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## Elements of Carlos Vaz Ferreira's Philosophy as Strategies to Counteract the Impact of Polarization

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**Abstract.** The work of Uruguayan philosopher Carlos Vaz Ferreira (1872–1958) shows a deep ethical commitment to institutions and forms of sociopolitical organization that favor peaceful coexistence in societies that, like his own, at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, faced various conflicts that led people to hold opposing positions on how to solve conflicts. In the context of widespread concern about the risks that polarization entails for contemporary democracies, Vaz Ferreira's study of the nature of this type of problem, the analysis of the epistemic and *psycho-logical* conditions that make it possible and, above all, his proposal on the kind of solution that can be applied to normative problems, are of particular interest to address this phenomenon philosophically. Vaz Ferreira conceptualizes polarization, especially in its social and political dimension, as a problem of ideals, that is, a normative issue that, unlike explanatory problems, can be solved by choosing among different options, none of them perfect or necessarily excluding, which the philosopher calls a *solution of choice*. In this sense, false oppositions, exclusivism, and extremism are, in most cases, obstacles to finding solutions to the problems of ideals and, therefore, often lie at the root of polarizing tendencies. Vaz Ferreira offers an original contribution as his thought articulates epistemic, *psycho-logical*, ethical, and political elements in studying the causes and effects of polarizing tendencies, thus allowing us to address this phenomenon comprehensively as a single, coherent, and systematic unit of analysis.

**Keywords:** Uruguayan philosophy, psycho-logic, false opposition, gradualism, normative issues, social problems, solution of choice, dogmatism

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# Элементы философии Карлоса Ваз Феррейры как стратегии противодействия поляризации общества

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**Аннотация.** Работа уругвайского философа Карлоса Ваз Феррейры (1872–1958) демонстрирует глубокую этическую приверженность институтам и формам социально-политической организации, способствующим мирному сосуществованию в обществах, которые, как и его собственное, в начале XX века сталкивались с различными конфликтами, заставлявшими людей занимать противоположные позиции относительно способов разрешения конфликтов. В контексте широко распространенной озабоченности по поводу рисков, которые поляризация влечет за собой для современных демократий, исследование Ваз Феррейрой природы такого рода проблем, анализ эпистемологических и психологических условий, которые делают это возможным, и, прежде всего, его предложение о том, какое решение может быть применено к нормативным проблемам, представляют особый интерес для философского рассмотрения этого явления. Ваз Феррейра концептуализирует поляризацию, особенно в ее социальном и политическом измерении, как проблему идеалов, то есть нормативную проблему, которая, в отличие от проблем объяснения, может быть решена путем выбора из различных вариантов, ни один из которых не является идеальным или обязательно исключающим, что философ называет решением выбора. В этом смысле ложные противопоставления, исключительность и экстремизм в большинстве случаев являются препятствиями на пути поиска решений идеальных проблем и, следовательно, часто лежат в основе поляризующих тенденций. Ваз Феррейра вносит оригинальный вклад, поскольку его мысль формулирует эпистемологические, психо-логические, этические и политические элементы в изучении причин и следствий поляризационных тенденций, что позволяет нам рассматривать это явление комплексно, как единую, последовательную и систематическую единицу анализа.

**Ключевые слова:** уругвайская философия, психо-логика, ложная оппозиция, градуализм, нормативные вопросы, социальные проблемы, решение выбора, догматизм

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## Introduction

*Master, invaluable respect for inner freedom, a generous mastery that provided us with a living logic that made us cautious towards any simplistic conception, any dogmatic tyranny, and the lazy negligence of thinking the least to*

*state the most!* (Sabat Ercasti. *Retratos de fuego*. Carlos Vaz Ferreira, (Portraits of Fire. Carlos Vaz Ferreira) 1958) *What is at stake, let us note, is the strength or impotence of reasoning in a world torn apart in which violence appears omnipotent before us as the maker of history.* (Thiebaut, Carlos. *¿Es posible resistirse al vértigo de lo sublime (negativo)?* (*Sobre un argumento de Carlos Pereda*), (Is it possible to resist the vertigo of the sublime (negative)? (Based on an argument by Carlos Pereda) (2013)

Public debate is growing increasingly concerned about the polarizing tendencies in the social and political arenas, as well as various other practices. This has resulted in a proliferation of academic literature on a topic that, although not new [1. P. 13–19] is taking on new forms, primarily about emerging technologies, artificial intelligence, and social media [2]. The terminology varies, with discussions of *ideological polarization*, *affective polarization*, *social polarization*, *cultural polarization*, and *political polarization*. Various other expressions refer to the same phenomenon; some are more typical of our River Plate context, such as “*grieta*” (crack), while others are used globally, including “*cultural battle*,” “*radicalization*,” and “*extremism*.” Disciplinary approaches to the subject are also diverse. Psychology, sociology [3], and political science [4] study these polarization processes or tendencies, as well as their causes and effects. Philosophy, concerned with the virtuous character of prudence for political life from its beginnings, provides some examples of research that problematize this issue [5]. In any case, the primary concern is the negative impact of polarization, whatever its form, on coexistence in societies that have chosen to coexist democratically and resolve conflicts peacefully.

Given the large number of approaches to and documents on the subject, it isn’t easy to provide an exact concept of what we mean by polarization. I will attempt a synthesis, surely incomplete, to serve as a minimum reference to understand what we are dealing with, although I do not aim to provide a conceptual delimitation. Social, cultural, political, or emotional polarization – we can also speak of *polarizing tendencies* – is characteristic of many contemporary democracies, although not entirely new. It refers primarily to the profound difference in political opinions or beliefs among individuals or groups within a society. It involves processes where extreme positions are taken; agreements are disabled, and hostility increases among groups, factions of various kinds, religions, and consumer preferences. This entails the fragmentation of public opinion, mainly on political and social issues. As a result, citizens, or different associations or groups, take extreme and even radically opposed positions. This creates apparent distortions in the public space of our democracies due to the difficulty in reaching agreements, resolving conflicts peacefully, or implementing cooperation systems – the pillars on which this system should be based.

This paper aims to highlight the comprehensive approach offered by Uruguayan philosopher Carlos Vaz Ferreira on the subject, contributing to the multiple reflections on polarization in Latin American thought. I refer mainly to the necessary articulation of the epistemic, *psycho-logical*, and ethical-political elements in the polarization processes. Making these elements explicit brings us closer to understanding the subject, opening paths of reflection on potential ways to counteract them. As the phenomenon is complex, I will focus on social and political polarization, considering my philosophical interests in Vaz Ferreira. However, many of the considerations below will also help us understand other forms of polarization. This work includes an introduction, two main sections, and final considerations. The first section addresses the main theses of Vaz Ferreira's *psycho-logic*, whose assumptions and theoretical bases I analyze. *Psycho-logic* or *living-logic* is the study of the psycho-logical aspects of rational understanding, particularly those related to its externalization through language. It is a discipline that is neither strictly psychology nor strictly logic but rather an interdisciplinary field [6. P. 30–34].

Additionally, I briefly explain, by way of examples, *false opposition* errors, which include many of the undesirable consequences Vaz Ferreira warns us about, such as illegitimate systematizations, exclusivist tendencies, or forms of dogmatism. The implications of this type of error are discussed, along with the ethical connotations of its impact, to illustrate its connection with the totalizing, unilateral, and extreme tendencies typically associated with polarization. In the second section, I address social problems as normative issues, focusing on a fundamental methodological tool for solving social and political problems where polarized positions are predominantly expressed. In the introduction, I briefly preview the central problem and introduce the philosopher, focusing on his character as a man of thought and action, as well as his sociopolitical commitments. This will justify the value of his contributions in helping to address contemporary polarization.

Furthermore, I contextualize his thoughts within Latin American philosophy, establishing the relevance of including his reflections in this issue. The final considerations recap the theoretical implications of Vaz Ferreira's contributions to the philosophical approach to political polarization, concluding with notes on the value of teaching philosophy. This is another of Vaz Ferreira's great legacies, a potential way to counteract the negative impacts of polarization (or, more accurately, those inherent in it), such as dogmatism, stigmatization, discrimination, hatred, and violence.

Carlos Vaz Ferreira is considered the greatest Uruguayan philosopher of the 20th century [6. P. 17]. A philosopher, lawyer, and mainly – according to his explicit self-assessment– an educator, he devoted most of his life to intellectual work, venturing into areas as varied as psychology, pedagogy, metaphysics, epistemology, science, ethics, and politics. Coherent with his ideas, he was also a man of action who spared no effort to see several projects based on his ideals come

to fruition. He was an intellectual who was deeply committed to his time and sensitive to the effervescent context of a budding century in young Uruguay, a country with much to do, and one marked by civil wars. He was prominent in several public debates, many of which developed in polarized terms. This undoubtedly marked his philosophical character: he was likely to seek agreement and conciliation, although aware of the inevitable nature of conflict. For example, Spencerian positivism prevailed in the university environment at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century. Therefore, it was necessary to establish a chair specializing in spiritualism, restricting the teaching of philosophy to learning through systems presented in an antagonistic manner [7]. He also gave his opinion in religious, social, and political debates. His political discussions included debating opposing positions on land ownership and housing rights, which is reflected in his lecture “*Sobre la propiedad de la tierra*” (On land ownership) (2018). He analyzed the limits and scope of the right to inheritance and the theoretical guidelines for designing social institutions, as compiled in his work *Sobre los problemas sociales* (On social issues) (1922). In all cases, his thought offers nuanced, graduated answers or solutions that weigh aspects of both positions, incorporating elements that might initially be incompatible. This is discussed in more detail in the second section.

His straightforward yet profound style gives his work an unmistakable character, which has been characterized as a *miracle of difficult clarity* [8. P. 9]. Influenced by the philosophy of his time—Williams James, Henri Bergson, John Stuart Mill, among others—he developed his style [9], rooted in the Latin American context. He did not just create a method but rather an *attitude of spirit, a style of expression*. These features are his legacy, offering the most significant benefit to budding Latin American philosophy [6. P. 79]. These features, developed in the central part of this paper, constitute the most significant contribution of his philosophy to help us address the contemporary problem in question. He was part of the group of *founders of Latin American philosophy*, whom Francisco Romero [10] defined as “those who, through their speculative capacity, the authenticity of their vocation and moral authority, lay the foundations of Hispano-American philosophical thought.” Therefore, his philosophical practice and teaching sought independence from established schools and systems, proposing an approach that addresses problems directly instead. This made his work an example for Latin American intellectuals, who were too inclined to philosophize based on doctrines from other contexts, which took as given both the solutions and the problems [6. P. 79]. Vaz Ferreira’s writings offer the philosophical awareness that systems are imported, but facts are ours. Thus, he acknowledges the dignity of the thinking subject and the reality considered: Latin America [11. P. 121]. Therefore, despite never touting his thoughts as *Latin American* and expressing that the free and open development of philosophy, like any other cultural activity, must be exercised without deliberately setting out to be Latin American, Vaz Ferreira’s philosophy is indeed Latin American. His work and intellectual production were independent of

schools and systems, which at the time were those imported from the central countries. This endows his work with the intellectual autonomy typical of his generation, that of the founders of Latin American philosophy. At the same time, he is Latin American because he is anchored in his time and context, concerned about the problems of his environment, rooted in the *Latin American here and now* [12. P. 97–98]. That *Latin American here and now* entailed a plurality of ideals, a juxtaposition of cultures [13. P. 282], incorporation of inherited (or instead imposed) visions and, at the same time, their creative overcoming. All this made evident the diversity, plurality, and coexistence of ideals, as well as the features of living together in difference and conflict, which shaped our continent's identity. This open and free spirit is the hallmark of the thought of Uruguayan philosopher Carlos Vaz Ferreira, and more than justifies his place in this issue on Latin American philosophy.

### **Transformations in the way we *think, feel, and act*.**

Vaz Ferreira is a typical problem thinker [14. P. 5]. He taught us to *think about problems directly*, independently of systems, schools, and exclusivist perspectives – not because he thinks this is perfectly and epistemologically possible, but to challenge thought to do whatever it takes, to delve into the depths of the issues, avoiding prejudices and preconceptions. Additionally, he cautioned us about potential confusion when addressing problems that differ significantly in nature, providing us with methodological tools that distinguish between these different types of issues and enable us to identify the appropriate mode of solution for each one. Influenced by Nietzsche and Bergson, Vaz Ferreira states that *language exerts a kind of solidifying action on thought* [15. P. 150]. These philosophers' criticism of traditional metaphysics focuses on overcoming schematism in favor of an ontology of becoming. Vaz Ferreira's agreement with this core idea helps us understand how he challenges thinking according to labels and ready-made mental structures.

The starting point of *Lógica viva* (Living logic) (2010), his most important and perhaps most internationally recognized work, is the central idea that there is a particular mismatch between thought and, even more, between *psiqueo* (a term initially proposed by Vaz Ferreira), and language. The most intimate and inscrutable reality of our mind, the *psiqueo*, is living, fluid, unclassifiable, and the source of original individual creation, i.e., of *fermentalidad*.<sup>1</sup> Thought cannot account for this internal reflection process because it cannot be expressed. Reflection has such inner richness that, in *giving itself to the consciousness*, there

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<sup>1</sup> The term “*fermental*” is used by Vaz Ferreira to refer to non-crystallized or undefined thought (the quality of what we have called “*psiqueo*”). This is another of the original and very characteristic terms of his work. His book *Fermentario* (1938) seeks to capture the idea that living thought, independent of logical formulas and conceptual schemes, is somewhat amorphous, plastic, alive, and fermenting.

is already a loss when thought first structures it. Then, thought sustains a new loss when expressed through language: another classification and schematization movement, typically linguistic.<sup>2</sup> That is to say that Vaz Ferreira believes that this externalization process, which originates from our interiority – the *psiqueo* – and moves towards the expression of language and even taking action, is a process of loss.<sup>3</sup>

To the loss of creativity, richness, and spontaneity that occurs in this externalization, and to which we are condemned by language's very nature and communicative function [17. P. 38–40], we must add the limitations of language to account for reality. In agreement with Nietzsche,<sup>4</sup> Vaz Ferreira states that language offers inherited and learned schemes to name, evaluate, and define aspects of reality, which is so complex that it cannot be fully apprehended. Hence, Vaz Ferreira's teachings are intended to warn us about the scope and limits of language as an instrument for thinking, evaluating, discussing, and teaching. Classifications and labels simplify reality, segmenting it arbitrarily. As a result, crystallized mental schemes, which are defended as unilateral and absolute truths, are obstacles to general understanding. Of the fallacies we commit – and which Vaz Ferreira analyzes in *Lógica viva* –, I address below, as an example, the errors of false opposition since I believe they are paradigmatic of the general criticism Vaz Ferreira addresses the schematic ways of thinking, of expressing ourselves and of acting.<sup>5</sup>

Its *psycho-logic* or *living logic* teaches us to problematize what seems to be absolute certainty and seeks to encourage an attitude of doubt. Although this may seem like he is expressing a skeptical philosophy, the refusal to think within a system – as we shall see – leads to reject this possibility, since skepticism *suggests something systematic* and would be nothing other than the *dogmatism of ignorance* [15. P. 12–13]. Instead, following Ardao's philosophy of doubt, it is a doctrine of *graded belief*, also known as the *gradualism of belief*. Learning to doubt and *teaching to ignore* is central to Vaz Ferreira's proposal. This concept is perhaps one of the most challenging achievements to attain in our time, where the confirmation of our beliefs and subjective validation prevail as reinforced by the media, the

<sup>2</sup> It is a truism to state that his theses on the relationship between thought and language are largely outdated, but we will not discuss this here.

<sup>3</sup> On the preeminence, Vaz Ferreira assigns to interiority and the corruption that involves every form of exteriorization (language, beliefs, action); ref. the following essential work: [16], especially the chapter titled “La prioridad de la interioridad en Vaz Ferreira” (The priority of interiority in Vaz Ferreira) [16. P. 33–39].

<sup>4</sup> To read about Friedrich Nietzsche's influence on Carlos Vaz Ferreira's thought, please see *Nietzsche en Uruguay, 1900–1920* [18].

<sup>5</sup> As a local background to this work, I recommend consulting the article [19]. There, he poses the thesis that the use of concepts or the poor treatment of language, influenced by Western formalist logicism, cannot capture the subjective complexities and reality, bringing with it dogmatic and fundamentalist tendencies. As Ryszard Kapuscinski puts it, these tendencies prepare the environment for war, violence, and intolerance. The uses of language and its transformations are not indifferent to the search for a civilized and democratic coexistence.

internet, and social media [20]. The most significant concern lies in the exercises, practices, or discourses that implicitly feed forms of authoritarianism by forcing beliefs. In this context, the epistemic dimension manifests itself in connection with praxis, particularly through the impact of schematizing tendencies on our beliefs and actions. Just as for Hannah Arendt, the experience of totalitarianism is strongly associated with that of a crystallized language [1. P. 54], Vaz Ferreira believes that schematizing and totalizing tendencies, which lead to a loss of inner richness and tend to simplify plural and complex reality, contain the seeds of dogmatism and intolerance, whose culminating expression is the annihilation of the other. Heir to Vaz Ferreira, contemporary Uruguayan-Mexican philosopher Carlos Pereda develops this line of thought and adds a very illustrative notion of this point. He called *arrogant reason* the “way of believing, desiring, feeling, acting governed by the mechanism described above: the overflows of the self are supported by a relentless disdain for the value of the other and, in general, a disregard for everything else. Moreover, in arrogant reasons, as in any arrogance, this active disregard for that which does not belong to the space of one’s validation is expressed more or less systematically and then exhibited [21. P. 14].” Pereda and Vaz Ferreira allow us to state that the polarizing tendencies we witness today express this arrogance.

Before proceeding, it is essential to emphasize that Vaz Ferreira believes that graduating from a belief does not imply methodical doubting, which would entail falling into skepticism understood as a systematic approach. Instead, Vaz Ferreira teaches us to adopt a particular disposition, metacognitively speaking, when facing certainty, assuming a skeptical evaluation of the conclusions rather than a skeptical method. This evaluation should lead us to take “critical care not to believe except with due guarantees, and even to the corresponding degree and with an open spirit to modify the belief, if necessary [6. P. 36].” The aim is to foster a skeptical disposition, attitude, or *tendency* aimed at avoiding dogmatism. This form of gradual analysis is a tool for argumentative assessment as it allows us to distinguish the different states of mind that, explicitly or implicitly, signal individual differences when discussing beliefs. In other words, gradualism is the most effective tool for discussing problems, such as beliefs and evaluations, in a pluralistic environment increasingly influenced by radically polarized tendencies. Vaz Ferreira’s gradualism articulates the epistemic, affective, and, at the same time, moral elements that polarizing tendencies entail and that must be fully addressed to reduce their effects. Polarization assumes the existence of absolutely irreconcilable beliefs, favoring ethical or somewhat unethical dispositions, such as those tending to arrogance or extreme denial of the other who thinks differently. Contemporary work has been done on this aspect concerning the humility that an attitude attempting to counteract polarization must entail. This work identifies the confluence between epistemic and moral polarization under the concept of *affective polarization* [20] (Ch. 11). Here, Vaz Ferreira’s gradualism fulfills this articulating function and can be potentially applied to social and political polarization, as we shall see below.



The first type of error analyzed in *Lógica viva* is false opposition.<sup>6</sup> This is how Vaz Ferreira introduces the topic:

One of the most significant acquisitions of thought would occur when men understood – and *felt* – that *many of the theories, opinions, observations, etc., which are treated as opposites, are not*. It is one of the most common fallacies, and on which the greater part of humankind's thought is wasted: that which consists of *considering contradictory that is not conflicting*, creating false dilemmas and false oppositions [23. P. 11] (italics by the author).

In practice, this error leads us to accept one of the alternatives and discard the other. The most common attitude within this fallacy,<sup>7</sup> argues Vaz Ferreira, consists in taking what is complementary as contradictory, which commonly occurs when attributing a single cause to that which indeed has many [23. P. 14–17]. This type of error, far from acknowledging nuances, the complementarity of ideas, beliefs, or values, or favoring the gradation of beliefs, confronts us with narrowness in both theory and practice. This simplification is compounded by the difficulties that arise when some relevant projects, proposals, or solutions remain unrealized because they fall into a false opposition, stemming from our tendency to think in these excluding terms. In this process, elements that could also be considered positive are discarded; for example, when providing a solution to a problem, which leads to the loss of much of humanity's thinking effort, the philosopher remarks. However, what is most relevant is that nuance is lost, and all thinking is posed in terms of *all or nothing*. Referring to this fallacy in the field of art, he expresses:

Furthermore, the practical result of all this is that, instead of opening our soul, we close it; due (sometimes...in part...) to these unintelligent paralogisms, we close our spirit to understanding and feeling, disabling us from the perception of beauty in all its forms, except in that which we have resolved to choose as if it were the only legitimate one [23. P. 35].

Rhetorically speaking, Vaz Ferreira says that this error of false opposition has a substantial impact. When a person presents, for example, a nuanced theory rather than an oppositional one, they tend not to attract the necessary attention. A theory must be presented in an exaggerated and one-sided manner to receive attention. Think, for example, how much this applies to our times, where outbursts, stridency, and showiness have invaded the scene of political speeches. Faced with phenomena like these, Vaz Ferreira states that unilateralism, thinking in terms of opposites, should hold a less prominent space in modern society, thoughts, and feelings:

I shall demonstrate that improving understanding (through reason, analysis, broader and more comprehensive ways of thinking, and more significant criticism) does not inhibit or damage action, but rather regulates and softens it. To which I add here that unilateral action is increasingly and less necessary, and in a certain

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<sup>6</sup> I will not start some more logical disquisitions on what specialists in Vaz Ferreira's thought have delved into. In this regard, please refer to [22].

<sup>7</sup> Vaz Ferreira often uses "problem," "error," "fallacy," and "paralogism" interchangeably. I am aware of the differences and choose to follow the philosopher's path here.

sense less possible, in the kind of society and the modes of thought and modern feelings, and also less good, that action, enhanced, if you will, but damaged in the very principle of its fruitfulness by unilateralism, narrowness, and fanaticism depending on the case. Conversely, modern man is increasingly more capable—and perhaps this is his most indisputable superiority – of acting, and of acting intensely, based on many feelings, and not just one, with many ideas, with more exact thought, and being more critical [23. P. 42–43].

There are no unique formulas to avoid false opposition or other fallacies – such as *thinking according to systems*, *false precision*, or *verbal and ideological fallacies* – which express our errors in thinking – and which have been linked – as Vaz Ferreira argued, and here I wish to emphasize – to the phenomena of polarization as we experience them in our contemporary societies. The philosopher himself warns that extensive practice is necessary to sensitize us to identify or be warned about these errors and to understand when faced with real, irreconcilable polarizations [23. P. 43–44]. We also need to add spaces where philosophical education, as Vaz Ferreira understands it and which he bequeathed to Uruguayan educational institutions, acquires greater relevance. Additionally, it is necessary to have greater political will and commitment to anticipate phenomena whose potential emergence we should not neglect. However, they are still very weak expressions in our context.

### **Totalizing visions and their impact on social and political institutions<sup>8</sup>**

In this second section, I employ another paralogism analyzed by Vaz Ferreira in *Lógica viva* – confusing normative with explanatory questions – to approach social problems as a normative question, particularly as suggested by the philosopher for their solution. The debate on the best way to organize social and political institutions to guarantee specific values (also under debate) for coexistence in modern societies often yields polarized, irreconcilable responses, making it difficult to reach a consensus. This reality was typical of Uruguay’s context in the early 20th century and is deep-rooted in Vaz Ferreira’s philosophy.

Confusion and disagreements that occur in exchanges, which may sound like mere conversation, debate, or intense conflict, are often caused by confusion about the issue at stake. Some issues that lead us to exchange ideas and create discrepancies are explanatory issues and other normative issues. In the words of Vaz Ferreira:

The problems that men discuss could, more or less schematically, be divided into two classes: sometimes, they discuss what things are like or how phenomena occur; other times, they discuss how we should act, or it is best to act.

We could call the former *problems of being*, or *issues of existence*, or *difficulties of ascertainment*, or *problems of explanation*; the latter, we could call *problems of doing*, or *problems of action*, or *problems of convenience* (to which

<sup>8</sup> In this section, I address elements already presented, partially reproduced, from my work [24].

could be added *problems of ideal*, not relative to how things should be done, but to how it would be desirable for them to be); or, still, *normative problems*, etc. [23. P. 61] (emphasis added).

The paralogism that interests Vaz Ferreira the most, and through which most discrepancies are committed, entails confusing the type of solution that each of these questions allows.<sup>9</sup> This error lies in thinking that the problems of doing or ideal can be fully solved, once and for all, or believing that if the solution has a flaw, it must be immediately discarded [23. P. 62–64]. However, the first step must be to analyze the problem to determine its nature, i.e., whether explanatory or normative, whether it is a question of knowing how things are or knowing how to act [23. P. 77–107]. Following what has been stated above, whatever the phenomena related to polarization, they translate into matters of ideals, which does not imply that they are limited to questions of values and beliefs. Still, we will see that they also involve nonrational elements<sup>10</sup> and are therefore identified with what Vaz Ferreira defines as *normative questions*. The following quote expresses the nature of these problems with crystal clarity:

If we were to discuss how we should act to attain this or that end, or, in general, how we should act; or how any institution should be organized, or whether a bill of law is good or bad; if we were to discuss, for example, the desirability of divorce, or the best type of family organization, or socialism, or free trade and protectionism; in such cases, we would not discuss how the facts happen, but how we should act, or what should be done; and these problems are, as the most straightforward examination shows, of a different nature [23. P. 62].

Let us note the topics cited by Vaz Ferreira and their resemblance to current topics. It is enough to glance at the headlines in news portals, exchanges in social media, or local or global political speeches to find debates on State interventionism or lack of it, on the tariff war, on freedom of expression versus respect for dissent, on bills that roll back rights acquired in recent decades, and so on with multiple examples. Therefore, these are all normative problems and admit a particular type of solution. What is the philosophical interest in the issue of polarization that Vaz Ferreira warns us about? This interest does not focus on the kind of problem but on the practical side: whether they can be solved and, if so, how [26. P. 17]. As these are matters of action and choice, the complexity of the potential solutions makes it impossible to count on, or even aspire to, finding a single or perfect solution. The solutions to normative questions are not “all or nothing” but solutions of degree, “since circumstances and ideals intervene, and neither reasoning nor experience is sufficient. It is necessary to appeal to good sense. This good sense is not common

<sup>9</sup> I will not address here the debatable and questionable conceptualization that Vaz Ferreira presents on explanatory problems, clearly influenced by the positivist imprint of his academic training, from which, although he tried to emancipate himself, he maintained some assumptions.

<sup>10</sup> I especially decided not to use “irrational” because contemporary discussions on the emotional elements in our beliefs and actions allow us to identify rational elements, as taught by the Stoic tradition. (See [25]).

sense... [14. P. 7]”; it is a *hyperlogical sense* that transcends towards the other mental states described by Vaz Ferreira, particularly *psiqueo* and affectivity.

What distinguishes normative questions is that, although they reference a fact that admits an explanation, their existence depends on laws, discourses, norms of conduct, and moral perspectives. Therefore, the arguments offered in debates on normative problems contain volitional and affective elements, and no single rule exists for their solution. In this sense, Vaz Ferreira introduces the concept of *razonabilismo* as the proper disposition for addressing these matters. The type of solution these problems admit is called a *solution of choice*, which includes three steps: stating every possible solution, analyzing the advantages and disadvantages of each potential solution, and making the final choice [23. P. 71–73]. As already stated, the solutions that address normative questions are neither unique nor perfect. The main reason is the diversity and pluralism typical of complex societies<sup>11</sup> and the various mental levels (*psiqueo*, thought, language) referred to by Vaz Ferreira. Given these conditions, the first step is to identify and assess the advantages and disadvantages of every potential solution. However, choosing is the most challenging moment: a time of absolute indeterminacy, of individual freedom and responsibility. This is discussed below. The confusion of believing that normative problems can have solutions like those admitted by explanatory problems – supposedly unique and perfect, according to Vaz Ferreira – has clear consequences. First, there is a tendency to reject novel solutions because they have drawbacks when other solutions must also have them. Likewise, permanent modifications tend to be promoted because it is assumed that what is in force is imperfect. Additionally, when discussing a normative issue, there is a tendency to believe that one’s position has only advantages and the opposing one has only disadvantages. [23. P. 71–73] This is nothing more and nothing less than consequences that deepen dogmatic attitudes.

The paradigmatic case I intend to exemplify this mode of solution, which I aim to support, is a fundamental contribution of his philosophy to transforming the increasingly assertive tendencies towards polarized positions, particularly in addressing social problems. I refer to his *Conferencias sobre los problemas sociales* (Lectures on Social Problems) (1922) to address this matter. Social problems as a subject of study and analysis arise in modernity due to the dissolution of social cohesion mechanisms, which leads to the exclusion of certain groups from social integration. They emerge as the unfulfilled promises of welfare and progress of

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<sup>11</sup> This is linked to liberal features present in Vaz Ferreira’s thought. Though it might be controversial to try to frame the thought of a philosopher whose most significant effort was to avoid the simplifying effects of classifications, there has been a tendency to identify his social and political philosophy with an *individualistic tendency*, that is, with liberalism. It is true that theoretical experts, such as the political scientist and historian Gerardo Caetano, consider him the philosopher who expresses a national way of being that synthesizes republicanism with liberalism [26]. However, the republican reference on which Caetano bases his interpretation is of a neorepublicanism, which dialogues without any conflict with contemporary egalitarian liberalism, and therefore, I continue to affirm that his affinities are more liberal than of any other type.

modernity [27]. In Uruguay, this debate has been going on since the first decades of the 20th century, and Vaz Ferreira was a privileged witness to it. In the lectures mentioned above, published in 1922, he begins by describing social problems as those which in his *Lógica viva* he called *normative questions*<sup>12</sup> because they are problems of *doing or preferring* [29. P. 7]. Vaz Ferreira cited the debate on the best form of social organization, including various positions, in the public debate as an example to analyze the solution to these problems. Of all these positions, he focused on examining individualism and socialism, which created a *polarizing opposition* in his time and continue to do so today. These positions encompass a myriad of sociopolitical and philosophical ideas, covering a gradual spectrum but also including extreme positions. According to Vaz Ferreira, this opposition between individualism and socialism is *the conflict of the ideas of equality and freedom* (with their related tendencies) [29. P. 12–16] (author's emphasis).

He aims to demonstrate that individual preferences and temperaments strongly influence such polarizations. This element is closely aligned with contemporary studies on the psychology of polarization. He also seeks to demonstrate that it is essential to cultivate open and sincere spirits, to recognize that the positions presented as incompatible share more similarities than they appear, and that this is the foundation for a society where conflicts are resolved through mutual agreement.

In the first lecture, Vaz Ferreira proposes that we must “begin by investigating whether there is as much real opposition as apparent, whether there should not be greater agreement; whether it is right that, as it happens in practice, tendencies, and theories fight as if they were opposed in everything and from the beginning, or whether all these tendencies should have a common part, without prejudice to the rest remains a matter of discussion [29. P. 12].” Regarding ideals, policies, and institutional organization, Vaz Ferreira shows marked optimism about reaching a formula that reconciles the principles and values of polarizing tendencies. This potential conciliation does not imply eliminating the disagreement.

Understanding, sincere, humane spirits *can and must agree on a sufficiently practical ideal, which can be expressed with a formula within which there is room for degrees*. Let us understand: this formula does not eliminate disagreement, and there is still much room for disagreement within it; but disagreement only of degree, within the formula... [29. P. 12] (*italics by the philosopher*).

As we have seen, solving a normative issue involves an analysis of the advantages and disadvantages of each proposal. When Vaz Ferreira applies this approach to solving social problems, particularly in analyzing individualism and

<sup>12</sup> As Yamandú Acosta rightly observes, social problems can also be considered explanatory problems of facts in a way. However – he observes – Vaz Ferreira's approach is not sociological but that of the philosophy of practice. “Vaz Ferreira's is a philosophical approach in the register of moral philosophy in the line of a practical idealism in which ‘what we can do’ is resolved based on what is, with special reference to what should not be, guiding us to ‘what we should do’ on the basis of what ought to be. From the possibilities determined by beings and their tendencies, it is a matter of enabling those possibilities indicated by an ‘ideal’ assumed as valuable by the subject of the ‘action’” [28. P. 18].

socialism, he no longer refers to advantages and disadvantages. Still, he speaks of *sympathies* and *antipathies* since, as mentioned before, the positions for one or the other are crossed by preferences and forms of temperament. Appealing to *understanding*, *sincerity*, and *open-mindedness* also involves incorporating non-rational aspects into the practical deliberation that occurs when finally choosing a position. For illustration purposes, I will show how Vaz Ferreira uses this valuation in each case without delving into the analysis or evaluation of his conception of each theoretical model.

He defines individualism “as the tendency each individual has to act freely and to sustain the consequences of his aptitudes and acts,” a tendency that thus presented “produces a mixture of sympathy and antipathy to sincere and free spirits” [29. P. 13]. He believes that individualism evokes sympathy because of its connection with the defense of freedom, the unfolding of personality, respecting individual differences, and favoring the progress of humanity. However, it arouses antipathy because it creates excessive inequality, does not guarantee that the necessary conditions for life will be met, does not ensure benefits for the most capable, and because economic values prevail over other values. [29. P. 13–14]. In contrast, when addressing socialism, Vaz Ferreira states the antipathies and sympathies it produces, without providing a definition. He considers that it appeals to people because it is a *more human* conception, which he relates to the language associated with it: *fraternity* and *solidarity*. It also evokes sympathy because it defends the weakest and poorest, promoting equality. Conversely, he detects an antipathetic effect in this equalizing tendency, which Vaz Ferreira, like many other analysts, confuses with a homogenizing tendency, which would imply the transformation of psycho-logical dispositions that could only be achieved through authoritarianism, and this is another aspect that would produce antipathy. He also states that people might not like socialism because of the dominant role assigned to the State, which assumes a centralizing and administrative role that hinders progress [29. P. 13–15].

Given the above definitions, Vaz Ferreira proposes that if we become independent from theoretical schemata and our sympathies, and reflect on problems directly, we would understand that what initially seems to be only opposition also has common aspects that can become the basis for an agreement. This is how he explains these two political models. It is worth sharing the direct quote, despite its length:

It does not look good if we consider the apparent absolute opposition of the theories (in terms of how they are formulated and how they clash). Still, this opposition results, to a great extent, from confusions and errors: to such a degree that there are cases – so far would well-understood theories be from being opposed; so fallacious is this apparent total opposition! – there are cases, I repeat, in which some of these theories delve more into the principles of the other, than into their principles. Let a single case serve as an example, relative to one of the meanings of “individualism” and “socialism.” In one meaning of the terms (which appears in the confused understanding of the theories), individualism would mainly or directly

consider the good of the individual, and socialism would mainly consider the good of society. [...] Socialism, as it is presented in our humanity, as it is formulated, as they want it to be implemented, as it struggles, far from sacrificing the individual to society, would like (utopian or not: this does not interest us at the moment) to make the individual the center: to provide each individual with the greatest possible well-being; far from sacrificing individuals, to assure every individual that all is possible in terms of well-being and happiness. It is, on the contrary, the individualism below which, through its idea of progress, and of sacrifice, relative at least, of the less gifted individuals (in selecting), is closer to the concept of the species in general, to the idea of society; so that it could be said without paradox that, in this sense of the terms, socialism is more individualistic and individualism more socialistic [29. P. 19–20].

We can examine specific values that emerge, disappear, and reappear periodically in the public debate, such as freedom and equality, which are constantly re-signified and sometimes even emptied of content, by following the exercise proposed by Uruguayan philosopher Carlos Vaz Ferreira. Let us directly analyze the polarizing opposition between these two ideals and consider whether, in doing so, we will reach a different perspective, typical of Vaz Ferreira's thought. This point of view may allow us to understand that, where there seems to be incompatibility, there is not necessarily a substantive incompatibility. On this basis, Vaz Ferreira proposes a formula as a normative ideal that aims to integrate the favorable elements of each theory – individualism and socialism – those that create affinity and those that arouse aversion, without attempting to fully overcome the differences. However, this aspect will not be addressed here due to thematic and space limitations.

### Final considerations

Most polarization phenomena are primarily expressed through discursive practices transmitted via various channels. However, the main concern and interest that arise are based on their practical effects: intolerance, discrimination, segregation, violence, and even the annihilation of the other. Vaz Ferreira understood this connection clearly and developed his thesis about the continuity between interiority (*psiqueo*-thought-language) and its externalization (discourse, actions), undoubtedly influenced by the most important theses of Peirce's and James' pragmatism. There is no duplication of realities. Vaz Ferreira is interested in how we act, think, and our discourses and actions because they express and materialize in social and public institutions. Hence, he is committed to promoting a new way of thinking, which is also a way of feeling and acting. In this sense, his contributions help address affective, social, cultural, political, or whatever type of polarization as a *dispositional unit*, which, although complex, has elements that identify it as a single unit of analysis. However, given the phenomenon's complexity, the question that arises is how to counteract its effects. The *Lógica viva*,

with its “practical objective that any person, after reading this book, would be somewhat more capable than before of reasoning well, on the one hand, and more capable, on the other hand, of avoiding some errors or confusions they would not have avoided before, or would have avoided less easily [23. P. 7],” but also aiming to promote new ways of feeling, evaluating, and acting, is Vaz Ferreira’s great project for this purpose. The other way, directly linked to this work, which is the transcription of the philosopher’s lectures, is teaching philosophy itself in all stages of life, but mainly in the earliest ones.

Education plays a fundamental role in transforming the open and sincere spirit to which we appeal to change our ways of thinking, feeling, and acting, which is necessary to counteract the polarizing tendencies we must address. However, institutionalized education must have specific features. According to Vaz Ferreira, participation is essential in the knowledge acquisition process. He proposes to positively acknowledge student attitudes focused on broadening their horizons of expectations in various fields (educational, social, political, and philosophical) and the interests awakened by the topics addressed in class by the teacher. In this context, teaching philosophy becomes particularly relevant as a tool for problematizing. Teaching philosophy as a critical and problematizing approach to knowledge is a way to counteract the effects of political, social, affective, and cultural polarization.<sup>13</sup> Philosophy should prepare future citizens to have a disposition of spirit that is a feeling that there is something beyond what books say, beyond the teacher’s interpretation, and that reality is much more complex than it appears [23. P. 91]. Today, all this can be applied to understand the phenomena linked to new sources of information, mainly social media, where the *bubble effect* or confirmation biases account for tendencies contrary to Vaz Ferreira’s teachings.

To learn to graduate beliefs – a central element of Vaz Ferreira’s teachings addressed in the first part – and thus overcome unilateral positions, it is helpful to encourage students (and the general public) to engage in an open debate on opposing theories. This will help them arrive at key concepts and issues, question the arguments in favor of their thesis, and reflect on the arguments against them. This is one of the teachings that Vaz Ferreira has bequeathed to us and that has contributed, for example, to forging a disciplinary identity in Uruguay: the teaching of philosophy, at least at early levels, has focused more on studying problems than on schools or traditions of thought. Thinking directly and freely is what Vaz Ferreira has bequeathed to us and what we present here as a substantial contribution to addressing polarization, confident that this is a promising path.

To open the spirits; to widen them; to give them breadth, horizons, open windows; and, on the other hand, to put them in darkness; that they do not end up

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<sup>13</sup> We can see how pioneering Vaz Ferreira’s proposal is by citing Jean Birnbaum’s book *The Courage of Nuance*, where he cites Raymond Aron’s contributions. The reader of this paper will note the similarities between the thinkers: “According to Aron, this includes much more than a pedagogical method: it is a practice of uncertainty that serves as a basis not only for a certain intellectual ethics, but also for democratic civilization.” [1. P. 76].



in a wall, in a closed, falsely precise limit; that they have views beyond what is known, beyond what is fully understood: to glimpse, and still feel, beyond those distant and darkish horizons, the vast immensity of the unknown. Teaching to graduate belief and distinguishing what is known and understood well from what is known and understood less well and from what is ignored (teaching to forgive, if taken without paradox, is as essential as teaching to know). Furthermore, it creates the sensation of how difficult the questions are, the distinction between what is certain and simply probable, and the sensation that some problems cannot be solved [30. P. 54].

Vaz Ferreira criticizes simplification, unilateralism, and totalizing perspectives, all of which are present in affective, cultural, social, and political polarization. In contrast, the author proposes that positions, beliefs, decisions, evaluations, or theories be presented, taught, or developed in a manner that makes the problems they create explicit. The teaching of philosophy should aim to cultivate critical, open, and sincere spirits, fostering habits of reflection that prepare those who hold divergent positions to adopt a respectful attitude and a disposition toward understanding.

It is unrealistic to think that a single strategy, proposal, or practice can, on its own, reverse a tendency that, although experienced in the past, now raises alarm bells due to the novel characteristics it has taken on and the new channels that feed it. This paper does not seek to suggest that Vaz Ferreira's teachings are an antidote to polarization. Even less so if we consider that neither in this paper nor in the philosopher's work is the issue of power addressed, which runs through polarization processes and has an undeniable impact on them. However, in agreement with Yamandú Acosta, I suggest that the ethical, political—and, I would add, pedagogical – validity of his work remains to build and strengthen “democratic contexts in which it is not a matter of eliminating the other as an enemy, but of recognizing him as a valid interlocutor, or in the most extreme hypothesis, as a political adversary” [28. P. 14]. Much more humbly, as the philosopher himself would admit, this paper aims to demonstrate that his proposal remains valid in terms of the warnings and tools he provides to enhance our capacity for thinking, valuing, and feeling, especially *feeling* the risks of polarization. Nevertheless, I do not adopt a naïve perspective: we understand that there are political and social moments and situations where polarization could be one of the few forms of resistance to oppressive systems, which, undoubtedly, would be the subject of another paper.

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