

Horia Vicențiu PĂTRAȘCU
“Spiru Haret” University, Bucharest

ȘTEFAN AFLOROAEI – ON METAPHYSICS NOWADAYS

(Ștefan Afloroaei, *Metafizica noastră de toate zilele / Our Metaphysics of All Days*, Humanitas Publishing House, București, 2008)

Abstract

The latest book signed by Ștefan Afloroaei, *Metafizica noastră de toate zilele / Our Metaphysics of All Days*, published by Humanitas Publishing House in 2008, brings into discussion a problematic that seemed long forgotten. The very title of the book announces its main idea, namely that metaphysics is as natural and present “frame of mind” of ours as possibly conceivable, a “form of sensitivity”, an “experience,” as the author himself calls it.

Key words: metaphysics, Ștefan Afloroaei, phenomenon, being, contingency, destiny, speculative frame of mind, metaphysical experience, exceedance, the non-contradictory principle

The latest book signed by Ștefan Afloroaei, *Metafizica noastră de toate zilele / Our Metaphysics of All Days*, published by Humanitas Publishing House in 2008, brings into discussion a problematic that seemed long forgotten. The very title of the book announces its main idea, namely that metaphysics, far from being a concern of an ended epoch, a field specialized in obscurities, or the name of the new obscurantism that invaded the world, is as natural and present “frame of mind” of ours as possibly conceivable, a “form of sensitivity”, an “experience,” as the author himself calls it.

However, the title of the book announces another idea as well, one which stands out as we are reading it: the “object” of metaphysics is not, as it is widely acknowledged, something detached from this world, beyond it, with no connection with what is happening “down – here”. This preconceived idea represents the main reason why metaphysics has been numberless times rejected: not having an empirical basis, lacking a foundation in the directly cognoscible and thus its theories never liable to being validated or gainsaid, metaphysics, it has been said, may be appreciated as a work of art.

Starting from its immanent criteria, the only judgment on its truth is possible only based on coherence, one being unable to pose the problem either of the

correspondence with those visible – which by definition it surpasses – or, out of obvious reasons, the correspondence with those that cannot be seen. Therefore, according to this perspective, “metaphysics” cannot be asked more than not being self-contradictory; it is sufficient for it to sustain itself as if a world – equally distanced from the one in which we dwell and from the one which we cannot envisage. Serious charges have been laid against metaphysics – from its meaningless utterances to the absurd claims it raises. Nowadays - when we can talk about a true scholastic of the analytical philosophy, about an official philosophy of pragmatism and empiricism, when metaphysics has even ceased to be driven into any corner whatsoever, being identified rather as a kind of sophisticated alchemy, a pre-history to the ‘true’ analytic philosophy - the publishing of such a book is, unquestionably, a genuine event both in the Romanian culture and the European one.

Throughout this work, the author knows how to dismantle the prejudices related to metaphysics and thus to surpass the restricted understanding of experience and the concrete reality. Metaphysics, without being one of our current experiences, is no less a decisive and defining experience for us. Meeting it is as unexpected as inevitable, and metaphysics intimately interlinks with our lives, with the world in which we live, our ways of thinking and even the ones in which we feel. Only those who regard metaphysics from the outside and who forget their intrinsic bonds with it can appreciate it as contemplation on “some aspects which seem to relate to a totally different world.”

It is not the reading of some books with strange titles, nor the initiation in the use of some concepts which may appear as rather vague to many readers, nor the doctrines or thinking trends that exhaust the metaphysical attitude. “The metaphysical attitude appears not in these situations, but exactly when man himself confronts, let us say so, with the unclear logics of his thinking, with his own beliefs or those of a foreigner, with the blurred boundary between reality and appearance, no less with those events that seem to talk about the lack of sense in the states of things. In these situations - and in an absolutely natural way – there come into being those attitudes and questions that can be called speculative, even if the way in which they are expressed is as common as possible”¹.

What constitutes the center of interest in this philosophical work is the way in which a “metaphysical experience” constitutes itself, an experience which makes possible any metaphysical conception as well as our whereness in the world. The metaphysical experience that Ștefan Afloroaei envisages is one that, one way or another, each of us experiences at least once in our lives: the experience of meeting what exceeds thinking, what surpasses our mental and emotional frames, what blurs the categories in accordance to which we usually operate. Only that the source of this experience is not at all strange to the world in which we lead our

¹ Ștefan Afloroaei, *Metafizica noastră de toate zilele*, Editura Humanitas, București, 2008, p. 11.

daily lives in the same way in which it is not strange to ourselves. The same source has, most of the times, the most familiar and usual faces – as the one of our neighbour or our own in the mirror, the image of a beautiful girl or that of pure and simple happiness. It may also have the countenance – drawn with devastating suffering or the one, pensive and serene, of the vesperal sadness. But in all these events of our lives there betides – especially in certain moments – an exceedance of these, a surplus, something else which cannot be reduced to what they embody, nor can it be isolated from its pure and simple occurrence. The simplistic dissociation: essence – appearance, essence – existence, mind – body, image – reality, the thing in itself – phenomenon is unable to clarify anything from this experience which makes erupt the originary unity of those separated or the profound coincidence of those that are contrary.

Paragraph 8 from *Metafizica noastră de toate zilele*, called “Situations in which thinking exceeds the non-contradiction rule” is essential for the present discussion. Stefan Afloroaei stops on three situations, frequent in our daily life and conversations, which elude the contradiction principle: the everyday thing, the determination free object, and what is not an object.

1. *The everyday thing*. Under this name there recurs in our life a situation which can no longer be elucidated by means of the principle on which thinking functions, as classical logics claims. The everyday thing may equally exist or not, may happen or not, may be equally true and false, in the same time and in all respects. Its indifference at the logical level translates our indifference at the psychological level. We can equally accept the existence and non-existence of a thing, that it happened or not, that it had to supervene or it was the result of a mere whim. We can think about the everyday thing without our thinking to experience logical convulsions. We accept it naturally as if the exigency of non-contradiction did not concern it at all. Either we refer to someone’s belief in the unexpected change of weather, or we talk about bookish or raving visions, the square circle or the old bestiaries, thinking gives evident signs that it can encompass anything without following the non-contradiction principle².

2. *The determination free object*. The second situation in which thinking exceeds the non-contradiction principle refers to the thing in itself. When thinking tries to encompass it, it finds itself in the situation in which it has to recognize the perfect equivalence of the thing with nothingness itself. The determination free thing makes being and nothingness coincide. In the realm of the absolute, detached from bounds and relationships, to be is identical with not to be. It is a paradoxical situation, especially since it contradicts the idea we all have according to which the maximum of being is determined by the absolute and not by the relative. Yet, within this exercise of thinking, one is obliged to accept that the maximum of being is identical with the absence of being. It is not only the Buddhism that confers to

² Ibidem, p.59.

the nothingness the value of a principle or the Heraclitean conception of universal becoming that will stand under the sign of this perspective of the thing in its contradictory absolute, but also the common thinking which develop – especially in proverbs or apophthegms referring to the mutual translation of life and death – “an understanding of things by means of their striking contrast term”³.

3. *What is not a thing.* This stands for the third situation in which thinking can no longer be subjected to the non-contradiction rule: namely, when this does not operate with simple predicative judgements any more or when it thinks what can no longer be subjected to the simple object condition. When there appear other uttering modes than the enuntiative one, the difficulty of establishing their truth or falsity according to the already mentioned principle maximizes already. Could one say that a prayer or a praise, a question or a narration are true or false?⁴

What is a speculative exercise according to Ștefan Afloroaei? It means conceiving the differences as orienting to a third term. Thus, for example, the distinction between the passing of the time and eternity finds its meaning in the light of a new term, that of the eternal moment (*nunc trans*). This is not a case of dissolving the tension between the two terms, but a bringing to light of the “originary horizon in the presence of which there becomes possible any elementary distinction in the order of existence.”⁵ This originary horizon is nothing else but the horizon of being.

But being knows more interpretations. Ștefan Afloroaei stops on those speculative interpretations of being from our daily vocabulary, which “illustrate the hermeneutical phenomenon of a double exceedance”⁶. These interpretations are: being “exists as such,” “is present”, “happens”, and “is real.” Exceedance manifests, on one hand, by the fact that the existence event cannot be transformed in an object and cannot be determined logically in a satisfying manner; on the other hand, in the very moment in which we name a thing we consider, more or less, the difference between the existence of that thing and its way of being. Put it differently, faced with an existence hypostasis, there is felt the impossibility of signification and semiosis in general, and also “the distance between apparition and the state of facts of a thing”, in which, inextricably, “there is the source of a huge reservoir of signification”. Always, the simple existence of a thing exceeds any possible signification of that thing, this situation being inextricably related to the immense difference that we feel between the existence as such of a thing and one way or another in which it appears. However, we continue to talk about things “as they are”, “in reality”, “in fact”.

³ Ibidem, p. 60.

⁴ Ibidem, p. 62.

⁵ Ibidem, p. 177.

⁶ Ibidem, p. 182.

To exist. Regarding the first acceptance of the term, Stefan Afloroaei notices the fact that each time we use “to be” as copulative, its existential meaning remains as a horizon which totally surpasses any potential predication. When we say about someone that he is in a way or another, we always assert the very condition of his existence, which makes possible any attribution of a predicate or another, but which does not reduce to any of these, being transcendent⁷. Here it is how in this simple act of talking there hides a metaphysical meaning which, though we are not always explicitly aware of, we accept implicitly.

To be present. Not differently do things happen with the other interpretation of „to be”, namely “to be present”. “To be present” is not exhausted by the spatial-temporal coordinates of the fact of being here and now; presence is not exhausted by being present. On the contrary, it is very likely that someone be present, in front of you, but in reality, to be elsewhere or even “absent”. The other way round, things long passed or not yet happened could “be present”. Many times, these value much more than those effectively running in front of us. Consequently, “the meaning of presence of the word “to be” leads much behind the logical space of a sentence”⁸.

„*There is*” – This acceptance of being brings, again, exceedance. When you say that “there is” something in a certain place, in its way to, or in a certain state, besides the attribution of certain properties, “there” announces a situation which can no longer be encompassed within the common categories of thinking⁹. “There is” means more than “being in a certain place in, in a particular mood”; it means exposing in what that thing has as its most unencompassing. When you say about something or someone that “there is”, you implicitly recognize its pure being, which surpasses any category and cannot be reduced to any concept.

“*To happen*” – enlightens being from another point of view, as we know how to recognize it in our most common experiences. When I assert about something that it happens I feel what goes beyond any power of signification; despite this, the distance is not infinite since the “event still lets me catch a glimpse of what leads beyond it”¹⁰. “To happen” sends to a situation in which the subject is either undetermined or inexistent as such. An example we could bring forth to lighten the author’s concept could be taken from the way in which the usance dictates formulating a deposition. The simple sentence in the beginning, “On the X (day) of Y (month), the following happened”, sends to this interpretation of being. “To happen” does not limit here to the involved persons, to the event narrated, to the mentioned circumstances or to the witness’ point of view: it indicates the incommensurable between the facts related and those which really happened. By “it

⁷ Ibidem, p. 190.

⁸ Ibidem, p. 196.

⁹ Ibidem, p. 197.

¹⁰ Ibidem, p. 199.

happened” one recognizes that the origin of the event completely surpasses the “causes” of the event and the event itself. By “it happened” metaphysics makes itself present under the more humble guises of our lives’ deeds. When sorrow “happens” to us the feeling will not be significantly different from the one experienced by a tragedy hero in front of the destiny, a situation which shades away and brings into the discussion the boundary between happening and destiny¹¹.

“*To be real*”. This last acceptance of “being” in day-to-day talk sends to the experience of what is “more”, of what “surpasses” or is beyond our power of thinking. Though we cannot have access to an ultimate meaning of life, of things or facts, we do not stop considering this acceptance of being. We talk about things as they are in reality, about real facts and real people, but this “to be real” remains mostly indeterminate. We cannot seize it in a definition and yet it operates like a regulatory idea¹². Today, other meanings are prevalent, such as that of actuality (the requirement to be updated), of the immediateness, of quantity and extension, of relating, possession, fact and of the new. But, above all, contingency imposes itself as “a name of the everyday being”¹³.

As today we can no longer talk about knowing “what it is because it is,” thinking will consider contingency as “an irreducible and natural fact”¹⁴. Since the world leans upon nothingness, on an abyss, and the feeling of the absent being is more and more experienced, contingency becomes “a name for being in the today world, maybe its most frequent and inoffensive name”¹⁵. Contingency has “an element that exceeds evidently the sphere of the human intentionality” and belongs to “the world of a rather free dialogue between what is proper to us and what is foreign”¹⁶. In the ambiguous economy of contingency we could also remark the “place of a free power or energy”.

There stands as significantly important and valuable the idea of contingency as meeting point between will and what surpasses it, finitude and what no longer stands under the sign of a known limit, the familiar and the foreign. As Ștefan Afloroaei remarkably puts it: “The consciousness of finitude and of a proper way of being is disclosed to man only as long as he actually can get a glimpse of a genuine beyond, a sky for this earth and a destiny almost incomprehensible of those that seem lost in the world”. Contingency is not pure contingency because this cannot be understood without its opposite term. Even if by saying “it happens” we no longer endorse a divine power or the blind force of destiny, yet “contingency

¹¹ Ibidem, p. 204.

¹² Ibidem, p. 207.

¹³ Ibidem, p. 220.

¹⁴ Ibidem, p. 221.

¹⁵ Ibidem, p. 223.

¹⁶ Ibidem, p. 225.

indicates another source of signification except the one proper to the human mind and will”¹⁷.

We could say that this entire discussion culminates in the pages in which Stefan Afloroaei writes about beauty. Starting from Borges’ text, *Beauty as Physical Sensation*, he remarks that between sensitive beauty and beauty as such or in itself, there is not only one possibility to choose. Some have chosen the beauty in itself as being the true and real beauty, compared to which the sensitive beauty – that of a beautiful girl, of a horse or of an object – would not be but copies, images, appearances. On the other hand, others have opted for the sensitive beauty as being the only reality, generalizing a beauty in itself, without a face and shape, without color, being but a meaningless abstraction. Without leaving behind the distinction between “in itself” and “sensitive”, Stefan Afloroaei brings them together, makes them depend on each other, makes them exist one because of the other: “beauty is pure and sensitive, simple and contingent”¹⁸.

Those who consider the Kantian distinction between the thing in itself and the phenomenon in terms of some “realities” radically separated, in the way in which textbook philosophy separates them, would be surprised to find out that Kant himself speaks about the thing in itself in terms proper to the description of a phenomenon, a limit phenomenon however. Also, in *Being and Time*, Martin Heidegger brings to light a meaning of the phenomenon proper to being itself: what shows in itself.

The thing in itself imposes itself to thinking evidently since, if we suppose that it does not exist, we would have to accept the absurd reasoning that “the phenomenon could be without something to appear”¹⁹. Although the thing in itself cannot be known, it constitutes “a perspective in which the object can be understood, yet not a subjective representation”²⁰. Those who blindly follow the textbook definition of the thing in itself will be legitimately shocked by the collocation, brightly used by Afloroaei, of “the thing in itself as phenomenon”. Here follows the fragment worthy of the most outstanding pages in the history of metaphysics: “After all, if the thing in itself affects the senses continuously and thus the sensitive world, if it means a possible perspective according to which any object is perceived, if it can be thought in a certain way, then it shows itself at least in these hypostases”.

In other words, it could be considered a phenomenon from this point of view. Evidently, it does not mean that it takes place somewhere or it manifests at a certain moment, yet it shows itself in a certain way to the consciousness. The distinction between *ens rationis* (the thing only thought) and *ens reale* (the thing that

¹⁷ Ibidem, p. 232.

¹⁸ Ibidem, p. 239.

¹⁹ Ibidem, p. 272 (cf. *Critica rațiunii pure*, p. 257).

²⁰ Ibidem, p. 275.

exists in reality) is indecidable in this situation. What *to appear* means (different as signified from *to seem*) does not make sense only in relation with the sensible experience, but also in relation with an experience in which faith or human will are decisive. That is the reason why we consider *that one could talk about the thing in itself as a phenomenon, yet a phenomenon that can exceed unlimitedly the boundaries of our empirical experience*²¹. If we translate “to be in itself” by “to be one and the same”, says the author, we could notice that alterity penetrates into the core of the absolute identity. What is one and the same will be the other, on one hand in relation with what is not like that and, on the other, it will be the other in relation to itself. This is the remarkable idea of the Romanian philosopher: the phenomenon is no longer regarded as appearance, but as apparition: it is no longer a modality to hide the being, but the way in which being gives itself. In the same way in which the various apparitions – a beautiful face, for example – do not confiscate the “in itself” which they make visible, the “in itself” can no longer be separated from its apparition, from its phenomenon.

When we see a beautiful face we do not perceive a “certain” beautiful face or a more or less “quantity” – *horribile dictu!* – of beauty: we see the beauty itself radiating from and on the face we admire. It is all here and entirely elsewhere, it is that absolute somewhere else which is fully present here. In this moment, thinking has to give up the dichotomies and to accept the antinomies if it wants to catch a glimpse of something beyond the limits within which it obliges itself to think. Therefore, “what shows itself at a certain moment appears both as a thing in itself, and as its image. In other words, it is both an inexhaustible source and a relatively defined apparition. It constantly intersects, therefore, its unconditioned or free be-tiding with the fact of its constitution under conditions such as the temporal ones²².”

And if the image belongs to the non-real ones, we are constrained to assert that “the non-real belongs to the substance of the real – and the other way round. Put it differently, any thing has a non-real side, somehow intangible and pure. Though non-real, it is in no way abstract, purely fictive, but it manifests a particular concreteness. In the same time, though sensible, it is still ideal and untouchable²³.”

Finally, we have to accept the paradoxical situation of our mind to think what transcends the act of thinking²⁴. The paradox Kierkegaard speaks about is invoked by Ștefan Afloroaei because it means “the passion of thinking” and it is only this paradox that can make us able to embrace both the unconditioned freedom and the historical liberty under the signs of which we live. This paradox also refers to “the wish to accede to what brings with itself an absolute difference, as the

²¹ Ibidem, p. 276.

²² Ibidem, p. 335.

²³ Ibidem.

²⁴ Ibidem, p. 354.

presence of something divine is”²⁵. As when referring to love, where embracing comes into existence from the lovers’ will to annul the separation given by the individuality of each of them, this antinomy is grounded on the desire to bring together those radically different. Both love and metaphysics stand their grounds only if the dream of unity is attainable as embrace, namely as speculative exercise.

Translated by lect. univ. dr. Ecaterina Pătrașcu

Horia Vicențiu PĂTRAȘCU: PhD Lecturer, “Spiru Haret” University, Bucharest, Department of Philosophy, Political Sciences and Cultural Studies.

E-mail: horia_vicentiu_patrascu@yahoo.com

²⁵ Ibidem, p. 356.