

Taming the Beast: Constantin Noica and Doing Philosophy in Critical Political Contexts

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Resumen: Constantin Noica es un filósofo rumano del siglo XX quien vivió en una sociedad comunista-totalitaria durante la mayor parte de su vida. Él muestra en su trabajo, directa o indirectamente, varias maneras de hacer filosofía en un contexto absurdo. Su solución final surge de la creencia que todas las cosas son buenas o podrían serlo. Para él, hacer filosofía es conducir vuestro mundo hacia el mundo del espíritu.

Palabras clave: Filosofía rumana, teatro del absurdo, clausura que se abre a sí misma, filosofía en crisis

Abstract: Constantin Noica is a Romanian philosopher of the 20th century, who lived for most of his life in a communist totalitarian society. Directly or indirectly, he shows in his work various ways of doing philosophy in an absurd context. His final answer stems from his belief that all things are either good or can become good. For him, doing philosophy is directing your world toward the world of the spirit.

Keywords: Romanian philosophy; theater of the absurd; closure that opens itself; philosophy in crisis

Ahoretia. This is one of the six maladies that Constantin Noica, a Romanian philosopher of the 20th century,¹ discusses in his book, *Six Maladies of the Contemporary Spirit*. Ahoretia, he says, “denotes the rejection, respectively the renunciation, be it attenuated, be it categorical, of *horoi*,² the refusal to possess Determinations” (*Six Maladies* 94)³. This malady is paradigmatic of an absurd world, in which nothing makes sense due to humans’ inability to find meaning in what surrounds them. It is a meaningless, irrational universe. Noica begins explaining it with Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*: a world in which “there are no longer *Determinations*, and men no longer even want to give themselves any *Determinations*” (*Six Maladies* 43). It is a universe marked by one thought, expressed in the opening of the play: “Nothing to be done.” Noica lived in such an absurd world, with the only difference that the absence of determinations was imposed from above and did not stem from a human’s personal disease. In a totalitarian communist society, such as the one in which Noica lived, all possible determinations were taken from people with the purpose of creating a new world, one in which only one determination is possible: that of a consenting subject to an ideology and to the organization that prophesied it.

The intellectual and moral crisis in which Noica spent the majority of his philosophical career was not singular to his native Romania. At the end of World War II, the majority of East European countries experienced radical changes at all levels of the society. In order to impose the communist ideology, the new power persecuted those who used to think freely. Considered a dangerous person because of his ideas, Noica was placed under house arrest in 1949 and then imprisoned in 1959, after the trial of a group that came to be known as the “Noica group”.⁴ Noica was accused of plotting against the state order by, among other things, sharing “hostile” manuscripts: Goethe or Hegel, for example.

Constantin Noica recounts his experience in prison in his *Pray for Brother Alexander*—a book in which one finds plenty of examples of people suffering from ahoretia.⁵ Written in the style of a diary, the text also offers a possible answer to the question of how one can philosophize in times of crisis. In this particular case, the crisis is the expression of an absurd world, in which rationality is absent. How can then one reintroduce philosophy, rational thought in such a world? The question seems to have no answer because the most important characteristic of an absurd society is that there is no rationality. In fact, within an absurd world, everything that is according to the *logos* no longer sounds rational. In the Romanian communist society, values were overturned to the point in which the norm was constituted by lies. People lived their lives as if they had two heads, one for the public life, in which they were subservient pawns, and

¹ For Noica’s life and philosophy, see Octavian Gabor, “Noica’s Becoming within Being and *Meno’s* Paradox” in *Companion to Classical Reception in Eastern and Central Europe*. Eds. Zara Torlone & Dana Munteanu. (Blackwell, 2017), p. 300-311.

² Greek for “limits,” “determinations.”

³ The diseases that Noica discusses are neither physical nor psychological, but rather explain a deficiency or a refusal in the order of Being. The first three maladies “reflect in man the potential deficiency of the terms of Being: the General, the Individual and Determinations” (p. 32). The names Noica designates for each of them are based on Greek philosophical terminology: *catbolitic*, *totetitis*, and *boretitis*. The other three maladies are due to a human’s rejection of and “inaptitude for one of the other of the terms of Being” (p. 33), so the names are *acatholia*, *atodetia*, and *aboteria*.

⁴ See *Prigoana: Documente ale procesului C. Noica, C. Pillat, S. Lăzărescu, A. Acterian, Vl. Streinu, Al. Paleologu, N. Steinhardt, T. Enescu, S. Al-George, Al. O. Teodoreanu și alții* (București: Vremea, 2010). According to the files of his trial, his writings on Hegel’s *Phenomenology of the Spirit* were considered anti-revolutionary. All translations from the Romanian editions mentioned in this paper belong to me.

⁵ Constantin Noica, *Pray for Brother Alexander*, translated by Octavian Gabor (Punctum Books, 2018).

a private life, in their own homes or even in their own minds. The communist power forbade books that contained western values, and students in philosophy studied almost exclusively Marxist ideas. In this context, we can understand why Gabriel Liiceanu, who became Noica's disciple in the 1970s, after the imprisonment, writes, "This intellectual from the East will tell you how for him the culture of Europe was not, as it was for you, the normal rhythm of the mind's breathing, but rather a sort of stolen oxygen, assimilated and stored clandestinely. It was one way of surviving in a world asphyxiated by lies, ideology and vulgarity" (25-6).

Liiceanu's thoughts suggest a way of doing philosophy in a time of crisis: clandestinely, stealing the possibility of rational thought from those who still have the opportunity to engage in it. Even if intellectual life in communist Romania was the experience of clandestinity, Noica's work and life suggest that responding to the absurd may take other paths, more or less philosophical. On the one hand, you could fight against the irrational enemy with the hope of defeating it. I propose that this first stage ends in the malady I mentioned above, *ahoretia*, because the fruitlessness of your fight and the loneliness that this entails may create disillusion. The world to which this first path leads is similar to the one described in the theater of the absurd. On the other hand, another path is the seduction of the enemy and the attempt to take it into a territory in which it can no longer be irrational. For Noica, this was the realm of the spirit.

Fighting against the absurd and losing oneself in the process

There are various moments of irrationality described by Noica in his *Pray for Brother Alexander*. I mention two of them here. The first one reminds of the beginning of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, "Nothing to be done" (2). Noica says, "It is of no importance" (*Pray for Brother* 23). He is in a cell together with a young athlete, who does not understand why he was imprisoned. The young man had crossed to Western Germany with the occasion of a tournament in East Germany, but he returned to the East on his own accord. A few days later, he was thrown into prison without any trial. His punishment has no meaning to him, and Noica confirms it: "It is of no importance." When a political power acts irrationally, one cannot make sense of events in a rational way, so it is better to avoid making sense of them at all. Later that day, when Noica returns after a session of senseless beatings, the same answer is given, "it is of no importance".

The idea that one cannot do anything when faced with irrationality suggests that there is no place for philosophy in crisis situations. This is because there is no dialogue with the one with whom the dialogue is supposed to take place. Since the philosopher—or anyone who is persecuted—has no means of communication with the torturer—and this can be understood in a larger sense, as a real torturer or, let's say, a metaphorical one, which demolishes any rational framework of discussion—the only way in which philosophy can still take place is with oneself, in an assumed solitary position of a human being outside of times. Perhaps the most surprising aspect of such situations is that human beings are placed in

environments where that which that does not make sense is the norm. For Noica, being beaten without reason is the reality of his world. For the young athlete in his cell, this is not only scary, but it is also a world in which he cannot function because he cannot understand how to position himself within it. You can be beaten without reasons, you can be thrown into prison without reasons, which also means that, after all, you cannot do anything to prevent it: events take place around you out of nothing, so to say. Still, there may be a possible particular explanation, “I was beaten because I did not want to take a cigarette” (*Pray for Brother* 24), Noica says. The phrase makes no sense. Why would someone be punished because he refuses a gift? In an absurd context, though, it is just an expression of a reality deprived of sense.

The absurd that took place in prison mirrored only more intensively the lack of meaning that the entire society exhibited. Perhaps the most pernicious aspect was the attitude toward truth. Since the only accepted reality was the one preached by the ideologues of the communist party, people learned to live two different lives, one at home, and the other in public. The two realms were supposed to not interfere. In fact, if there was any influence, this always was in one sense, from the outside toward the inside. In such situations, one has thus to make a decision to behave authentically or not every moment of his life. After a while, living this divided life becomes something natural. The lack of determinations that is characteristic to ahoretia seems to take away all elements to which one can cling one’s life.

The dialogue between Alec, the young athlete, and Noica shows that Alec has not yet fallen into the habit of the absurd. It exhibits the first and the final stage of someone who fights the absurd directly. At the beginning, you do not accept its irrationality and attempt to make it see its own faults, not accepting the idea that one can be blind to truth. Then, when you realize that the absurd cannot see anything other than itself and that there is no means of rational communication with someone in that state, you fall into the despair of “it is of no importance.” It may seem as if this state is similar to the indifference of the Stoics, but the context is different. In an absurd situation, nothing has value due to the fact that nothing makes sense. Attempting to make sense of things, as Alec does in his conversation with Noica, leads you nowhere. It would be as traveling to a destination that does not exist, but you continue to pursue it stubbornly. In the context of persecution, the destination is taken from you. Its lack of existence is due to the fact that it has been stolen, and thus you fall into a state of despair.⁶

In *Pray for Brother Alexander*, Noica recollects one other moment that shows that we cannot fight irrationality by opposing it. Noica had been transferred to another prison, in a larger cell, holding 25-30 people. He no longer knows anything about Alec, and his daily routine changes according to this other prison’s rules. During a “search day”—a ritual done periodically, rather with the purpose of maintaining stress and fear among those imprisoned—all inmates are taken out of the cell and placed in line on the

⁶ In *The Sunflower: On the Possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness* (New York: Schocken Books, 1997), Simon Wiesenthal describes life in Nazi concentration camps emphasizing the hopelessness manifested in absurd contexts: “The prisoner in the camp was driven, and he had to learn to let himself be driven without a will of his own. In our world, nothing any longer obeyed the laws of normal everyday life, here everything had its own logic. What laws were still valid in captivity? The only law that was left as a reliable basis for judgment was the law of death. That law alone was logical, certain and irrefutable. All other laws paled into insignificance, the result was a general passivity. We constantly reminded ourselves that this was the one law that was inevitable, that one could do nothing to change it. The effect on us as a mental paralysis, and the inconsolable attitude in which we were enveloped was the clear expression of the hopelessness of our lot” (p. 68).

hallway, their faces to the wall. Noica says, “This scene, with the face to the wall, in the corridor, reminds me of something from a book. It’s just impossible to remember which one exactly; only after a quarter of hour, when we are back in the cell, I remember the book, and I smile” (*Pray for Brother* 67). It was *Darkness at Noon*, by Arthur Koestler.⁷

The smile, however does not match the atmosphere, and a guard yells at him, asking him why he laughed. After an absurd exchange, in which Noica wants to clarify that he only smiled, while the guard insists that he laughed, the philosopher explains the reason for his smile: he remembered a similar scene from Koestler’s book. “So? What’s to laugh about this?” (*Pray for Brother* 68). The guard’s question makes sense: why would someone laugh at such a scene, which rather provokes tears or despair? The unfolding of the events is, once again, absurd: Noica gets bored with “this idiot’s insistence” and decides to “tell him the truth and be done with it” (*Pray for Brother* 68). In Koestler’s book, “the prisoners get a pistol in the back of their necks” (*Pray for Brother* 68).

The entire room froze. The inmates’ reaction shows that everyone understands that truth has no place in an absurd context, and that truth has unfortunate consequences for the one who utters it. All know it, regardless of whether they are persecuted or designated persecutors, because all know that the absurdity of the world, its lack of meaning, has been imposed from above. For Noica, the reasonable answer should have been any absurd story that could have been accepted by a proponent of the absurd. One can even say that being honest is not even a virtue in this context, especially because it places you and your peers in danger.

This particular moment leads to more suffering for Noica, who is taken to isolation, “a dark cell, which has some sort of table or stone bed and a hole for a wc” (*Pray for Brother* 68). The main problems stem from the cold—Noica is thrown in the room wearing only a shirt—and from the lack of nourishment, already inadequate in prison. Noica recollects, “When you are in isolation, one day you do not get food, but only a bowl with warm water at noon, and one day you get half of the portion” (*Pray for Brother* 68).. Nevertheless, the moment also gives the occasion to an encounter with another inmate, who was thrown into the cell after Noica, who claimed that he could still find joy in prison. This man, however, was not interested in truth, but enjoyed laughing at the absurd situations in which he was.

There is a striking difference between the “laughters” that bring Noica and this man, Ernest, to the isolation. The philosopher had smiled at a memory about a book, but he gets to be punished because he answered with the truth after being bored by the guard’s insistence. The other man was punished because he was making fun of the situation. Both men laugh, but one focuses on the events, while the other does it light-heartedly. Both of them reject the absurdity of their surroundings, but one suffers because of it, while the other is able to maintain his serenity. Noica’s fellow inmate recollects how, prior to being caught and thrown into prison, he traveled by trains from one station to another, assuming a freedom of going nowhere and living without a plan, other than the one of not being caught. After two

⁷ See Arthur Koestler, *Darkness at Noon* (New York: Scribner, 1968).

years, he started to miss “chairs, carpets and people” (*Pray for Brother 73*), so he gave himself in. In prison, where he could not find a magic carpet, as Noica points out sarcastically, he “kept a magic carpet, the taste for flying. Even here, among people so heavy with so many troubles, I feel like a light being. I try to make people talk, dream. Haven’t you sensed how much and how well one can dream here?” (*Pray for Brother 73*).

Humor and irony seem to be the weapons one has against a totalitarian regime when one realizes the fight cannot be won. If an open fight can only lead to the isolation room and defeat, laughter, while not granting justification to the regime, continues to oppose it. The ironical and light-hearted attitude reminds of the Socrates of Plato’s dialogues, where we find a similar laughter that opposes the tyranny of senselessness. I take it that Socratic irony is a sort of laughter in the face of a false conception of truth. As Bakhtin says in the *Dialogical Imagination*, “it is precisely laughter that destroys the epic, and in general destroys any hierarchical (distancing and valorized) distance” (23).⁸ Used primarily in the *elenchus*, the method of questioning that refutes the claimed knowledge of his interlocutors, laughter has a cleansing function: it rejects all opinions that one has. As it appears in Plato’s dialogues, the *elenchus* does not attack the truth of Socrates’ interlocutors’ opinions, but their justification. Forcing the others to fall into contradictions while answering his questions, Socrates can show that people’s beliefs are not justified, and he can do so without having to claim any knowledge. His method was supposed to help others to better themselves. In Plato’s *Sophist*, the Eleatic Stranger says that those who practice dialectic⁹ collect the opinions of the one examined

together during the discussion, put them side by side, and show that they conflict with each other at the same time on the same subjects in relation to the same thing and in the same respects. The people who are being examined see this, get angry at themselves, and become calmer towards others. They lose their inflated and rigid beliefs about themselves that way, and no loss is pleasanter to hear or has a more lasting effect on them. (230b-c)

As we know, the method rarely, if ever, succeeded in helping Socrates’ interlocutors cleanse their own souls. The main material consequence is for Socrates, who ends up in prison after he had upset the socially important people of his world. While in prison, his attitude is as light as Ernest’s, Noica’s fellow inmate, and we know that Ernest’s irony did not help others either. Nevertheless, both Socrates and Ernest seem to be placed in the service of truth without clinging to it forcefully. Socratic irony allows us to witness to the fact that things are not right, that the society around us is not set up on correct, rational principles.

While there was no possible way to use the *elenchus* in a communist prison—after all, an impossibility characteristic to all totalitarian societies—the connection between it and irony is their apparent lack of focus on truth while serving it. Both of them do not propose a theory that can replace the faulty one, but rather destabilize it. While using verbal (the *elenchus*) and non-verbal (laughter) speech, they are logos-less. Still, they stem out of logos and serve it implicitly.

⁸Bakhtin calls Socrates also the “bewildered fool.” Vlastos in *Socrates, Ironist and Moral Philosopher* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) questions whether or not the Socratic dialogues’ “protagonist allows himself deceit as a debating tactic” (p. 42). He also mentions here Kierkegaard for whom “Socrates is the anti-sophist who by ironies of sophistry tricks sophist into truth” (p. 45).

⁹It is not my intent to equate the practice of the *elenchus* and dialectic. Here, I am interested in what they have in common, the attempt to produce in others anger toward their own lack of understanding.

Even if laughter saves you from falling into despair, it is still dangerous, and Noica describes it toward the end of his *Pray for Brother Alexander*. After coming out of prison, he looks for Ernest, and he finds him working at the City Hall. He had become the head of a project which, like everything else, made no sense. At the beginning, Ernest found a hygienist doctor who had been hired to take care of the pollution of the city. “He did not know where to begin, and so I gave him a few ideas. I told him he had to begin from odors. Since I have sharp senses, I offered my help, and we became friends. Anytime I smelled a pestilential odor, we both got into a City Hall car and went in the direction of the odor” (*Pray for Brother* 145). An absurd situation, of course. Most of the time, they could not find it. “But why is that important? I liked to look for the not-found, just as I told you ‘there’ that I liked to go nowhere by train” (*Pray for Brother* 145). Using his intelligence and subtle irony, he convinced the leaders of the party organization that the problem is serious, and they hired him to take care of it. Realizing that buying various devices to detect pollution would diminish his job and would not allow him to have an entire department, he further convinced them that these devices were too expensive and that they did not produce the expected results. He was, in fact, congratulated for the “savings” he had obtained and given the power to put together a scientific group. Ernest had become part of the world of the absurd and functioned properly in it, while maintaining a (false?) sense of freedom: he acted absurdly knowing it. The following paragraph is perhaps the best description of the victory of the system:

Just like an ancient soothsayer, who told the army commander whether to begin the battle or not, I keep some square-heads and their decisions in suspension. In this world, the one who counts is the one who knows or seems to know what others ignore. I would never exchange this life here for the one from the ‘free’ world. This is not because imposture would not be possible there — in fact, I don’t feel at all that I’m an impostor; I’m telling you again: I may accomplish something. But I say this because there, with their system of measuring everything in terms of ‘advantageousness,’ there is no longer place for a sweet irresponsibility, like here. I am grateful to these regimes for making gratuity possible for man. (*Pray for Brother* 148)

Ernest accepts the system and assumes it without any purpose other than enjoying life. If nothing makes sense, people are no longer under any obligations. It is as if freedom to do anything had been granted to man, a freedom without responsibility. Ernest is not blind to the evilness of the regime, but he chooses to ignore it and to profit from it on a personal level. As we will see in the next section, Noica ends up also assuming the system, but he does so responsibly, with the purpose of transcending it.

Taming the beast: the seduction of the irrational to the realm of the spirit

After 1989, when the dictatorial regime was overthrown in Romania, Noica’s philosophy came to the forefront of the Romanian cultural life. His disciples, especially Gabriel Liiceanu and Andrei Plesu, became public figures and important voices of the civil society. Noica’s figure became iconic. *The Păltiniș*

Diary, which recounts the cultural experience he occasioned for his disciples in one of the small towns in the mountains where he retired toward the end of his life, was republished. Noica's retractors also came to the surface, accusing him of collaboration with the secret police. The accusations were refueled when the files of the *Securitate*, the communist secret police, were open. Noica appeared to have collaborated with the *Securitate*, and this did not seem to be the result of some pressure from which he could not escape. He gave information about his friends, including those who formed the Romanian intellectual diaspora, many of them opposing openly the regime. In his *Scholars, Dissidents, and Documents: The Manipulation of the Securitate Archive*,¹⁰ Gabriel Andreescu paints a grim picture of Noica. After acknowledging that he spent ten years under forced residence and then six others in political prisons, the author claims that "the documents suggest a submissive behavior, regardless of the period of time" (Andreescu 63). In other words, Andreescu believes that before prison, during prison, and after prison, Noica had the same kind of submissive attitude toward the political power, without fighting against it.

Andreescu is not mistaken in describing how Noica was portrayed in the documents, and this is certainly not the image of a hero, and much less of a person who professes any kind of love for truth. If we consider what the archives say only, we may find another reason to believe that it is impossible to do philosophy in a time of crisis, and that the philosopher, even if he may try to oppose the persecution that the absence of rationality entails, will inevitably fall into one or another "malady" of the spirit.

Interpreting Noica's life according to the files is, however, problematic. First, one needs to remember the general conditions of terror in which these declarations to the *Securitate* were given. Second, even if Noica's dialogue with the workers of the secret police was often in friendly terms, the preparation and human quality of these officers were often doubtful. They tended to interpret all things through their accusatory lenses, and they had to justify their own work with various reports even if there was nothing to be investigated.

Be that as it may, it would also be wrong to deny a certain openness that Noica had in these declarations. In fact, it is in the explanation of this attitude that we find another possible way to "philosophize" in a time of crisis. Gabriel Liiceanu describes it in these terms: "

Noica believed that the authorities could be manipulated, domesticated, tamed, and placed in the service of his own ideas. In fact, in a moment when the world had fallen in the hands of the devil, he had the vanity and the naivety to believe that he could convert the devil to God's work. All of this while giving to the devil the sensation that you are at his disposal. ("Noica" 15)

To an observer's eye, this attitude could be easily dismissed as being equal to any collaboration with the *Securitate* that people were doing out of cowardice, fear, or interest. For Noica, however, things were very clear. The same Liiceanu reminds of Noica's statement to one of the *Securitate* officers: "I work with you *so that you help me* to do something in culture" (Liiceanu, "Noica" 15).¹¹ His interest was not to help the *Securitate* in anyway, but rather to use anything around him to his higher purpose of establishing

¹⁰ The volume has been publishing in Romanian. Gabriel Andreescu, *Cărturari opozițanti și documente: Manipularea Arhivei Securității*. (Iași: Polirom, 2013).

¹¹ Liiceanu's underline.

something in the Romanian humanistic culture. In his mind, the collaboration was transferred from the Securitate's territory to his own realm. Liiceanu continues,

Noica specifies here the only field on which he is willing to encounter 'the prince of this world' and talk with him. This field is culture. Satan is thus brought *on the only field on which he is not at home: the field of the spirit*. The only one. And this is the only field on which Noica accepts to encounter him. Any attempt of the *Securitate* to move him from this field is stopped from the beginning with suddenly straightening his spine and with a previously unsuspected vehemence. ("Noica" 15-16)

In his mind, then, Noica seemed to have made a distinction between two ways of collaborating with the *Securitate*. One of them was despicable, and no one could force him to do it, being ready, as Liiceanu notes, to return anytime in prison. The other one was not collaboration in his eyes, but rather a taming of the beast so that Noica could achieve his cultural purposes.¹² From the outside, however, the actions are identical and may have the same consequences for those implied.

My purpose is not to analyze whether Noica was naïve or not. The fact remains that he was faithful to his approach throughout his life, behaving at all moments as if he had nothing to hide and encouraging others to do the same thing (Liiceanu, "Noica" 17). His attitude raises the question of how we should understand the role of a philosopher in the city in time of crisis.

On the one hand, collaboration with a murderous regime, such as communism, seems to provide legitimation for it. After the years of radical persecution, one of the purposes of the Securitate was, indeed, to legitimize its government by connecting it with the work of intellectuals recognized by the international community. As Liiceanu points out, through Noica, the agents of the secret police wanted to convince someone like Mircea Eliade, who had left Romania and had a successful career in the United States, to come back and thus give some legitimacy to the regime. They also hoped that this would "discredit the aggressive emigrants such as those working at Radio Free Europe" (Liiceanu, "Noica" 13).

On the other hand, Noica's ability to consider himself free while dealing with the corrupt political power at the time is bewildering. In his self-assumed freedom, Noica believes that you can live in the world without being touched by it, that the dealings you have with the misery of daily life cannot affect your being as long as you situate yourself rightly in the space of the spirit. His attitude has Biblical overtones, and it reminds of Jesus' saying, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's" (*The Orthodox Study Bible*, Mark 12:17). But just as Jesus does not require his followers to be divided within themselves, to have two heads, Noica does not consider that his attitude stems from a separation between the public man and the private man, but rather that you should have continuity and remain the same in all the aspects of your life. Since public life presupposes an interaction with evil, you must somehow include evil within your world.

¹² One of these purposes was to find 22 young people who could do performance in culture. These 22 people were supposed to be credited throughout their lives by the government, since the performances of culture, Noica believed, decide the affirmation and the survival of nations. According to *Pray for Brother Alexander*, Noica discussed this possibility even in prison, and the proposal created many reactions among the inmates (see p. 88-94). The population of Romania was 22 million people at that time. Noica believed that one person in a million could achieve performance in culture.

Noica's attitude does not stem from a consequentialist perspective. He does not believe that you should collaborate with the secret police because this is how you can maximize yours and others' benefits. If it were just about the consequences of an action, then he would not have made the distinction between collaborating with the *Securitate* on his field and on the secret police's field. At the same time, he does not collaborate with the 'enemy' because he needs to somehow live his life in the context that is given to him, as Ernest seems to do. Rather, his actions stem from his, perhaps naïve, honesty and his belief that anything has the potential of being transformed into something good. This approach is certainly bewildering, and many of his friends were appalled at Noica's defense of the possibility of "doing culture" in communist Romania.¹³ For him, however, it was his consistent belief that the world of the spirit transcends our world and, at the same time, can be manifested in it. His notion of "closure that opens itself"¹⁴ explains this attitude. For him, any act can be a closure, and as such it can die in its finitude, without giving being to anything else beyond it. Left on its own, an absurd society is a closure that no longer opens itself, and so it dies together with all of its members. If it is, however, appropriated, seduced somehow to collaborate for your own purposes, it may open itself into something else. Noica does not believe that a communist society can become an open society. His perspective is different—that any society, any embodied thing, can give fruit in the realm of the spirit if, instead of fighting it on its own terms, you seduce it to work for the cultural world even if it is not aware of it. For him, life should function just how mathematics does. In his *Becoming within Being*, he says, "While in the history of other exact sciences, new knowledge contradicts the old [...], the new does not contradict the old in history: it integrates it" (9). For him, even if communism denies your being, you are not called to respond in the same way. The theory of unilateral contradiction that he develops in *Becoming within Being* explains in these terms his attitude toward the regime.¹⁵ "Only evil contradicts good, but not the other way around" (Noica, *Becoming within* 10), he says. Becoming contradicts beings; being, however, can assume becoming instead of opposing it. Noica's point here is that everything that participates in becoming is not yet that toward which it moves. Evil may not move toward the good by itself, but it has the potential to do so as long as it does not receive a definition, and so, being. Opposing that which is of the order of becoming means treating it as if it were something, as if it had being. Noica does not think that the difference between evil and good is blurry; it was quite the opposite. Good and evil belong to two clearly different realms.

Of course, as I mentioned above, this attitude sounds naïve. I think, however, that Noica did not act out of naivety, but rather out of love. Noica is the prototype of the lover who no longer sees any darkness around him because he is overtaken by the beauty of the beloved. One of his books, *Simple Introductions to the Goodness of Our Time*,¹⁶ testifies to this approach. Noica writes texts as introductions to the thought of various philosophers, not only to intermediate between their readers and their philosophies, but rather to also show that, regardless of the context, everything can also be good. As the editors of the

¹³ See Liiceanu's "Noica și Securitatea."

¹⁴ See a development of this notion in his *Becoming within Being*, translated by Alistair Ian Blyth (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2009).

¹⁵ See also G. Liiceanu's commentary in "Noica și Securitatea."

¹⁶ Constantin Noica, *Simple introduceri la bunătatea timpului nostru* (București: Humanitas, 1992).

volume say in the introduction, “every page of this volume is written under the sign of the confidence that, after all, everything is or can become *good*” (Noica, *Simple introduceri* 8).

Claiming that anything is good or can become good does not mean that Noica repainted evil in positive colors, as some of his contemporaries¹⁷ or later detractors accused him. Evil remains evil. If we stay in the context of justice, then we can claim that evil should be punished as it deserves, and that choosing any collaboration with the agents of evil is morally indefensible. Noica, however, transcends this realm. For him, the question of whether we should fight evil and show its ugliness is not to be asked. One could even say that, for him, it is an irrelevant question, something that has “no importance.” The real issue is whether one can assume evil in one’s world and thus open it toward something else.

This is why accusing Noica that he chose to cooperate with the secret police is non-sense, and this is not because he did not cooperate, but rather because the action does not seem to be a choice between collaborating or not. In his love for Romanian culture, Noica pursued all possible means to contribute to it, remaining, perhaps, blind, to the political consequences of his actions.

To be sure, from a political perspective, this attitude is useless, and it proved to be so in communist Romania. The political regime did not improve because of Noica’s efforts to use it for cultural purposes, nor did it fall because of these attempts. In fact, it continued to have its terrible consequences on people’s lives despite Noica’s actions. On the plan of the spirit, though, so in Noica’s own world, Godot may have finally arrived.

In the context of political persecution, claiming that there is “nothing to be done” or that things have “no importance” may just be the despair into which one falls when realizing that fighting the regime is to no avail.¹⁸ But if we return to Beckett’s absurd theater, *Waiting for Godot*, a slight change in the scenario can make Godot appear. At the end of the play, Estragon asks Vladimir a simple question, “And if we dropped him?” (Beckett 107). Estragon’s question cannot, after all, have an answer because any time we fight Godot or try to run from him we seem to remain in the same place. Leaving “here” is never possible because we arrive always still “here,” in a world that is determined by Godot and which makes no sense. Vladimir replies to Estragon’s question: “Well? Shall we go? / Estragon: Yes, let’s go. / They do not move” (Beckett 109).

Imagine Vladimir and Estragon bursting in laughter and falling into each other’s arms... They have already left—they would have been cured of ahoretia.

Noica’s attitude toward a world that makes no sense rests on such an embrace, suggested also in his few lines about the day of liberation from prison: “With the coat on my arm and with a small bundle of laundry, I come before the commander, who hands me a banknote, the equivalent of around ten bus tickets. I look at the prison commander before I come out of the door. We are both caught in a smile, and I remember William Blake’s verses:

There is a smile of Love

¹⁷ See G. Liiceanu, “Noica și Securitatea,” p. 19.

¹⁸ This statement does not imply that the fight against dictatorship is fruitless. On the contrary, I believe that the examples of people who responded to terror with dignity have contributed to the erosion of the regime, even if these singular events may have been perceived as fruitless at the moment in which they took place.

*And there is a smile of Deceit,
And there is a smile of smiles
In which these two smiles meet. (Pray for Brother 126)*

Perhaps it is difficult to say whether the assumption of evil and the attempt to transform it is a justifiable theory. I propose, however, that doing so Noica did nothing else than living his life authentically, in accordance with his own philosophy, in a context in which the only freedom one can have is that of the spirit.

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