

## PLATONISTS AND ARISTOTELIANS: SOME CHARACTERIZATIONS

We have now gathered enough of an imagination to be able to differentiate between the Platonic and the Aristotelian impulses. Plato looked back to the past of the world's existence; at the personal level this culminated in the anamnesis, the soul's remembrance of existence before its birth in the world of ideas. Aristotle confined his gaze to the present, and consequently he closed the door to memory of previous lives. The Platonists of Chartres looked into the past of the world Mysteries, and they preserved conditions that held true in the past. The Aristotelians of Scholasticism prepared for the future that would fully materialize only in our fifth post-Atlantean age. And we can see how the Platonism of German classical culture brought to life after their time, the last vestiges of ancient northern European wisdom. This is why Steiner said of Hegel (another Platonist) that "...he was one who brought the final glimpse of the ancient spiritual light into an era when spirit is veiled in darkness for human cognition."<sup>1</sup>

An orientation toward the past or future is thus a first element that differentiates the two streams. Another contrast is found in the respective soul moods. The School of Chartres was characterized by Steiner, "not so much [for] the actual content of the teachings, as [for] the whole attitude and mood-of-soul of the pupils who gathered with glowing enthusiasm in the 'lecture halls'—as we should say nowadays—of Chartres."<sup>2</sup>

Steiner described thus the coming together of Platonists and Aristotelians in the spiritual world in the thirteenth century: "All these souls afterward came together again—those who with fiery lips had declared ancient and sacred teachings in the School of Chartres, and those who had wrestled in the cold and clear, but heart-devoted works of Scholasticism, to master the true meaning of Intelligence."<sup>3</sup> And in describing a conversation he had with a priest of the Cistercian Order, Steiner blended the attributes of both streams thus: "...with Aristotelian clarity and definition of concept, and yet at the same time with Platonic spiritual light."<sup>4</sup> Of the greatest of Platonists, Plato himself, Steiner said, "Our souls were lifted by his wonderful idealism and noble enthusiasm."<sup>5</sup> And another important differentiation between Aristotelians and Platonists lies behind the thinking of its two major representatives:

Schröer was an idealist; for him, the driving force in everything created, whether by nature or human being, was the world of ideas itself. For me [Steiner], on the other hand, ideas were shadows cast by a living spiritual world. I found it difficult, even for myself, to say what the difference was between Schröer's way of thinking and my own. He spoke of ideas as the forces driving history. He felt that ideas have life. For me, the life of spirit was behind ideas, which were only manifestations of the spirit within the human soul.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Steiner, *Autobiography*, Chapter 58.

<sup>2</sup> Steiner, *Karmic Relationships*, Volume 8, lecture of August 21, 1924.

<sup>3</sup> Steiner, *Karmic Relationships*, Volume 3, lecture of July 28, 1924.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, lecture of July 13, 1924.

<sup>5</sup> Steiner, *Autobiography*, Chapter 12.

<sup>6</sup> Steiner, *Autobiography*, Chapter 14.

All of the above speaks of a contrast between a way of looking at things from a global perspective and with a certain mood of soul pervaded with enthusiasm among the Platonists; and of an attitude of detached devotion, great clarity and smaller-scale focus among the Aristotelians. Overall, the Platonists have a more general orientation to the will, the Aristotelians to thinking. But most of all the contrast between Aristotelians and Platonists will be made clear through the evolution and metamorphosis of their gestures over the centuries. To this we turn next.

The evolution of the Michaelic streams has taken us from ancient Greece into the times and lives of Steiner and Schröer. Before proceeding to the present we can review the stages of incarnation of the Michaelic impulses, up to the time in which they can work together, and no longer in succession.

In ancient Greece the oracles were followed by the Mysteries. The state of union of inner world and nature still held sway at the time in which the oracles spoke to the ancient Greek and offered indications about the life of the individual and of the social body. The ancient Greek of that time had not developed a life of thought; he experienced the surrounding world in images, and felt himself a part of the life of nature. He experienced what Steiner called the “wonders of the world.” From this original state of union of microcosmos and macrocosmos Greece moved into the time of the “trials of the soul.” This meant moving from oracles to Mysteries, with the transition most clearly played out in the sanctuary of Delphi with its oracle of the Sun and its Dionysian Mysteries. Dionysus opened the way for a more individualized connection to the spiritual world through the stages of trials that found the individual worthy of being initiated into the spirit. Along this path Dionysus himself was the hierophant, first in the body, then as a disincarnated entity.

The life of the Mysteries came to a state of decadence roughly around the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC. It was then Plato, the reincarnated Dionysus, who led the way out of the Mysteries and disciplined the faculties of thinking from which philosophy developed its early rudiments. Plato still acted like the hierophant of the new faculty of thinking. He helped in the transition from the culture of the Mysteries into the newly evolving faculties of the intellect.

Aristotle perceived that the human being needed a complete severance from the realm of the Mysteries. He turned his gaze to the life between birth and death. In his categories, or in his logic, lived concepts that mirror the reality of both spiritual and physical worlds, and can be confirmed through clairvoyance. Nevertheless one need not be clairvoyant in order to elaborate such concepts, and anyone with healthy thinking could verify their lawfulness.

Here we may see a first gesture/contrast between Plato and Aristotle. Plato gathers everything from the past. He carries memories from his life before birth, centuries after these had faded from the experience of most Greeks. He gathers all the wisdom of the Mysteries, both from Greece and from Egypt, and makes it available to the pupil. In the process some of this knowledge is corrupted and can no longer be entirely trusted; it is like a long-gone memory. Through Platonism, conditions are gathered for the environment to take on a new evolutionary step. The Athenian *polis*, of which Plato is the proud son, can soon become the *cosmopolis* under Alexander the Great and Aristotle. The

fruits of Plato's Academy, and especially of Aristotle's Lyceum, can now be disseminated from the West to the East. They have reached ripeness in a thinking that can apprehend the reality of both the natural world and the soul, a thinking that can even reflect upon itself. After Aristotle no philosophy reaches the pinnacles of the master for centuries to come.

Plato gathered the fruit of the past and created a space in which a solid platform for the future could be built. Aristotle alone, at the time of Michael's last regency before the present age, could sow the seeds of the future and create the conditions for a cosmopolitan and universal culture.

The Middle Ages recreate and metamorphose this gesture anew. The School of Chartres gathers the fruits of the Mystery traditions of the Middle East and of Europe. Chartres recapitulates and extracts the essence of the past, and most of all it recaptures the impulses of Plato and Christianizes them. Chartres' teachers live in a condition of consciousness that has long disappeared from the immediate environment. They can perceive the cosmic Intelligence and communicate it with enthusiasm to their pupils, who can lift themselves to a higher level of perception and live in the imaginations their masters have conjured up. The teachers offer their pupils glorious echoes of the past. Chartres and the Cistercians do something else: they tame the landscape of Europe, they reclaim the wetlands, they put untamed lands under cultivation, they increase agricultural yields and help prevent famines. Theirs is an eminently social impulse. In essence the Platonic impulse once more prepares the ground and the conditions for a momentous change, and no more fitting image could be mentioned than that of the great cathedrals, whose secret dies with the end of the Chartres impulse. The teachers of Chartres live anonymous lives; they do not yet feel the impulse towards stronger individualism that comes from the cosmic Intelligence turning earthly. This is also why they cannot repulse the dangers looming in the near future, especially in the cultural realm—they who live in conditions rather reminiscent of the past.

The School of Chartres also brought to its end a great revival. It preserved everything from the past that was worth saving. It linked Christianity with the philosophy of Plato. It created the social conditions under which new evolutionary steps could be taken. Just imagine the landscape of Europe without the cathedrals and without the network of economic activity created by the Cistercians.

The Dominicans show an essentially different gesture. Their sphere of activity moves from the frontiers of nature, dear to the masters of Chartres and the Cistercians, to the growing urban environments. They want to place themselves center-stage in the growing culture of the Middle Ages. They live in the cities and promote the cultural life of the emerging universities. They tackle the questions of knowledge that are so central at a time in which the cosmic Intelligence, growing earthly, runs the risk of falling prey to Ahriman.

The Scholastics' role in the Michaelic movement is less conspicuous, but more critical for the future. They fight cultural battles on two fronts. They fight a return to the past in the Arabism of Averroes, who predicates a human intelligence deprived of individuality, and who distorts the heritage of Aristotle and directs it to purposes it was never devised for. They fight against Nominalism, that tendency to see a world devoid of meaning, a dissociation between the world of the senses and the concepts used to

understand it. Nominalism would have created many of the negative conditions for the Consciousness Soul, visible at present, before its time. Thomas Aquinas resurrects the thought of Aristotle and preserves the realms of reason and faith in a manner that still allows their reunification in modern times.

In this second stage we see again the gesture of collecting everything from the past, even if for a short interlude, and creating the cultural and social conditions for a more cosmopolitan future. This is what the Platonists can offer to culture. On this solid foundation a truly cosmopolitan cultural impulse can take root that sets the tone for the culture of the Consciousness Soul and averts the main threats to its blossoming.

We now come to the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, to the doorstep of our own world. German idealism leads the way, but one should not forget Great Britain's Romantic literature, and the transcendentalist movement in the United States, among others. The German Platonists counter the rising materialism and scientific outlook of the age with the innate feeling that the human soul can find from within answers to the world riddle, that nature need not live at odds with the human soul. Each of the German Platonists knows he can reach this goal, even from very different points of departure. The new worldviews struggle to find expression in the growing world of abstraction, which, however, they German idealists imbue with poetic imagination. Steiner reminds us that here too we see an echo of the past; that Hegel, Fichte, Schelling and the others carried in their souls the memory of a time in which the human being perceived spiritual beings at work in the soul. And the ideas of German classical philosophers are better described as "idea-experience" or the experienced idea, which live with a certain elemental vigor in the soul.

German idealists have in common the striving for a worldview in which self-consciousness forms the center and ground. The movement reaches a pinnacle in Goethe in what the artist and scientist reveals in deep poetic insight. He cannot transform his insights into clear concepts, but he nevertheless lays the basis for the transformation of thinking.

Schröer and Steiner arrive on the scene at the culmination of this Romantic movement, when the focus is moving from Germany to the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Steiner carried both his and Schröer's tasks in parallel, ensuring that from Goetheanism anthroposophy would be born. From a new understanding of karma and reincarnation he developed the impulse for a new way of seeing the place of the individual in the world, and of carrying pre-birth intentions into the world. This impulse has been explored in depth in *Rudolf Steiner and Karl Julius Schröer: Anthroposophy and the Teachings of Karma and Reincarnation*. From both impulses that Steiner developed we can recognize archetypes at work in the natural and social worlds. What lived in Goethe under the inspiration of the German folk-soul is now expressed in universal fashion in anthroposophy. What came from inspirations carried by the great German philosophers is now becoming the fruit of direct vision in the spirit. The teachings of karma and reincarnation, which only survived as memories from the East, are now articulated in such a way that each human being who truly desires it, can ascend in a deeply experiential way from the subjective dimension of individual life to an objective ground beyond the veil of maya spread before the human soul.

Between German idealism and anthroposophy there is, once again, no direct continuity. But here too, the former sets the basis for the latter. And between the two lay

the momentous watershed of Michael's new time regency. The German idealists had to set the conditions for a spiritual ascent and light the flame at the time of the growing darkness of materialism. They could do so with the power of the inspirations they received from the spiritual world. They set the tone for another Platonic revival of German culture. They also strove to create the foundations for a new social reality, which would have developed under the impulse of German liberalism and found a culmination under the guidance of Kaspar Hauser. These developments, however, were thwarted by the Western brotherhoods. The inspiration of the spiritual world becomes, ideally, direct spiritual vision in spiritual science. And what was present in some discrete pockets of culture—Germany, Austria, Great Britain, United States primarily—now becomes a universal impulse which can ray from the spiritual Goetheanum. The fruits of anthroposophy can be grasped universally, regardless of local cultures.

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We will see the twin Michaelic impulses at work in the modern world when we turn to individuals of the twentieth century working in the natural sciences, in the humanities and in the social sciences. Anticipating what is to come we will see that the contrast between German idealists and anthroposophists of the time of Steiner is still at work in the present.