

[1983]

ZUBIRI, THE BEST SPANISH PHILOSOPHER



On the 21st of September died in Madrid the leading Spanish philosopher, Xavier Zubiri (84), who is considered to be the most important thinker Spain has had in the recent past, if not in all its cultural history.

Some people say that he is the greatest Spanish 'metaphysician' since Francisco Suárez, the succession being purely temporal, for Zubiri's Metaphysics does not constitute a school's branch within the Scholastic Philosophy, but represents the beginning of a new Metaphysics.

Other Spanish Philosophers, like Ortega y Gasset, who was Zubiri's teacher in the ways of philosophizing rather than in the contents of his teaching, could have had an advantage on him in the treatment or, at least, in the sorting out of concrete issue concerning the biographical aspects of life and the historical ones of society, but no one past or present is his better in the metaphysical treatment of the issues which are fundamental ever since the Presocratics up to Husserl or Heidegger, including, naturally, Platon, Aristotles, Thomas Aquinus, Descartes, Kant, Hegel, Compte or Bergson, to mention only those thinkers who were most relevant to Zubiri's work.

Xavier Zubiri was born on the 4th. of December 1889 in San Sebastián. He was a Basque; a condition which no doubt was present in his thinking, made up of realism and sobriety. He went through an ecclesiastical training, in which he came to know the scholastic revival of Louvain, where himself wrote a short dissertation on Husserl.



But Scholastic Philosophy, did not satisfy him, even though it brought him in touch with one of his favorite thinkers, Aristotles. Afterwards he polunged, under the influence of Ortega y Gasset, in the study on the newest philosophers of his time, and felt the need to know personally Husserl and Heidegger in Freiburg and attend their lectures. He met there Marcuse and Gadamer. Soon were Zubiri to see that without a solid scientific training his philosophy runs the risk of losing ground on which to stand and of giving up control of its achievements. Accordingly, he devoted himself to studies of Mathematical and Physics in Madrid, worked on these subjects under Lamaitre in Louvain, and attended courses of Einstein and Heissenberg and got acquainted with the latest publications of the 'new' Physics. He was also interested in biological studies and payed a certain attention to other areas: linguistics with Daimel in Rom and Benveniste and Dhorme in Paris.

After acquiring this extraordinary formation, Zubiri returns to Spain at the time of Franco's victory in 1939, but because of his republican leanings he is forbidden to teach in Madrid University and sent to Barcelona University. He will soon give up his chair at the University, believing that the political dictatorship of Franco's regime and the ecclesiastical dictatorship of the Spanish Church were not compatible with the freedom that he as thinker and citizen needed in order to live and think truthfully. For than reason his intelectual work was little projected towards an hostile enviroment which instead of enhancing intelectual creativity hindered if form dogmatic and totalitarian positions. Zubiri withdrew himself to the solitude and devoted himself to searching the reality itself, what things are in themselves.

Zubiri has been accused of lack of concern for the problems of his time, the concrete problems that affected the Spanish community or the individual



existence of his contemporaries. Many complain that the most urgent problems are dealt with by those who are not philosophers, whereas the true philosophers, like Zubiri, do not deal with urgent issues. The point is serious. But, as far as Zubiri is concerned, one must admit that his talent and temperament lead him a different way, although he never gave way to the social-political conditions of the dictatorship, not even in the most crucial moments of pressure on him. He was interested in the important questions rather than in the urgent ones; in laying bare the structure rather than in decoding the present situation (coyuntura); he tried harder to uncover the truth than to transform reality.

In order to synthesize Zubiri's philosophical work, it could be said that he devoted his life to search the reality of things, to find out how things are in reality, to deepen restlessly and without pause in the reality as such. He left to others the drawing of conclusions and applications to everyday events, conclusions and applications that have to be well founded on reality as it is, in order to be significant and correctly oriented. Indeed, the reality is fundamental concept of Zubiri's thinking, a reality that is only given in real things, although it is not exhausted in them. It is well probable that real things push us beyond themselves, but this pushing and launching, some times transcendental some others even transcendent, is always done from the things, as apprehended in that structural unity which form sensibility and intelligence which Zubiri called 'inteligencia sentiente' or 'sensibilidad intelectual'.

Thus Zubiri's realism takes on a complex character. In so far as it is a realism which derives from an inteligencia sentiente, it seems and often is a strict materialism, which escapes all forms of idealism even in the seemingly less idealistic versions of Husserl and Heidegger. But, at the same time, in



so far as this realism derives from and intelligence, the inteligencia sentiente, it becomes a transcendental realism, which, since it is not purely sensorial, could seem idealist or at least intellectualist mainly to those who mix up conceptual rigor with the flight from reality.

It is in his main work, Sobre la esencia (1962) and in the trilogy devoted to the intelligence: Inteligencia Sentiente (1980), Inteligencia y Logos (1982), Inteligencia y Razón (1983) that Zubiri has thoroughly worked out both the concept of reality and that of intelligence, not only in their ultimate determination -reality as it is 'de se' and intelligence as an actualization of reality-, but also in their complex richness. Thus he will study reality as structure, what forced him to construct new conceptual categories. But, when a philosopher jointly redefines a new concept of reality and of intelligence, we have already a new philosophy. Such is the case of Zubiri's philosophy, which in full coherence has also developed essential issues like matter and its evolution, man in his personal, social and historical dimension. Before his death he was writing the final draft of a new book, El hombre y Dios. Some of these books have not been published as yet, but it is to be expected that they will be soon, although without the masterly final touch that he knew to give his books.

Which kind of philosophy is that of Xavier Zubiri? It is difficult to classify. A superficial reading of it could well give the impression of being a new Aristotelism, profoundly remodelled by the extraordinary progress of modern science. This is not to say that Zubiri did what Aristotle would have done today, even if the comparison is somehow enlightening; it would be difficult for us to imagine what would have been Aristotle's work with such a



different concept of reality from his. One could also discover in Zubiri that other re-actualizator of Aristotles who was Hegel, and the counterface of that what Kant meant can also be found. All this has to be interpreted not, from the viewpoint of received phylosophy, but from that of a philosophy which he had been construing during fifty years, trying to make it meet modern times; what metaphysics today may and must be. Metaphysics seemed to be dead, finished. Zubiri's work shows that this is not so. And when men and countries feel again the need of reviving and making progress in metaphysics, the thorough and unprejudiced study of Zubiri's work may be of great help. It already is for those who want to deepen in our time's reality, even though he has not cared to do so, for he was absorbed trying to uncover what reality is in the light and at the height of the most recent knowledge, at least of those disciplines which in the 1950's and 1960's were considered as wholly scientific. It is true that his philosophy was not affected by Marx, Nietzsche of Freud, and only slightly by analythic philosophy. Wrong or not, Zubiri thought that what these thinkers had contributed was not essential to metaphysics. This does not mean that a fruitful dialogue is impossible between Zubirian philosophy and other ways of thought, if reality is placed as the meeting poin rather than the processed and reflex experience of that reality.

On the other hand, even though Zubiri developed his thought in a Christian horizon and was a man of deep personal faith, his philosophical thinking remained autonomous, though not closed in himself. He continued growing in intellectual liberty and his sharp knowledge of catholic dogma allowed him to arrive fearlessly to very radical theses, that others, with less faith



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but also with a lesser knowledge, would not have dared to maintain.

Theses as the possibility of eternal matter and its potential evolution, the creation as an extra molding of divine life; the unity of human essence and the total and mutual dependence of psyche and soma.

He didn't want to bid defiance to dogma but he wanted intelligence autonomy to be kept because he saw in creative liberty the best similarity and participation of humankind with God.

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