

DUMITRU ISAC – A DRAFT OF METAPHYSICS

IONUȚ ISAC

The early philosophical works written by the distinguished Professor Dumitru Isac were focused mainly on the so-called “critical spirit”. What Prof. Isac meant from a philosophical point of view to express by it was Kant’s *criticism* as it has been featured in the famous *Critique of Pure Reason*. But, being essentially an inquiry on the *truth*, on the *value* as well on the *certainty of knowledge*, the critical spirit has a range wider than Kant’s metaphysics. The modern beginnings of the spirit of criticism could be located in Descartes’ masterwork *Discourse de la méthode*; also, it has a huge impact on the *philosophical methodology*. Thus, Dumitru Isac considers that such a conceptual framework allows a specific “reading” of the history of philosophy: instead of regarding metaphysics as a “row” of historically isolated individual systems of thinking, it would be much more useful to appreciate them according to the criteria of development of the *spirit of criticism*. Therefore, D. Isac advances a metaphysical draft, starting from the point of “conciliation” and “blending” of two major trends of the history of philosophy: *epistemological idealism/transcendentalism* and *metaphysical/ontological realism*.

I. The early interest for metaphysics of the distinguished Professor, researcher and writer Dumitru Isac (1914–1984) begins with an inquiry on the so-called “critical spirit”. His *Journal of ideas*¹ as well as *Knowledge and Transcendence*² contain accurate explanations for his motivation concerning a research on the *critical spirit* in the history of philosophy. Furthermore, D. Isac decided to extend this research from Descartes, Kant and Lucian Blaga to the whole of the culture and social system, in the direction of a new philosophical investigation, adequate to the needs of modern times. Eventually, he reached the standpoints of an original metaphysics (a sort of “*critical realism*”), for whose development, unfortunately, the Romanian historical conditions after 1947 left no chance.

Even since a sophomore, he made efforts to explore the germs of the “critical spirit” – seen at first glance as an expression of coming off the dogmas and habits of everyday mentality. With subtlety, Isac remarked that, if about intelligence much of a writing has been done, in exchange, about foolishness very few works have been written (this is especially valid for nowadays). To get free from the seductive and almighty guardianship of foolishness – not only as concerns “ignorance”, but also its social consequences – one must be prepared to perform a thorough exam of the intellect. The very old *stultitia* has always put in difficulty even the brightest minds – as appears obvious in the whole civilized history of

¹ See D. Isac, *Jurnal de idei. Fragmente filosofice și literare* (Journal of Ideas), Editura Grinta, Cluj-Napoca, 2003, *passim*.

² See D. Isac, *Cunoaștere și transcendență* (Knowledge and Transcendence), Editura Grinta, Cluj-Napoca, 2003, *passim*.

mankind. Beyond mind's narrowness, foolishness associates with evilness and bad intentions. Thinking of Erasmus' *Praise of Folly*, D. Isac planned to write a book about this calamity of humankind; however, it remained an eternally postponed project. With certainty, the author of the notes in the *Journal* had clashed numberless of times against this social plague, in circumstances I was told about with wise meaning and refined humor during my childhood and adolescence.

The first opportunity met by Dumitru Isac to express the "critical spirit" as a moral attitude consciously assumed, was at the time of making the option for academic studies. To the general astonishment – including his former school teachers – he chose philosophy: "When my ex-high-school teachers heard that I was going in for philosophy, they were amazed and unsatisfied. It would surely be the end if they did not answer my 'hello'. Why is it so? Well, it is simple, because of the assumption that if one goes in for philosophy one is useless to oneself and to society."³

The reaction of the future student Dumitru Isac to this "too human" attitude let other see an overwhelming belief in philosophy as *a world of abstract ideas, meanings and absolute values*, at the opposite side of the empirical "common world". We deal here, therefore, with a sort of "essentialism" and "metaphysical absolutism", where common sense is forbidden. Such an attitude can be explained, on the one hand, by the "native" idealism of youth, associated with selfishness; on the other hand, by the influence of the great stream of classical ontology (Parmenides and Plato) – which young D. Isac used to study carefully.

For this reason, a philosopher cannot find his/her place in society, not just because he/she could be a "misunderstood genius", but also because there is an ontological and psychological gap between the philosopher and society.

II. The many studies and articles published by D. Isac in renowned reviews of the '30s and '40s ("Freamătul Școalei", "Symposion", "Revista de filosofie", "Revista Fundațiilor Regale", "Cronicar", "Bucovina literară", "Hyperion", etc.) deal with two main problems: a) the Kantian and post-Kantian criticism concentrated around the *Critique of Pure Reason*; b) the philosophy of Lucian Blaga – *i.e.*, the epistemology of the *Trilogy of Knowledge* and the ontology of the *Cosmological Trilogy*. The analysis of these historical-philosophical "branches" involves a very important systematic aspect: the idea of *certainty of the human knowledge* correlated to the idea of *reality of the external world*. Therefore, these co-ordinates of philosophical research, considered both *historically* and *systematically*, indispensable for future metaphysics, are supported by a couple of important presuppositions which D. Isac had detailed in his works of youth.

³ D. Isac, *Jurnal de idei...*, pp. 31–32.

A first presupposition, which has to be considered as the standpoint of the second reflexive stage of D. Isac, is that of the *multiplicity of philosophical kinds*. In spite of a very spread and common opinion, it would be very hard if not impossible to find out “THE PHILOSOPHY” (in capitals). The history of philosophy shows a certain number of theories, systems and reflections which can be grouped together under some common directions or “lines” as *rationalism*, *empiricism*, *idealism*, *materialism*, *philosophy as a system*, *philosophy as “free reflection”*, *philosophy as “final” speculation*, etc. One could speak about philosophy only having in mind all these particular features which make the difference between one “way” of doing philosophy and the other or all the others.

Also, it appears obvious that philosophy can neither identify itself “punctually” with this multiplicity of conceptions, systems and theories; otherwise, it would mean that there are as many philosophies as philosophers or, to put it differently, one could no more speak about philosophy but only about philosophers – an unacceptable “crumble”. Between these extremes, D. Isac makes his option for understanding philosophy as a certain *kind* of the above-mentioned, easily enough to be taken into account, identified in the middle of a cultural tradition, defined through clear, essential and recognizable features as well as analyzed in its intimate framework.

Another “anchor-presupposition” of D. Isac is that of Kantian transcendental metaphysics, considered not *à la lettre* – inevitably doubtful, as proved by the very many critics brought to the master of Königsberg – but in its *critical spirit*, that will last over the centuries. What is the meaning of this term? In the works of D. Isac, “critical spirit” means an outstanding intellectual quality of the philosopher – that one of going repeatedly to the *basics* of philosophy and thus “weighing” over and over again the truth of his/her own ideas as well as others’. This is not only a problem for the philosopher as an individual, but also a question of succession of philosophers’ generations: in time, the lack of “critical spirit” could damage and compromise a whole philosophical culture. In the history of modern philosophy, the proliferation of the varieties of *classical metaphysical ontology* without an epistemological critical exam of the human capacity of knowledge, has led to a lot of pointless speculations. Therefore, Hume and Kant struck this kind of metaphysics an extraordinary “blow”, demonstrating the futility of its attempts of knowing the *transcendent* through the “pure reason”, considered as separated from senses.

Concerning the significance of Kantian criticism, we can agree or not with the existence of 12 categories (more or less), with the fact that the “thing in itself” could be an intrinsic element of Kant’s transcendental metaphysics, or with the argument that its analysis would entail the abandon of the fundamental assumptions of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, etc. What lies beyond each and every denial is the re-definition of philosophy’s identity by giving up the delusive goal of an “absolute” knowledge of a “world in itself” (i.e., *transcendence*), inaccessible to

human experience. And this, owing to the “critical spirit” which guides philosophical research to a stronger selection of the metaphysical hypothesis on its way to *certainty* and *truth*. In this respect, D. Isac has even ventured to make a “prophecy”: “... if philosophy should ever succeed to come out of its obfuscating multiplicity of conceptions – as presented by its history –, and reach a unitary and generally accepted system of sentences, this will be only possible if it lets the “critical spirit” control the “headquarters”; because “critical spirit” is the only fit to the philosophical *impetus* of all times and fully accommodated to the eternal ideal of speculation – it contains in itself the virtues of realizing the harmony of human intelligence.”⁴

Influenced by the creed of Nicolae Bagdasar and Ion Petrovici, D. Isac seeks thoroughly the problem of the critical spirit, asking himself if this is a transient moment in the history of philosophy and what is its relationship with philosophical methodology. Or, the critical spirit proves to be much more than a certain method; it is a *spiritual outlook* which commands all the methods, an *irrepressible passion for certainty*, basic to all metaphysical attempts.⁵ Thus, Kant’s criticism was a “cold shower” for philosophy, which elevated critical spirit to the rank of *supreme and universal value* of the philosophical spirit – far beyond even the huge historical importance of Kant’s works. D. Isac nurtures the conviction that *this* critical spirit will contribute in the future to the reorganization and harmonization of the philosophical issues, that different philosophers from various countries and cultures would be able, however, to agree on the essential features of a philosophical domain, to conjugate their efforts for obtaining solutions to the problems as well as to succeed in the critical demarcations of their contributions all over this common road.

Obviously, the great interest of D. Isac for the critical spirit and Kant’s criticism as a whole merges with a state of mind very present in the Romanian pre-war as well as interwar culture. A research of the history of Kant’s influence in Romania shows that this philosophy was, as concerns the idea of the “system of thinking”, a true “touchstone” for several generations of intellectuals. At that time, Kant’s criticism was perceived as a standard or a norm of philosophy as system. Formed in such an intellectual *milieu*, D. Isac quickly recognized and assimilated Descartes’ and Kant’s standards of philosophical excellence (*i.e.*, critique and clarity of thinking). Moreover, he kept this ideal for a whole life, despite the hostile historical circumstances after 1945–1946.

The peak of D. Isac’s works concerning the heritage of the Kantian paradigm of thinking is the book *Knowledge and Transcendence*. It is composed of 5 chapters – *Philosophy, Knowledge of Transcendence; The Critical Spirit in the Knowledge of*

⁴ D. Isac, *Reflecții asupra spiritului critic* (Reflections on the Critical Spirit), “Symposion”, Cluj, no. 2, 1939, pp. 109–110.

⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 120, 121.

Transcendence; Dilemmas of Transcending; The Problem of the “Thing in Itself”; Knowledge and Transcendence. There were some strong convictions to motivate the publication of the book, dedicated to Professor Ion Petrovici:

- philosophy’s autonomy regarding science, as well as the specificity and the meaning of philosophical speculation – the tendency of transcending;
- the necessity to give a founded retort to “intuitionism” and “essays” in fashion at the time in Romania, by asserting and making arguments about the role of thinking, “lucid spirituality” and reason;
- the substantiation of *critical realism* in order to formulate a solution to the problem of transcendence.

On the basis of Kant’s criticism, D. Isac makes a founded and very thorough critique of “naïve” realism as well as of solipsism, demonstrating their limits in principle as they derive from the examination of the modern history of philosophy and modern history of science. Thus, he thoroughly analyses not only the fruits of Descartes’ and Kant’s philosophy, but also makes an original valorization of contemporary Meyerson’s and Brunschvicg’s conclusions – philosophers of science of great authority at the time, especially concerning the problems of *scientific explanation* – as emphasized in their works. Within the Romanian philosophy, D. Isac finds a profound affinity with M. Florian’s *Metaphysics and its Problems*, in the respect of conceiving *transcendence* as an object of philosophy and *explicans* of the sensible world. Through a fine and argued “critique of criticism”, D. Isac reaches a “synthetic” solution: *the realist-critical philosophy of transcendence*, able to give an account both for the activity of consciousness and its external reality.

The conclusion of *Knowledge and Transcendence* is that a point-blank separation of *immanence* from *transcendence*, as *Critique of Pure Reason* prescribes, becomes impossible. And this is so because man himself together with the cosmos participates in transcendence and is an expression of it. Kant’s contradictions must be now resolved and overridden. Philosophy cannot refuse itself transcendence without risking of becoming a religion without God. As M. Eliade will later prove that *the sacred* becomes manifest through *the profane*, *phenomena* are ways of *transcendence*’s expression, which does not mean, however, that the human being will be some day able to know effectively the absolute as such. “Human spirit, as well as the nature surrounding it, is an expression of the high transcendent existence, therefore a means through which we can raise questions and suspicions about what there is *over there* (italics ours). In this concern, we might say, on the one side, that the singularity and isolation of the human being in nature is a phenomenon less tragic than commonly stressed. Springing from transcendence, the reason, the meaning and the noblest experiences

of the human soul must have a correspondence “beyond”, a root which, even if not of the same nature, signifies their justification.”⁶

III. As is known, from the perspective of a complete philosophical system (at least as an intention), L. Blaga accused the insufficiency of Kant’s criticism. The philosopher of Königsberg, the one who believed to have demonstrated once and for all *the impossibility of metaphysics as a science*, remains the prisoner of an undeclared metaphysical outlook. The ontological demarcation made by Blaga between the existence of the human being in the practical-sensible world for the purpose of self-conservation (with knowledge of “1st degree”) and the so-called “existence in the horizon of mystery and for its revelation” (with knowledge of “2nd degree”) sends Kantian epistemology to the first level. The second one receives the theories which aim to *transcendent* – orientated and shaped by historical, ethnical and local “stylistic categories”, i.e., a “stylistic matrix”. Beside Kant’s categories, stylistic categories give science a structure, represented through the forms and historical varieties of its evolution. Unavoidably, Blaga will reach the antipode of Kant’s metaphysics, because while the philosopher of Lancrăm considers *the subjective representations about the absolute/transcendent as knowledge*, the philosopher of Königsberg denies to them neatly this quality.

The open disagreement of D. Isac with the main presuppositions of Blaga’s philosophical system originates in the conviction of the necessity to keep steady the thinking in the field of critical spirit. Also, Isac shares the ideal of metaphysics as a “*streng Wissenschaft*” (“rigorous science”), as featured by Kant or Husserl. Therefore, an interpreter devoted to the requirements of philosophical critique could find in terms like “mystery”, “the Great Anonymous” or “transcendent censorship” nothing else but some beautiful arbitrary conceptual buildings, which have no reasonable support. In the research of the ontological problems raised by the *Trilogy of Knowledge* – especially those belonging to the “dogmatical method” – D. Isac writes: “Here, we must say it, the *metaphysician* Blaga went much too far beyond the *theorist of knowledge* or, in other words, a theory of knowledge was created leaving behind the critical positions which we consider absolutely necessary. As any other metaphysician, Blaga forgot that concepts do not always cover reality and that, in all case, the standpoint for the philosophy of knowledge ought to be the discussion of the relationship between concepts and reality, the discussion of the very existence of the transcendent.”⁷ Interested in the cognitive value of the above-mentioned epistemology, D. Isac understood to set forth Blaga’s theory *from a critical point of view*. It is about the conviction that “... inside the

⁶ D. Isac, *Cunoaștere și transcendență*, p. 349.

⁷ See D. Isac, *Lucian Blaga theoretician al cunoașterii* (Lucian Blaga – Theorist of Knowledge), “*Freemătul Școalei*”, nos. 5–6, 1938, p. 209.

critical thinking and not elsewhere one must search for the solidity and justification of every philosophy”.

New interpretations come to confirm D. Isac’s point of view, by the idea that, in contrast with Kant, Blaga’s epistemology does not succeed in assuring the position of metaphysics; on the contrary, the metaphysical *corpus* is nothing else but a consequence of epistemological premises, with all the risks assumed (in the first line, the claim to be a *knowledge of the transcendent*). However, a historical “conciliation” of these two great philosophers might be possible: if we accept that the research of the “pure reason” would come along with the research of historical, ethnical and local determinations of reason. Thus, not the existence and spiritual meaning of the attempts to elaborate representations about the transcendent would have to be put under debate by the conclusions of Kant’s criticism, but only the characterization of the outcome of these aspirations as *knowledge* in the proper sense of the term.⁸

I must emphasize that D. Isac conducted the dialogue with L. Blaga respectfully for the person of the philosopher from Lančrăm. He had always in mind Blaga’s *ideas*, not the *person* of Blaga. As an admirer of Blaga’s poems, D. Isac highly appreciated them several times for their inner outstanding value.⁹

IV. Studying very carefully the history of philosophy as well as the most important and influential interpreters, D. Isac was led to the conclusion that there is a *meaning* of the extremely numerous philosophical theories which follow one another in time. Thus, the diverse conceptions of mankind’s philosophers are neither mutually exclusive nor meddled in. Their evolution, from ancient times up today, has the role and the meaning to shape the *philosophical conscience* which directs the way of philosophy to coherence, consistence and, above all, to the *metaphysical truth*. The comparison with the “hard sciences” (mathematics, physics, chemistry, etc.) is disadvantageous to philosophy, but unavoidable; however, such situation is not given once and for all, because exactly the *critical spirit* could re-open philosophy to science and to all the fields of culture.

At last, what is to be kept in mind from all the history of philosophy? In order to draft an answer, D. Isac invoked Socrates’ seducing personality: “If the shadow of immortal Socrates were again among us and could again sound people with his embarrassing questions, it would not take long, of course, before he could speak to us, using his profound and ironic spirit: «Now I know too well what Descartes, Hume, Leibniz, Kant and all the others thought about the knowledge of the world,

⁸ See M. Flonta, *O posibilă discuție între Blaga și Kant* (A Possible Discussion between Blaga and Kant), ****Meridian Blaga IV*, Editura Casa Cărții de Știință, Cluj-Napoca, 2004, pp. 16, 17.

⁹ See D. Isac *Diferențialele divine – considerații critice* (Divine Differentials – Critical Considerations), *Revista de filosofie*, no. 2, 1940; *Lucian Blaga – Știință și creație* (Lucian Blaga – Science and Creation), *Bucovina literară*, no. 40, 7 March, 1943.

the human being and prime truths, but still, my beloved friends, cannot see clearly what somebody, whoever he or she might be, must think and is entitled to think about all these things. I can see philosophers and systems, but cannot see philosophy itself, as my formerly helpless disciples were able to see a beautiful object or a beautiful being, but not the beauty in itself. Should we stay with the opinion that philosophy consists of the knowledge of what one man or another have thought about the supreme reality, or to sustain its right to be a true *science*, accessible for everybody's learning, even if, eventually, we could reduce it to the finding that we do not know a big deal?» What are we going to answer Socrates, if he objected – naturally –, that systems are only opinions with more or less carats of truth, when he expects from us the *knowledge* of things and the clear awareness of the measure we own?; then, he asks not what such or such philosopher said, but what should anybody think that truth itself is. We must show him that philosophy is as an amount of wisdom and knowledge, beyond and through the systems, as he was striving in the ancient times to find out what virtue is, beyond a virtuous deed or another.”¹⁰

Beyond what a certain philosopher thought and created, it is *philosophy itself* in advantage because the critical spirit guides it toward *certainty*. This way, philosophy gets the capacity to make a *synthesis* of all its perennial theories, trends and paradigms. If reality is only *one* and *non-contradictory*, it follows that the knowledge of reality must have the same feature. Thus, we obtain a *criterion* for all philosophical systems in history; there is none to express completely the *metaphysical truth*, but many of them possess “parts” or “fragments” of it, which must be set into the light for the completion of the great synthesis. An exam of the traditions and paradigms from Democritus to Kant and from Thales to Bergson shows two important elements to take into account: *epistemological idealism/transcendentalism* and *metaphysical/ontological realism*. These are both liable to being mixed, in a very promising metaphilosophical perspective, even if they have different roots.

A synthesis thus achieved has the mission to “convert” transcendence in terms of knowledge. Not only the human subject imposes its *a priori* shapes on the matter of sensible intuition, but also these shapes are influenced by the structure of a known object. “Kant said that the subject imposes its *a priori* shapes on the «matter», which comes from the world-in-itself. We are, however, entitled to ask him a question: how does one come to explain the wonder of the concordance between matter and shape; how comes that reality-in-itself is so obedient that it lies itself in space and time without our least effort? The answer to this question has a meaning only if we acknowledge the process of “accommodation”. Reality-in-itself does not disguise suddenly, it is not “transformed”, because, properly speaking,

¹⁰ See D. Isac, *Realismul critic – sinteză filosofică* (The Critical Realism – a Philosophical Synthesis), “Revista Fundațiilor Regale”, no. 5, 1946, p. 22.

knowledge does not exert any action on it. In time – or maybe out of time – in the order of *phenomena* or in the *ontos* zone an agreement was settled between the two elements of knowledge. Their imbrications and correspondence is the result of some reciprocal “concessions”, which led to the formation of the intermediate world (the so-called “phenomenal”), a kind of existence *sui-generis* between psychological and ontological.”¹¹

The boldness to propose such a project of a philosophical synthesis was an anticipation of C. Noica’s idea about the major responsibility of Western philosophy: the conciliation between *transcendent* and *transcendental*. Even if the metaphysics of the XXth century went on the road of the critical analysis of language, still the conviction of D. Isac has the force to impress us today: “So, this is how the historical and systematical synthesis of philosophy is, however – against every pessimism or spirit of historicity –, possible. Critical realism, in which we see the core of the future philosophical synthesis, will join the grand and perennial lines of the evolution of systematic philosophy: *epistemological idealism* and *ontological realism*.”¹²

I should mention in conclusion, that, in recent years, books have been published in the philosophy of science and ontology which tend to give reason to D. Isac’s anticipation. It seems that the “blending” of epistemological transcendentalism with ontological realism is the most reasonable solution, at least for a mind that continues the inquiry for external reality, *i.e.*, for a new ontological model as well as for a new ontology.¹³ Within this philosophical tradition, re-thinking the ontological models and ontology is a must.

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¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 38.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 39.

¹³ See, for instance, I. Pârvu, *Arhitectura Existenței* (The Architecture of the Existence), vol. 1, Editura Humanitas, București, 1990; vol. 2, Editura Paideia, București, 2001.

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