. In the work that resulted from these concerns, entitled *Pagini despre sufletul românesc* (*Pages on the Romanian soul*, 1944), Romanian spirituality is compared with modern idealism: the latter finds in the things the meaning that the self gives to them, while the former thinks that things have a meaning in themselves. "This shifting of meaning – as not about, nor of the thing, but *within* the thing, as if beyond the understanding cogito – belongs to something more profound: the inclusion of the thinking into the being."[11]

Noica's work from 1950, *Essay on Traditional Philosophy*, which presents the structure of the philosophical system, seals his turning away from Kant and following Hegel's direction of philosophy. After Noica, the moderns have lost the sense of reason, changing it into intellect. Therefore their philosophy is pervaded by the ethos of neutrality and dualist, oppositional thinking. Reason – termed now also as becoming within being – is directed, affirmative, containing the negative merely as one of its moments, exactly as Hegel talked about speculative reason. "And the speculative reason, that of of philosophy – we shall say together with Hegel, although apparently against him – is that of the affirmation of a theme, not the maintaining of a contradiction. Precisely because it is affirmation, thinking can be at a certain

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[8] Constantin Noica, *21 de conferinţe radiofonice. 1936-1943* (Bucureşti: Humanitas & Editura Casa Radio, 2000), 28-29 (the conference "Încotro merge cugetul contemporan", 2 December 1937).

[9] Constantin Noica, *21 de conferinţe radiofonice. 1936-1943* (Bucureşti: Humanitas & Editura Casa Radio, 2000), 111 (conferinţa „Organizarea durerii", 21 iulie 1940).

[10] Constantin Noica, *Schiţă pentru istoria lui Cum e cu putinţă ceva nou* (Bucureşti: Humanitas, 1995), 7-21.

[11] Constantin Noica, *Pagini despre sufletul românesc* (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1991), 77-78.

point also negation and self-contradiction. And precisely because it is directed, it can be at a certain point neutral."[12] Elsewhere Noica clearly expresses the connection between "yes" and "no", underlining the methodological virtues of unilateral contradiction: "The progress of the living is not made by *no*, or the logically customary opposition between yes and no. It is made thematically by a *yes* which becomes *no* only at a certain point (the irrational number only apparently contradicts the rational number) and it is re-made as a fuller *yes* (the irrational number integrates the rational one). «No» is only possible within the thematic life of yes, as a moment of this life."[13] The synthesis between idealism and ontology was possible precisely following the Hegelian model: the subject is not merely self-consciousness, but absolute consciousness, which is understood, as Noica points out, as a subject-object which unites the level of the world with the level of consciousness.[14]

The cultural-linguistic argument: organicism and Romanticist philosophy of language

Taking up the integrative project, completed in his 1950 work, approaches Noica to organicism. This is not the unique truly philosophical aspect of Goethe's thinking (*Despărțirea de Goethe* [*The Separation from Goethe*], a text written in the 1950s but published only in 1976), but also the main trait of Hegelian speculative philosophy. Moreover, Noica also referred to him in the dispute between traditional and modern-urban culture (*Manuscrisele de la Câmpulung* [*The Câmpulung Manuscripts*], 1951-1953), and especially in his writings on Romanian cultural specificities. In his work on Goethe, Noica points out the philosophy is nothing else than the continuous passage from the individual self to the enlarged self, the latter taking the form of community, spirit, consciousness in general, the absolute self, reason, or the matter endowed with its own dialectic.[15] However, in his articles on Romanian cultural identity included in his volumes published between 1970 and 1978 this enlarged self was simply identified with "Romanianness". For this reason we can say that the same presupposition lies at the basis of both the ontological project and the one concerned with the Romanian cultural identity.

These latter writings are founded on the idea that individuality is only justified by its participation to a general order. However, this idea belongs to both organicism and

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[12] Constantin Noica, *Devenirea întru ființă*, vol. I: *Încercare asupra filosofiei tradiţionale*, 120.

[13] Constantin Noica, *Devenirea întru ființă*, vol. I: *Încercare asupra filosofiei tradiţionale*, 94. Cf. also. 117-119: "The world must be understood in its affirmation, in what exists, is instituted and grows within it. Negation can only be *one* moment of this growth, and precisely not the moment of growth. (…) The important thing is thus to think of the *yes* as more comprehensive than *no* and as a term that generates it. In the last instance, we may say: the difference between our dialectical movement and the other one is that «no» represents a simple face of «yes». The world does not oscillate between yes and no, it doesn't say yes and at the same time no."

[14] Constantin Noica, *Devenirea întru ființă*, vol. I: *Încercare asupra filosofiei tradiţionale*, 141-144.

[15] Constantin Noica, *Despărţirea de Goethe*, ediţia a II-a îngrijită de Marin Diaconu (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2000), 161.

Hegelianism, as well as to the Romanticist philosophy of language. The first two have been briefly discussed above. Noica's common thesis with these is that the individual self is surrounded by the "self" (the moving horizon in which one gains its own meaning and truth"), and both integrated itself within an ampler whole "Self" beyond man ("the ultimate intimacy of every single thing in the bosom of being"[16]). The last term is similar to the subject-object that post-Kantian idealism understood as reason, absolute consciousness, spirit, etc.

The third proximity, as mentioned above, is with Romanticism, namely with its characteristic language philosophy. According to Noica, the general remains abstract if the particular does not breathe life into it. In the works on Romanian specificity, the particular under scrutiny is the Romanian language itself, as an expression of the community: "The entire exploration of the being made by the Romanian spirit through language is deeply meaningful, aiming to breathe life and concreteness into the most abstract general.[17]" According to Noica, "the languages and the communities are a type of breaths", and this idea is shared by the German romantics. Herder believed that the languages are not simple instruments, but totalities that store the knowledge and experiences of the past generations. They structure the collective thought and, implicitly, the individual thought. There is thus a deep connection between language and the community. Wilhelm von Humboldt also believed in the forming function of language in its intimate relation with the spirit of the nation. There is a particular view on the world in each language, one that we could even say envelops the respective nation. There is a "transfer of the external medium into the internal one". Moreover, Noica admits Humboldt's influence on him: "transfer of the external medium into the internal one: *das sprachliche «Umschaffen der Welt in das Eigentum des Geistes» (W. Von Humboldt)*.[18]" In his works from the '70s there are several passages that prove the fact that Noica assumed the romantic conception of the language. For instance: "we live within them [in words] as we do in our air, as in an element of our nature."[19] Or, in another passage: "A language expresses the vastness of a community.[20]"

The ontology of the "Romanian speech" appears by elevating certain words, with their meanings in the folk tradition, to the rank of philosophical concepts. However, it also has a precise function within the system, since it is the articulation of the universality of the spirit in the field of the particular, of the concreteness. Noica explicitly states that the ontological thematisation of the Romanian specificity is not an accident within his philosophical endeavour, on the contrary: "…I never sought the Romanian, but the universal. I found the Romanian because we can only think within the limitation that does not limit of our

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[16] Constantin Noica, "Rostirea filosofică românească," in *Cuvînt împreună despre rostirea românească* (Bucharest: Editura Eminescu, 1987), 13-19.

[17] Constantin Noica, *Spiritul românesc în cumpătul vremii. Şase maladii ale spiritului contemporan* (Bucharest: Editura Univers, 1978), 160.

[18] Constantin Noica, *Jurnal de idei* (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1991), 282

[19] Constantin Noica, *Creaţie şi frumos în rostirea românească* (Bucharest: Editura Eminescu, 1973), 105.

[20] Constantin Noica, *Sentimentul românesc al fiinţei* (Bucharest: Editura Eminescu, 1978), 60.

language.[21]" Thus, we can better understand in what sense the investigation of the national specificity represents a necessary moment of the system. The same endeavour made possible the emphasis on the difference between Romanianism and the modern Western culture. The theoretical support for this comparison was given by the idea of *medicina entis*, by virtue of which there are essential differences between several forms of the spirit. By using the method of unilateral contradiction, Noica's endeavour was carried out from within the "Romanianism", understood as a tradition[22] which, in spite of the novelties it could accept, and especially in spite of the opposition with the Western modernity, remains identical to itself, by having a so-called "Romanian being".

A cultural-biographical argument: the non-involvement in politics and the salvation from history

The individual that is not enveloped in the general is empty. It can become part of a general that envelops it, but it can also be integrated into a "good" general, one that fulfils it and offers it a form of openness towards itself. The Romanianness is one of the forms of this "good" general, but it is not the only one. School, philosophy and culture are also wholes that open, they are forms of the enlarged Self within which the individual receives meaning. Philosophy and culture, for instance, are for Noica means of completely transforming the man, means of forming one's own self. Thus, they play the role of a mediator between the self and the self.[23]

From a philosophical viewpoint, we are still in the proximity of the Hegelian scenario, which also opposed the rest of the spirit in final determinations. Similarly with Hegel, for Noica, philosophy is "the adventure of the universal that becomes particular,[24]" but, as opposed to Hegel, it keeps it private, temporary, experiential character. It is not enveloped together with the system, but it has a deep paideic nature, developed as a *symphilosophein*, "the cultural space of the givers and receivers that constantly switch roles.[25]"

Noica also personally assumed the role of a mediator that helps others initiate in the ways of culture and philosophy by converting himself to authentic thinking. As such, first and foremost, what was needed was an anti-dogmatic attitude of renouncing the singular truth and conquering the personal freedom of thought. Noica was actually an achoretic, as he

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[21] Constantin Noica, *Jurnal de idei*, 282.
[22] Cristian Bădiliță supports the idea according to which Noica replaces history with a trans-history, the only one invested with meaning. See Cristian Bădiliță, *Platonopolis sau Împăcarea cu filozofia* (Iași: Polirom, 1999), 185-186. An approach to the theme of the refusal of history as a premise for a utopian project is also present in Ion Ianoşi, *Constantin Noica între construcţie şi expresie* (București: Editura Ştiinţifică, 1998).
[23] Gabriel Liiceanu, *Jurnalul de la Păltiniş. Un model paideic în cultura umanistă* (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1991), 11.
[24] Constantin Noica, *Jurnal filosofic* (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1990), 103.
[25] Gabriel Liiceanu, *Cearta cu filozofia. Eseuri* (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1992), 39.

describes himself and as his disciples depict him. The refusal of definitive determinations is a common feature of the achoretics, those who wander between different areas of reality, between the individual and general freely.[26] Noica inclined towards asceticism and towards a non-involvement in the reality of the present and he refused the exile in order to remain "home". He also describes himself through the parable of the prodigal son.[27] His situation is actually paradoxical, a synthesis of the prodigal son and his brother: he is like the prodigal son due to the lack of adherence to the fixed determinations and to the assumption of the adventure of the thought, represented by his school of thought and his approach to philosophy, but he is also like the brother of the prodigal son due to his acceptance of history, of the politics and biography as forms of decay and impurity.

Noica is a sort of "cultural tamer" who encouraged his disciples and his readers to apply the philosophical ideal in which he believed to their own lives, namely "to move on from the individual self to the enlarged self.[28]" School, culture, philosophy, as well as Romanianness represented for him the spaces of authentic thinking and feeling, the "true" spaces, as opposed to the inauthenticity of the daily life. Therefore, we can assess that he proposed a way out of the factual history and a way into the history of the significant human deeds.[29] He deems his own biography as irrelevant, lacking a deeper meaning. In fact, it is transferred into another, philosophical biography that identifies with the idea, with the system, and which is assumed as a pure life. As Andrei Cornea points out, "his philosophy does not only envelop its authorial self, but this is the intention of its constitutive project", Noica thus managing to live within his own philosophy.[30] The elevation from the individual self to reason and spirit, a purified, both philosophical and biographical self is thus obtained.

This analysis can conclude that the lack of assuming a political stance[31] is not an ideological act, as Alexandra Laignel-Lavastine believed, but the result of Noica's achoretic

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[26] See Andrei Pleşu, "Între filozofie şi înţelepciune. Însemnări despre C. Noica," in Gabriel Liiceanu (ed.), *Epistolar*, second revised edition (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1996), 340-345; published under the title "Constantin Noica între filozofie şi înţelepciune", and in Andrei Pleşu, *Limba păsărilor* (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1994), 195-203; see also Cristian Bădiliţă, *Platonopolis sau Împăcarea cu filozofia*, 181-184, 195-196.
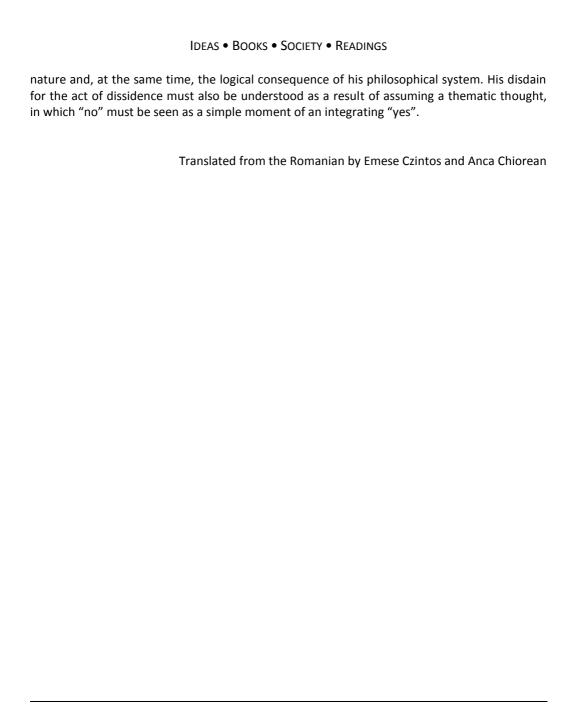
[27] Gabriel Liiceanu, *Jurnalul de la Păltiniş*, 263.

[28] Gabriel Liiceanu, *Jurnalul de la Păltiniş*, 101.

[29] Gabriel Liiceanu, *Jurnalul de la Păltiniş*, 271. A presentation of the stances taken by the commentators of this issue is present in Andrei Cornea, *De la Şcoala din Atena la Şcoala de la Păltiniş sau Despre utopii, realităţi şi (ne)deosebirea dintre ele* (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2004), 200 sq.

[30] Andrei Cornea, *De la Şcoala din Atena la Şcoala de la Păltiniş sau Despre utopii, realităţi şi (ne)deosebirea dintre ele*, 248.

[31] Noica's relation with the political scene is already controversial. Some commentators claim that his gamble was a purely philosophical one; for instance, Andrei Cornea, "Rugaţi-vă pentru fratele Constantin," in *22* (30 October 1998); others claim the exact opposite, like, for instance Victor Neumann, *Ideologie şi fantasmagorie. Perspective comparative asupra istoriei gîndirii politice în Europa Est-Centrală*

nature and, at the same time, the logical consequence of his philosophical system. His disdain for the act of dissidence must also be understood as a result of assuming a thematic thought, in which "no" must be seen as a simple moment of an integrating "yes".

Translated from the Romanian by Emese Czintos and Anca Chiorean

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(Iași: Polirom, 2001), 108-115, who states that the defence of the national cause at the expense of individual freedom is favoured by the excesses of the critique of instrumental reason.