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Michael S. Jones

Liberty University, msjones2@liberty.edu

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BLAGA'S PHILOSOPHY OF CULTURE: MORE THAN A SPENGLERIAN ADAPTATION

Introduction

It has again, at last, become popular to emphasize the important place of culture in human thought. Along with this has come the overdue recognition of the importance of philosophy of culture. Lucian Blaga, one of the bright lights of Eastern Europe suppressed by the socialist dictatorships of the second half of the 20th century, is the author of a fairly voluminous and very interesting philosophy of culture.

Blaga's works contain at least five books devoted largely to the subject of philosophy of culture and many other books that contain sections on this subject. The five books on philosophy of culture are: Orizont si stil,¹ Spatiul mioritic,² Geneza metaforei si sensul culturii,³ Filosofia stilului,⁴ and Arta si valoare.⁵ Other books that contain significant material on this subject include his doctoral dissertation, which is published under the title Cultura si cunostiinta,⁶ Fenomenul originar,⁷ Diamonion,⁸ Stiinta si creatie,⁹ Gandire magica si religie,¹⁰ Aspecte antropologice,¹¹ and Fiinta istorica.¹² Although each of these books is fairly small, few of them

¹Orizont si stil (Horizon and Style). Bucharest: Fundatia pentru literature si arta, 1935.

²Spatiul mioritic (The Ewe-Space). Bucharest: Cartea Romaneasca, 1936.

³Geneza metaforei si sensul culturii (The Genesis of Metaphor and the Meaning of Culture). Bucharest: Fundatia pentru literature si arta, 1937.

⁴Filosofia stilului (The Philosophy of Style). Bucharest: Cultura Nationala, 1924.

⁵Arta si valoare (Art and Value). Bucharest: Fundatia pentru literature si arta, 1939.

⁶Cultura si cunostinta (Culture and Knowledge). Cluj: Editura Justitul de Arta Grafice "Ardealul," 1922.

⁷Fenomenul originar (The Original Phenomenon). Bucharest: Editura Fundatia Culturale "Principele Carol," 1925.

⁸Daimonion (Evil Genius). Cluj: Editura Revistei "Societatea de Miine," 1930.

⁹Stiinta si creatie (Science and Creation). Sibiu: Editura "Dacia Traiana," 1942.

¹⁰Gandire magica si religie (Magical Thinking and Religion). Bucharest: Fundatia pentru literature si arta, 1946.

¹¹Aspecte antropologice (Anthropological Aspects). Cluj: Uniunia nationala a studentilor din Romania, 1948.

exceeding 200 pages, they still constitute a significant body of philosophical reflection on this often overlooked subject.

Blaga wrote in a period when science and technology were gaining ever more respect, and when various forms of positivism were converting the successes of science into a form of philosophy modeled upon the natural sciences. One important and unfortunate aspect of the positivist program was the devaluing of non-scientific phenomenon. Another aspect was the super-elevation of scientific objectivity to the status of universal norm. In retrospect the errors of these trends are clear to most philosophers. Blaga had the vision to see these errors while they were yet happening. In a period in which many of the most notable thinkers were positively inclined toward the attempt at purging the cultural and subjective from philosophy, Blaga spoke out loud and clear in favor of culture as a fundamental and pervasive human enterprise.

Perhaps the time has come when Blaga's philosophy of culture can and should be recognized for what it is: an early and creative contribution to this growing field. That this does not seem to be happening can be attributed in no small part to the widely held opinion that Blaga's philosophy of culture is not original.¹³ It is sometimes alleged that Blaga's philosophy of culture is little more than a re-hashing of Oswald Spengler's theory of culture. A more sympathetic (and more understandable) criticism is that Blaga's philosophy of culture is an application of Spengler's ideas to the particularities of Romanian culture. If this latter interpretation is true, then Blaga's philosophy of culture will be of little interest except to those who are positively inclined towards Spengler's philosophy and who also have a particular interest in Romanian culture.

The latter view would be understandable if one were to read only Spatiul mioritic, but a full reading of Blaga's works on philosophy of culture does not permit such an interpretation. Blaga himself indicates that his philosophy of culture is not completely original: it is a current in the stream of philosophy of culture initiated in the late 19th and early 20th centuries by philosophers and thinkers such as Nietzsche, Simmel, Riegl, Worringer, Frobenius, Dvorak,

¹²Fiinta istorica (The Historical Being). Cluj: Editura Dacia, 1977.

¹³One of my own professors, the eminent Virgil Nemoianu, wrote "When you speak about 'style' for Blaga you have to mention Oswald Spengler; his views are largely a rehashing of Spenglerian ideas, even though occasionally with a personal (Blagian) slant." (personal email, August 2002).

Spengler, Keyserling, and others.¹⁴ He acknowledges that it includes a further development of the philosophy of culture expounded by Alois Riegl, Leo Frobenius, and especially Oswald Spengler.¹⁵ But Blaga's philosophy of culture is more than a simple restatement or synthesis of the insights of these other thinkers. It contains important differences from the philosophies of his predecessors and contemporaries, offers several new insights of its own, and most importantly it forms an integral part of a broad and inclusive philosophical system.

Since the attacks on the originality of Blaga's philosophy of culture generally involve one form or another of the accusation that it is an adoption or adaptation of Spengler's insights, I believe that what needs to be done in order to restore Blaga's philosophy to its rightful place is to show how Blaga's philosophy differs from Spengler's. It is hoped that this will demonstrate Blaga's originality and vindicate his philosophy. Therefore that is what I intend to do in this article.

Difference of Style, Method, and Detail

Perhaps the most obvious difference between Spengler's work and Blaga's is the difference in philosophical style. Certain similarities between Spengler and Blaga are undeniable, and are acknowledged by Blaga himself. However, if one were to hear the comparisons between Spengler's and Blaga's writings on culture and subsequently one were to read both, the stylistic difference between the two collections of works would be striking. Spengler's masterpiece, The Decline of the West,¹⁶ is a single large work characterized by a long succession of discussions of lesser issues in the philosophies of history and culture, with the succession of conclusions drawn lending support to eventual conclusions on the larger issues that are the target of Spengler's philosophical enterprise. Spengler's is an empirically-oriented philosophy of culture. Blaga's systematic writings on philosophy of culture are quite different: Blaga expounds his philosophy in a series of short books that build upon each other systematically. In Orizont si stil (the first book in Blaga's trilogy of culture) Blaga lays the foundation of his philosophy of culture, addressing fundamental issues and arguing for a particular view of cultures as human constructions guided by matrices of deep (abyssal)

¹⁴ Orizont si stil, Opere 9 p. 75.

¹⁵ *ibid* 102ff.

subconscious categories of human minds. He then illustrates and argues for this interpretation of culture by showing how it fits and explains the phenomena of Romanian culture. This he does at length in the second book of his trilogy of culture, Spatiul mioritic (and much more briefly in the fifth chapter of Orizont si stil). In the third book of his trilogy of culture, Geneza metaforie si sensul culturii, he further develops ideas introduced in Orizont si stil and explains how his philosophy of culture both elucidates relevant philosophical problems and integrates into a cohesive metaphysical system. In subsequent books he demonstrates how his philosophy of culture compliments his philosophy of science (Stiinta si creatie), philosophy of religion (Gandire magica si religie), philosophical anthropology (Aspecte antropologice), and philosophy of history (Fiinta istorica), facilitating the resolution of issues in each domain. Thus the main arguments used by Blaga are the pragmatic demonstration of the utility of his philosophy and the coherentist demonstration of how his philosophy of culture contributes to a global philosophical system. He does make use of Spengler's empirical tack of supporting his thesis by reference to specific historical phenomena, but whereas this is the overwhelming tactic employed by Spengler, it is only a secondary strategy in Blaga.

On the whole, one receives the impression that Spengler's philosophical exposition is much more detailed than is Blaga's. This is due at least in part to the aforementioned difference of strategy. Spengler surveys a much larger array of empirical data and discusses a somewhat wider array of cultural issues. In comparison to Spengler, one could say that Blaga "paints with a broad brush." Blaga's use of empirical data is typically characterized by brief presentations and analyses of phenomena for the purpose of supporting his major theses. He discusses fewer cultural phenomena, and those he discusses are not usually discussed in great depth (with the exception of the examination of Romanian culture in Spatiul mioritic). Those that he does discuss provide good support for his theses, which are major theses of the first order.

Differences on Issues Addressed

A more significant difference between Spengler's and Blaga's philosophies of culture is the difference of the issues that each chooses to address. In connection with philosophy of culture, both philosophers discuss philosophy of history at considerable length. Discussions relevant to philosophy of history are found throughout The Decline of the West. For his part,

¹⁶Oswald Spengler, The Decline of the West: Form and Actuality. Authorized translation by Charles Francis Atkinson. New York: Alfred A. Knopf Publishing, vol. I, 1926; vol. II, 1928.

Blaga discusses philosophy of history in connection with his philosophy of culture in the book Fiinta istorica and to a lesser extent in Geneza metaforei si sensul culturii. Common to both thinkers is the near absence of a philosophy of ethics. Blaga originally intended to write an ethics as part of an unwritten fifth trilogy of his systematic philosophy, but seems to have given up the project due to a lack of time, a preference for dealing with ethical issues via the more flexible medium of aphorisms, and the inability to publish under the socialist regime.

Just as striking as the commonalties of issues addressed, however, are the differences in issues addressed. If Blaga is in fact copying his philosophy of culture from Spengler, or is adapting the Spenglerian philosophy to his own ends, one would expect to find reflected in Blaga's work at least some reference to those issues which form a significant part of Spengler's opus. In several striking instances this is not the case. Spengler expends considerable effort in examining and explaining issues of political philosophy. In fact, nine out of fourteen chapters in Spengler's second volume deal with various aspects of political philosophy. Blaga breathes nary a word on this subject: it is almost as if he somehow knew that the coming socialist tyranny would ban the rest of his work if it were to know his political thoughts. Likewise, Spengler is very interested in economics, devoting the closing chapters of his masterpiece to this subject. Again, Blaga has nothing to say on the subject.

Furthermore, Blaga's exposition of his philosophy of culture contains detailed presentations on issues that are lacking from Spengler's philosophy of culture. Blaga has an entire book discussing the philosophy of science from the perspective of his philosophy of culture (Stiinta si creatie), and also discusses the interaction of science and culture in Cultura si cunostiinta and in Experimentul si spiritul matematic.¹⁷ Spengler, on the other hand, devotes only one five-page subchapter of The Decline of the West to philosophy of science. Similarly, Blaga's writings are replete with discussions of the implications of his philosophy of culture for philosophy of religion, and especially for Christian philosophy of religion, and he frequently utilizes illustrations taken from Christian theology and the history of Christian doctrine. This material includes (but is not limited to) the entire book Gandire magica si religie. The Decline of the West contains relatively little discussion of religion and only about 20 pages of what might be considered Christian philosophy of religion (parts of chapters VIII and IX of volume II).

¹⁷Experimentul si spiritul matematic (The Experiment and the Mathematical Spirit). Bucharest: Editura stiintifica, 1969.

Differences of Conclusion

Another type of important difference between Spengler and Blaga is the conclusions that they draw on various issues. Although Blaga follows Spengler's lead on some issues, he often markedly points out differences of opinion between himself and Spengler. On issues that are addressed both in Spengler and in Blaga, it is striking how often Blaga comes to different conclusions than does Spengler. One might get the impression that Blaga is reacting against Spengler, although in other places he demonstrates considerable respect for Spengler as a thinker.¹⁸ There are also differences that Blaga does not specifically point out - issues concerning which Blaga draws different conclusions than does Spengler, but concerning which Blaga does not specifically mention Spengler's views nor point out that there is disagreement between himself and Spengler.

One example of Spengler and Blaga coming to different conclusions is on the interpretation of the importance of urbanization as the crux of human culture and history. Spengler writes, "world-history is urban history," illustrating the high degree of importance that he attributes to urban culture.¹⁹ Blaga refrains from making any such evaluation, but it is clear that he had a very high regard for rural villages. His poetic statement "eternity was born in the village"²⁰ is well known. The philosophy behind this statement is explained in Geneza metaforei si sensul culturii, where Blaga describes the village of his childhood as being filled with a sense of "necessary mystery" constituting an entire world, something which (he asserts) is not true of a large city.²¹ The significance of this distinction is only appreciated when one bears in mind the importance of mystery in Blaga's philosophical system.

Another difference concerning evaluations and related conclusions involves the practice of attributing superiority to one culture over others in a specific domain of human activity.

¹⁸ This respect is notable in Blaga's statement that the two greatest works to date on philosophy of culture are Nietzsche's The Origin of Tragedy and Spengler's The Decline of the West (Diamonion, Opere 7 p. 343). It is notably lacking when, on page 486 of Fiinta istorica, Opere 11, Blaga writes that "most of Spengler's ideas lead to false interpretations of history."

¹⁹ The Decline of the West, 90.

²⁰ Lucian Blaga, "Sufletul satului," translated by Dumitru Ciocoi-Pop in Poezii alese / Selected Poems, Sibiu: LBUS Press, 2001.

²¹ Geneza metaforei si sensul culturii in Opere 9, pp. 339-40.

Spengler, although a relativist, is prone to making such judgements. One example of this is his judgement that the ancient Indian²² and Greek²³ civilizations had no sense of history, while on the other hand the European (particularly German) civilization has “the most wonderful expression of which a historical world feeling is capable.”²⁴ Blaga is extremely cautious about making such judgements. He is unusually aware of the relativity of perspective, and writes that the evaluation of a feature of a culture as better than the corresponding feature of another culture involves being converted to the intrinsic criteria of the former culture, and is an arbitrary judgement.²⁵ This would seem to be an insight that Spengler himself should have come up with. It is an insight that escapes many philosophers even today. Although Blaga does not specifically mention Spengler in this context, it may well be this excess on Spengler’s part that Blaga is rebuffing when he vindicates the Indian and Greek (as well as the Egyptian, Persian, and Chinese) concepts of history in the first chapter of Fiinta istorica.

Blaga also rejects Spengler’s thesis that a culture is a spirit or an organism independent of the individuals who make up a part of the cultural collective.²⁶ The unity of attitudes, accents, and aspirations within a given culture is not a result of culture being an independent organism, but rather is a result of a shared subconscious “stylistic matrix,” a key concept in Blaga’s philosophy of culture.²⁷ This is a significant difference between Spengler and Blaga, and reflects the Kantian influence upon Blaga’s thought, which places subconscious “abyssal” categories (rather than a Neo-Platonic spirit) at the foundation of culture.²⁸

Spengler and Blaga even seem to disagree on the very nature of culture. Spengler appears to view culture as incidental to humanity: culture is something that humans sometimes create, but culture is not essential to being human. Blaga’s view is almost diametrically opposed to this:

²² The Decline of the West vol. 1 p.11.

²³ *ibid* p.9-10.

²⁴ *ibid* p. 14-15.

²⁵ Fiinta istorica, Opere 11 p.362.

²⁶ The Decline of the West vol. 1 p. 104ff., Orizont si stil, Opere 9 pp. 183-184.

²⁷ *ibid* 186.

²⁸ Geneza metaforei si sensul culturii, Opere 9 p. 414.

according to Blaga, it is creating culture that distinguishes humans from all other animals. Culture is at the heart of being truly human – it is humanity’s *sine qua non*.²⁹

Spengler and Blaga share the view that a culture’s feeling or conception of space can be used as a symbol of the content of that culture. It is possible that this shared treatment of the conception of space within a culture is the main cause of the view that Blaga’s philosophy of culture is borrowed from Spengler. Blaga certainly does borrow *this particular aspect* of his philosophy of culture from Spengler.³⁰ The title of his book Spatiul mioritic may be responsible for the misperception that Blaga’s philosophy is merely an application of Spengler’s thought to Romanian culture. However, the title of this book only represents one aspect of what Blaga has to say about Romanian culture and about philosophy of culture in general. Blaga argues that Spengler and other morphologists over-emphasize the importance of a particular ‘feeling of space’ in their theories of culture. According to Blaga, the spatial horizon is one among several key factors, each of which plays a major role in any particular culture. The other key factors are the temporal horizon, the axiological accent, the sense of movement or destiny, and the formative aspiration of the culture.³¹ In contradistinction to Spengler, Blaga argues that a spatial horizon can neither be the single wellspring of a culture, nor can it symbolize a specific culture in distinction from all others. This is because a spatial vision is never the only determinant of a culture, and because the same spatial vision can be (and often is) a factor in diverse cultures.³² According to Blaga’s analysis, Spengler erred by trying to explain style by reference to a single category (space) rather than by reference to a matrix of categories.³³

Systematic Differences

Another significant type of difference between Spengler and Blaga could be characterized as “systematic differences.” There are several pervasive differences between

²⁹ Ibid 494.

³⁰ Compare The Decline of the West vol. 1 pp. 161ff. and Orizont si stil, Opere 9 pp. 100ff.

³¹ Orizont si stil, Opere 9 pp. 173-4.

³² *ibid* 179-80.

³³ Geneza metaforei si sensul culturii, Opere 9 pp. 343. Blaga also criticizes Spengler’s analysis of the spatial horizon as trying impossibly to blend intuitive and naturalist approaches to the issue, see Fiinta istorica, Opere 11 pp. 264-267.

Spengler's and Blaga's philosophy of culture, differences that repeatedly rise to the surface because they are systematically employed in shaping their respective philosophies.

One such systematic difference is the already-mentioned disagreement over the importance and usefulness to philosophy of culture of spatial conceptions within particular cultures. Blaga indicates that Spengler over-estimates the importance and utility of spatial conceptions.³⁴ Furthermore, Blaga systematically avoids making evaluative judgements of any culture. His sensitivity to other cultures and his objection to judging other cultures are comparable to the best in post-modern philosophy.³⁵ Spengler, on the other hand, freely makes evaluative judgements between cultures.

Perhaps the most important and most striking of the systematic differences between Spengler and Blaga is that of the goals of their works. The goal of a work often influences the work from its outset to its finish. Spengler's goal in The Decline of the West is to provide, for the first time, a morphological analysis of culture: a philosophy of culture methodologically based upon morphology. In so doing, he at the same time consciously constructs a philosophy of history. Spengler is NOT directly attempting to answer questions of epistemology, metaphysics, or philosophical anthropology. Blaga's ultimate goal in addressing philosophy of culture, on the other hand, is to provide a philosophy of culture based upon and consistent with a particular metaphysical vision, the vision that he has previously elaborated in his earlier works. Thus the purpose of Spengler's philosophy of culture is more limited than is the purpose of Blaga's philosophy of culture. This has the result that Spengler's philosophy of culture is more focused on the one hand and more limited on the other: Spengler's philosophy does not address many closely related philosophical issues.

Systemic Difference

Probably the most fundamental and most significant difference between Spengler's philosophy of culture and Blaga's is the difference in systematicity. Although Spengler's philosophical exposition is more detailed than is Blaga's when it comes to the philosophy of culture, Spengler does not succeed at integrating his philosophy of culture into a general systematic philosophy, as does Blaga. Blaga's philosophical system is relatively complete, a metaphysical system that includes most domains of philosophy and which could be expanded to

³⁴ Orizont si stil, Opere 9 pp. 107, 180; Fiinta istorica, Opere 11 pp.484-5.

include every philosophical issue. Spengler's philosophy is a joining of philosophy of culture and philosophy of history that occasionally reaches out to address issues in other philosophical domains. Spengler should not be criticized for failing to construct a comprehensive philosophical system: that was not his goal. What must be done is to give Blaga his due for constructing a comprehensive philosophical system that incorporates a philosophy of culture complementary to all the other components of the system.

Conclusion

No one, not Blaga himself, denies that Spengler's and Blaga's philosophies of culture come from the same school of thought. It is likewise undisputed that Spengler preceded Blaga in that school and that Blaga read and was greatly influenced by Spengler. However, the number and extent of the differences between Spengler's and Blaga's philosophies of culture are sufficient to refute the accusation that Blaga's philosophy of culture is nothing more than an adaptation of Spengler's ideas. Just as Spengler's philosophy is more than a mere elaboration of Frobenius' ideas, Blaga's philosophy is more than a mere adaptation of Spengler's ideas. Blaga changes elements of Spengler's philosophy, discards features that he finds untenable, and adds new insights of his own, creating a new, deeper, much more sophisticated, more complete, and more lasting philosophy of culture, and then he integrates this new creation into a complete philosophical system. The end result is a product that is wholly his own.

³⁵ see for example chapter 1 in Fiinta istorica.