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Lucian Blaga on the Nature of God

Michael S. Jones, 1 March, 2010

Introduction

In 2008 I published an article with the title, *Lucian Blaga on the Existence of God*. The question of the existence of God is undoubtedly one of the most frequently posed and hotly debated in the history of philosophy. It is a question of perennial interest, and rightly so, for if there is a God, that fact can serve as a heuristic that facilitates the resolution of many other questions, but also gives rise to interesting questions such as those addressed by theodicy, questions related to religious pluralism, and the questions of philosophical theology relating to the nature of God. Conversely, if there is no God, this fact gives rise to questions about the origin of the universe, rationality, and morality.

The interpretation of Blaga's position on the question of God is a subject of dispute. The closest thing to the God of theism in Blaga's philosophy is the "Great Anonymous," also referred to as the "Anonymous Fund," and on rare occasions as "God."¹ But Blaga is quick to explain that when he uses the term "God" to refer to the Great Anonymous, he is using it metaphorically, and that there are significant differences between his own conception and that of traditional theology.² He further states that attributes are usually ascribed to God that he believes cannot be known to apply to the Great Anonymous.³ Ultimately, while he grants that the term "God" could be used as a synonym for the Great Anonymous, since God is the metaphysically central existent in Christian theology and the Great Anonymous is the metaphysically central existent in Blaga's philosophy,⁴ he will not even affirm that the Great Anonymous is an existent in the usual sense, saying rather that conceiving it thus is merely a "crutch" used by the understanding.⁵

¹ These names and several others are used and explained in chapters two and ten of Blaga's *Diferențialele divine* (Bucharest: Fundația pentru literatură și artă "Regele Carol II," 1940). The term "Great Anonymous" was used by Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite, but Blaga states that his use of the term differs radically from how Dionysius used it, see Blaga, *Artă și valoare*, in *Opere 10: Trilogia Valorilor*, ed. Dorli Blaga (Bucharest: Editura Minerva, 1987), 630.

² Blaga, *Diferențialele divine*, 104. Blaga warns that "it is not advisable to concede some preconceived opinions (of theologians)," Blaga, *Diferențialele divine*, 159; see also Blaga, *Cenzura transcendentă*, 542, where he states that he avoids using the term because of its accumulated baggage. Blaga, *Cenzura transcendentă*, in *Opere 8: Trilogia Cunoașterii*, ed. Dorli Blaga (Bucharest: Editura Minerva, 1983).

³ Blaga, *Diferențialele divine*, 66.

⁴ Blaga, *Diferențialele divine*, 67.

⁵ Blaga, *Cenzura transcendentă*, 449. Some philosophical theologians assert that the same is true about God, since the human use of terminology to describe God is always inadequate to the task. See, for examples ancient and contemporary, Dionysius the pseudo-Areopagite, *The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Lubheid (London: SPCK, 1987); especially the chapter "Mystical Theology"; John Hick, *Philosophy of Religion*, 4th edition (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1990), 349ff; Jean-Luc Marion, *Dieu Sans L'Être* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2002).

In my previous article I argued that the Great Anonymous is sufficiently similar to the God of theism to support the conclusion that Blaga would at least tentatively affirm that God exists. I'll not repeat those arguments here. Rather, in this article I intend to follow up the earlier by asking the question, if God exists, then what is he like? My answer will not take the form of a traditional theology, but rather an exploration of the theological implications of Blaga's philosophy. In other words, if Blaga would say that God exists, what would he say God is like?

The Challenge of a "Blagian Theology"

Admittedly, there are several significant challenges doing theology within the framework of Blaga's philosophy. His reservation about traditional theology can hardly be ignored. He seems to feel that traditional theology is an accumulation of baggage that goes far beyond the limits of human epistemic ability.⁶ He explicitly rejects the central Christian doctrine of the incarnation, and expresses great reservation about the likelihood of divine revelation.⁷ And while many religious traditions, including Christianity, make room for a natural theology based upon what can be inferred about God from his creation, natural theology is generally considered to be capable of discovering only the basic truths of theology. The bulk of theological opinion is dependent upon divine self-revelation of some sort. So Blaga's skepticism towards revelation is a significant hurdle.

Blaga's skepticism toward revelation stems from several fundamental aspects of his philosophical system. The first of these is his view of the transcendence of the Great Anonymous. He describes the Great Anonymous as so transcending empirical experience that even the idea itself is not a product of observation. The idea of the Great Anonymous is a sort of Neo-Kantian postulate, a product of human imagination that is plausible because of its immense heuristic value, but it is not empirically verifiable.⁸ The name "Anonymous" signifies this separation and hiddenness.

In Blaga's cosmology, the Great Anonymous creates everything else that exists through a process of emanation of minute particles called "differentials" that combine to make up the spiritual and physical world. Since the Great Anonymous is the source of all else, it differs ontologically from all else, just as the creator differs from the thing created.⁹ Blaga's own view,

⁶ Blaga, *Diferențialele divine*, 159, *Cenzura transcendentă*, 542.

⁷ Blaga, *Gândirea magică și religie*, in Dorli Blaga, ed., *Opere 10: Trilogia Valorilor* (Bucharest: Editura Minerva, 1987) 479.

⁸ Blaga writes that the idea of the Great Anonymous "does not have the pretensions of theology, in the usual sense, nor as of a supreme result of some inductions. It represents merely an anticipation, which can demand the consent of the readers only progressively and to the degree in which it will be in a position to organize a metaphysical vision of great scope without arriving in conflict with the results of experience." Blaga, *Diferențialele divine*, 67.

⁹ That there is discontinuity between the creator and the created has been remarked by a number of thinkers. According to some Gnostic and neo-Platonic thinkers, any product is inferior to its producer, therefore the world is necessarily dis-analogous to its source. According to Christian theology, there exists great discontinuity between God and creation because of the misuse of free will and the resulting fall of man, which affected all of creation. According to Plato, the discontinuity from Form to object is a result of the inability of material to receive the perfection

which he sees as a tentative hypothesis pragmatically justified by its success in explaining other problems,¹⁰ yet also as being a result of deductions from certain empirical observations,¹¹ is that the product of the Great Anonymous' creative activity is necessarily differentiated from the Great Anonymous itself in order to preserve the order of the cosmos. He calls this "differentiated creation." One of the goals and benefits of differentiated creation is the generation of beings with cognitive capacity while at the same time censoring that capacity so as to protect both the beings and the order of the universe.¹² Part of this censorship, discussed in detail in his book *Cenzura transcendentă*, involves preventing created beings from having positive knowledge of their creator so as to preclude the possibility of any rivalry on the part of the former. He calls this "transcendental censorship."

Blaga states that the existence of dis-analogy between creator and creation is paradoxical.¹³ It is paradoxical because the expected result of a hidden creator as postulated by Blaga would be the production of other entities like itself, the production of identical self-replications. Blaga finds it surprising but empirically evident that this self-replication has not taken place. The explanation for this surprising non-occurrence is the necessity of thwarting "theo-geneses" in order to preserve the necessary order of existence.¹⁴ Donning his poet's cap, he describes the Great Anonymous as "the existence that holds us at the periphery, that refuses us, that imposes limits on us, but to which is owed every other existence."¹⁵

A third element of Blaga's philosophy that is relevant to the possibility of doing theology is his theory of "stylistic braking." "Stylistic brakes" are deep subconscious categories of the mind that shape and inform one's attempts to understand and express those things that transcend ordinary experience. Blaga also calls them "abyssal categories." They affect all theoretical knowledge such that it is always a cultural product.¹⁶ The abyssal categories function both positively and negatively in cognition, and these two functions are intrinsically related. They function as a structural medium for understanding the transcendent and as a limit to this understanding (which is the aspect properly termed "stylistic brakes"). Thus the abyssal categories both enable humans to create, and prevent human creativity and cognition from reaching absolute adequacy.¹⁷

of the Form. Blaga criticizes these proposals on the grounds that each gives to a second element, in addition to the Great Anonymous, a key role in the formation of the cosmos. He also objects to the latent potential for overcoming of the creator-creation discontinuity found in each of these proposals. Blaga, *Diferențialele divine*, 158.

¹⁰ Blaga, *Diferențialele divine*, 154.

¹¹ Blaga, *Diferențialele divine*, 159.

¹² This will be explained in the section on Transcendent Censorship.

¹³ Blaga, *Diferențialele divine*, 190.

¹⁴ Blaga, *Diferențialele divine*, 192.

¹⁵ Blaga, *Diferențialele divine*, 66.

¹⁶ Blaga, *Știința și creație*, in Dorli Blaga, ed., *Opere 10: Trilogia Valorilor* (Bucharest: Editura Minerva, 1987) 199, 211.

¹⁷ Blaga, *Ființa istorică*, in *Opere 11: Trilogia Cosmologică*, ed. Dorli Blaga (Bucharest: Editura Minerva, 1988) 492-4.

Both the transcendence of the Great Anonymous and the protective/defensive measures that it employs against human cognition (transcendent censorship and stylistic braking) raise doubts about the likelihood of any divine revelation, and they also seem to rule out the possibility of natural theology. Together they provide an almost insurmountable obstacle to the traditional task of theology. But it is clear that Blaga feels entitled to at least some assertions about the nature of the Great Anonymous. How can this be, in light of the bleak epistemic picture resulting from this metaphysical vision?

An alternative source of theological knowledge is philosophical theology. Philosophical theology attempts to deduce or infer the attributes of God without resorting to revelation. The deductions or inferences of philosophical theology are usually based on an analysis of what attributes would be most consistent with other philosophical considerations, such as ethics or metaphysics.¹⁸

Blaga's philosophy contains certain elements that strongly resemble the philosophical theology approach to discovering the attributes of God. In Blaga's case, the attributes of the Great Anonymous are either inferred from other elements of his metaphysics or are postulated and then confirmed according to the epistemological methodology that he names "luciferic cognition."¹⁹ The conclusions of this part of Blaga's philosophy are sparse (in comparison with traditional theology) and are viewed by Blaga as tentative, in keeping with the limits of transcendent censorship. But they do describe what Blaga takes to be likely attributes of the Great Anonymous. So if the earlier argument that the Great Anonymous is Blaga's version of "God" holds, then these attributes of the Great Anonymous are Blaga's theology.

The Divine Attributes

Traditional theologians have put great effort into describing the attributes of God. A typical text on Christian theology includes explanation and defense of such doctrines as God's personhood, aseity (self-existence), simplicity, immutability, trinity, holiness, lovingness, sovereignty, truthfulness, eternality, omnipresence, omnipotence, omniscience, and omnisapience.²⁰ But because of Blaga's reservations about divine revelation and natural theology, these conclusions of the theological approach to knowing the nature of God are not available to Blagian theology.

Philosophers have also speculated about the nature of God. In general, philosophers have attempted to analyze the probable nature of God without resorting to divine revelation.

¹⁸ These two approaches are utilized in many texts on the attributes of God. See Edward R. Wierenga, *The Nature of God: An Inquiry into Divine Attributes* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989); Ed. L. Miller, ed., *God and Reason: A Historical Approach to Philosophical Theology* (New York: Macmillan, 1972), especially 21.

¹⁹ For an explanation of luciferic cognition, see Blaga's book by the same title, and also Michael S. Jones, *The Metaphysics of Religion: Lucian Blaga and Contemporary Philosophy* (Madison, NJ, and Teaneck, NJ: Fairleigh Dickenson University Press, 2006) 105-17.

²⁰ See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II:1, 2 ed. G.W. Bromiley, T.F. Torrance (New York : T & T Clark, 2009); Augustus H. Strong, *Systematic Theology: A Compendium* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1985), 249–352; Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 19-99.

Philosophers have discussed and taken a variety of positions on divine attributes such as singularity, self-existence, infiniteness, personhood, lovingness, goodness, holiness, perfection, omnipotence, omniscience, timelessness, and sovereignty.²¹

In contrast to traditional theologians and philosophers of religion, Blaga's emphasis on the transcendence and resultant hiddenness of God leads him to a theoretical explanation of the human inability to know God's nature.²² However, the human epistemic situation and divine inscrutability do not entail that no attributes of God can be postulated.²³ After all, inscrutability is itself an attribute, of sorts. Although Blaga is hesitant to follow theologians and philosophers of religion down the path of rational speculation about the nature of God,²⁴ his metaphysics does lead him to draw certain conclusions regarding the nature of the Great Anonymous.

In order to fulfill its role in Blaga's metaphysics, the Great Anonymous must necessarily be both the source of all other existents and the designer of the universe. This entails both aseity and creativity. The cleverness and intricacy of the plan employed by the Great Anonymous in creating and sustaining the universe seem to require that it be very wise and intelligent. Considerable power and some sort of sovereignty are also implied by this demonstration of creativity and providence. Corollaries of Blaga's explanation of creation are the conclusions that the Great Anonymous both has the ability of self-replication and is not able to self-replicate without disturbing the balance of existence. That it refrains from this destabilizing self-replication may be an indication that the Great Anonymous cares about the welfare of existence, thus indicating a degree of benevolence, and the Great Anonymous' censorship of human cognition is a further indication of its benevolence toward creation. Blaga speculates that the Great Anonymous has a creative nature, and chooses to create in such a way as to efficiently produce the maximum creative effect with the minimum effort. These indicate divine efficiency. The endowing of humanity with a creative/cognitive drive but subject to transcendent censorship and stylistic braking is a strategy employed both for the benefit of humanity and for the furthering of divine creativity. This reveals that the plans of the Great Anonymous take into account equally its own desires and the well-being of other creatures. This could indicate (as

²¹ On omniscience, see, for instance, Hick, *Philosophy of Religion*, 5–14; Peterson et al., eds., *Reason and Religious Belief*, 48–67; Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 97–298; on timelessness, see Nelson Pike, *God and Timelessness* (New York: Schocken Books, 1970); William Lane Craig, *Time and Eternity: Exploring God's Relationship to Time* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2001); on sovereignty, see Paul Helm, *The Providence of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994); Clark Pinnock et al., *The Openness of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994).

²² In this Blaga is not unlike Dionysius and some others within monotheistic religions who have emphasized that the greatness of God so far exceeds human cognitive ability that God's nature cannot be comprehended.

²³ A similar argument regarding ineffability and limited theoretical postulation is found in Keith Ward, *Religion and Revelation: A Theology of Revelation in the World's Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press; New York: Oxford University Press, 1994) 210–20, where Ward argues that God's ineffability is not like the ineffability of Kantian noumena, which cannot be apprehended at all.

²⁴ Blaga, *Diferențialele divine*, 67.

Blaga himself observes) that the nature of the Great Anonymous includes elements that are both divine and demonic in comparison to the traditional understanding of the nature of God.²⁵ This could support the interpretation that the concerns of the Great Anonymous are holistic rather than theocentric.

Some religious practitioners make a distinction between “knowing things about God” and “knowing God.” According to some, the latter may be possible even if the former is not. That is, although God may transcend human comprehension, having a relationship with God may be possible. This is because relationships, while possibly involving cognitive states, may be distinct from them and may precede them.²⁶ Blaga’s insistence that human knowledge of the Great Anonymous is censored does not eliminate the possibility of humans having a relationship with the Great Anonymous. In his discussions of mystical experiences Blaga concludes that mystical experiences do not lead to a cognition of transcendent reality that is free of the influence of the culture of the cognizing subject. He does not, however, deny that mystical experiences exist, and though one might think that one detects some reservation on Blaga’s part concerning the genuineness of such experiences, he never concludes that they are counterfeit. Therefore there may be room in Blaga’s philosophy for “knowing God” even where there is very little room for knowing “about God.” Hence it is possible that Blaga’s God is also relational.

Conclusion

There exists an undeniable tension within any philosophy or religion that posits the existence of a transcendent being and then proceeds to elaborate the attributes of that being.²⁷ Blaga’s emphasis on the transcendence of the Great Anonymous heightens this tension. He attenuates the tension, however, by making the entire Great Anonymous hypothesis, including both the existence and the attributes of the Great Anonymous, a tentative philosophical postulate rather than a dogmatic doctrine. In Blaga’s philosophy, the existence of the Great Anonymous cannot be conclusively known, but it can be postulated, and this postulate can be pragmatically confirmed.

Similarly, the attributes of the Great Anonymous cannot be conclusively known, but can be postulated and pragmatically confirmed. While it is indisputable that Blaga eschews traditional theology, and quite possible that he would be skeptical of any attempt to list the

²⁵ What Blaga has in mind here does not seem to be a good/evil dualism like that of Manichaeism nor a determinism that views God as the efficient cause of every event whether good or evil, but rather the recognition that the Great Anonymous often works in ways that seem evil to humans even though they are justified as part of a greater plan for creation. For example, the frustrating of the human aspiration to penetrate mystery and to grasp the transcendent is experienced by humans as an evil, but is intended by the Great Anonymous as a good, since it spurs human creativity, gives humanity a *raison d’être*, and perpetuates the creative activity of the Great Anonymous itself.

²⁶ This distinction can be found in Eastern Orthodoxy, where the strong emphasis on the transcendence of God is not thought to prevent knowing (having a relationship to) God. It is also commonly made in Protestant Evangelicalism, wherein the strong emphasis on the importance of a personal relationship to God is not thought to negate the fact of God’s transcendence.

²⁷ Blaga himself mentions this tension on page 67 of *Diferențialele divine*.

attributes of the Great Anonymous, he does discuss some attributes of the Great Anonymous that are direct implications of his speculative philosophy. Having opened the door to this method of theologizing, he can hardly object if others bring out further theological implications of his system. The following is the list of divine attributes that I see as entailed or implied but Bлага's philosophy:

Greatness
Transcendence
Anonymity
Inscrutability
Powerfulness
Aseity
Creativeness
Efficiency
Intelligence
Wisdom
Sovereignty
Benevolence/beneficence
Holistic
Possibly Relational

Perhaps further reflection on Bлага's philosophical system will bring to light additional theological implications. For now, I think it sufficient to conclude that Bлага allowed for, perhaps even implied, the existence of a supreme God, that he provided a philosophical method for drawing some tentative conclusions about the nature of that God, and that through his philosophy he suggested this list of divine attributes.

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