TRADITIONALISM AS A THEORY: SOPHIA, PLATO AND THE EVENT

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Mark Sedgwick and his hypothesis on Sophia Perennis

In his book, Against the Modern World: Traditionalism and the Secret Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century [1], the contemporary scholar and historian of Traditionalism, Mark Sedgwick, based on research into the philosophical sources of the worldview of the founder of Traditionalism, René Guénon, advanced the hypothesis that the Traditionalist movement, in its assertion of Sophia Perennis (Philosophia Perennis) and the “Primordial Tradition” as its foundational theory, is based not on some “mythical”, exotic, “Eastern” sources, but on none other than the Western philosophical tradition, whose roots can be traced back to the Renaissance Platonism of Gemistus Plethon, Marsilio Ficino, Pico della Mirandola, Agostino Steuco, etc. The current which took shape in this circle elevated the figure of Sophia and the corresponding notion of “Primordial Theology” (as in Steuco’s Prisca theologia), and the content of this “primordial theology” boiled down to Platonism, Neoplatonism, and Hermeticism, which were rediscovered in Western Europe thanks to translations from Greek of a broad spectrum of these currents, whose texts were brought by the Greek Gemistus Plethon from Byzantium in the final period before its final fall. Although Sedgwick’s thesis has seemed to many Traditionalists to be “disrobing”, overall this analysis of the intellectual circles of the Renaissance Neoplatonists and their ideas demonstrates a considerable convergence with Guénon’s views and those of his followers.

In turn, the works of the English Dame Frances Yates dedicated to these very same intellectual currents of the European Renaissance and Modernity [2] have shown just how enormous of an influence Platonism exerted on the formation of the philosophical, scientific, and political views of this transitional epoch. Both Sedgwick and Yates show how a significant number of the founding fathers of the modern scientific view of the world were in fact largely inspired by mystical-religious ideas and Neoplatonic theories, even though only one side of their works – that tied to empiricism, rationalism, mechanism, etc. – would make it into the scientific canons of Modernity, while the mysticism and “Perennialism” of the Renaissance would be left “behind the scenes” or alternatively interpreted in naturalistic, pantheistic, or deist directions. A prominent example of this is Issac Newton, who was both an alchemist and a Kabbalist on the one hand and, on the other, the founding father of mechanistic physics and rationalist, empiricist natural science. The historian of religions Mircea Eliade, who in his youth participated in the Traditionalist movement, developed this perspective with the proposal that we view the rational-scientific and progressist topography of the philosophy of Modernity as a product of the secularization of European Hermeticism.

These considerations led Sedgwick to reconsider the influence of Traditionalism on philosophy, science, and to a certain extent politics in the 20th century. This movement, lying at the heart of Modernity and appearing in new form as the philosophy developed by René Guénon, Julius Evola, and a broad circle of thinkers on which the former had decisive impact, was much more significant and important than can be judged on the basis of mere superficial familiarity with the subject. At the same time, they appear to be somewhat more modest and even, to a certain extent, marginal. At the source of Modernity lies Platonic universalism, which became the ideological grounds for proclaiming the universalism of the rational philosophy of post-Medieval Europe. Gradually, the bulk of attention came to be drawn towards the technological side of this movement, towards pure empiricism and rationalism, while the metaphysical dimension was neglected and written off as one of the costs and remnants of “Medieval irrationalism.” However, following this scheme, it turns out that with the exhaustion of the technocratic, rationalist philosophy, Baconist scientism, and Cartesian dualism of the epoch of Modernity, this second side, which had long since receded to the periphery, began to make itself known again. Guénon’s Traditionalism became its developed manifesto. Hence the growth of Traditionalism’s significance in correlation with the ever broader and deeper consciousness of the “crisis of the modern world.” Thus, in the transition to Post-Modernity, Modernity has once again remembered its “occult roots.” The Enlightenment, now called into question, has turned towards its “Rosicrucian” beginning.

This hypothesis of Sedgwick and Yates, shared by a number of other authors, is productive. In the very least, it raises the status of Traditionalism to that of one of the most important philosophical currents to emerge in the critical moment of the exhaustion of the agenda of the classical scientific rationality of Modernity and with the formation of the first Post-Modern theories subjecting Modernity to deconstruction. If we recognize that at the very heart of Modernity, which claimed rationalism and the theory of progress to be the foundations of its universalism, there lies a set of irrational views that appeal to deep antiquity for substantiation, i.e., the Platonic-mystical and Hermetic universalism of the Perennialist and Sophiological shade, then Modernity itself appears under a completely different light, and Post-Modern critics thereby acquire yet another argument, namely, that Modernity was not at all what it claimed to be, but was merely a poorly disguised, masked version of the traditional society which Modernity sought to overcome, annul, and dismantle.

On the other hand, Traditionalism itself thereby appears to be a phenomenon that is critical of, but nonetheless related to Modernity. It is not simply the “continuation of Tradition” by inertia, but an altogether specific and original critical philosophy which refutes Modernity and subjects the latter to merciless critique on the basis of a special, complex set of ideas and theories which, taken together in their sum, constitute a “Perennialism” or “universal esotericism” which, it ought to be noted, does not coincide with any one single really existing historical tradition. Thus, we are only one step away from recognizing Traditionalism to be a “construct.” The revolutionary, critical, and modern potential of Guénon’s philosophy was rightfully noticed by the Traditionalist René Alleau, who proposed to consider Guénon alongside Marx as one among the constellation of radical revolutionaries and critics of modern civilization.[3]

From Prisca theologia to René Guénon

A number of various, altogether interesting conclusions can be extracted from Sedgwick’s analysis.[4] Here we will fixate on merely one point, that of the conceptual unity of 20th century Traditionalism (Guénon, Evola, etc.) and Renaissance Platonism (Plethon, Ficino, Steuco, etc.). Both of these philosophical currents can be generalized with the notion of “Perennialism.”

If we can historically trace Guénon’s philosophical inspirations back to the Renaissance, which Guénon himself harshly criticized for misunderstanding the sacred civilization of the Middle Ages, and if we can find there the first formulations of Sophia Perennis or the Prisca theologia which compose the foundation of Traditionalist philosophy, then in it becomes completely obvious that these currents came to Western Europe in the Renaissance from the much deeper past and, to a certain extent, from a different cultural context (more specifically, the Byzantine-Greek). Of course, Platonism was well known in Medieval European Scholasticism, but it had long since yielded to Averroism and Aristotelianism enshrined virtually dogmatically in the realism of Thomas Aquinas. Hermeticism had existed in the form of alchemical currents and esoteric fraternities, but in the Renaissance these tendencies surfaced in rather vivid and magistral form, such as in the forms of open Neoplatonism and philosophically-formulated Hermeticism (with numerous direct or indirect polytheistic elements), which claimed to be not merely a secret tradition parallel to the dominant Scholasticism, but a foundational, universal worldview. Renaissance Platonism and Hermeticism directly opposed Catholic Tomism and formulated the agenda of Renaissance Humanism. This humanism was magical and sacred: man was understood to be the “perfect man”, the Platonic philosopher, the Angel-Initiator.

The Renaissance Platonists appealed directly to the works of Plato, Plotinus, Hermes Trismegistus, and the broader corpus of Neoplatonic and Hermetic theories, many of which were freshly translated from Greek. Platonic humanism was reformed into a conceptual, theoretical bloc and began its offensive against previous philosophical and theological constructs. The Neoplatonists justified their claims to truth by emphasizing the antiquity of their sources and by claiming to propose a philosophical paradigm which could generalize different religious confessions, and as such was more universal and more profound than the Catholic religion of Europe. This synthesis came to include, in the very least, Byzantine Orthodoxy, but the reform program of Gemistus Plethon was even broader, proposing a restoration of “Platonic theology” as a whole and a return to certain aspects of polytheism. Platonism, like Hermeticism, was seen not simply as one philosophical or religious tendency among many others, but as “universal wisdom” capable of serving as a key to the most diverse philosophies and religions, as a common denominator. This idea of a meta-religious generalization became the most important notion of the Rosicrucian movement and, later, European Masonry (as shown by Yates).

This universalism was substantiated by references to “Perennialism”, to the existence of some kind of exclusive instance in which all of world wisdom, independently of historical peripeteia, is present and preserved in its “paradisal”, primordial state. This “perennial wisdom”, Sophia, was the point of departure that allowed one to examine specific religions and philosophies as individual and historically conditioned constructs, thus laying claims to a universality transcending any and all individualities. This Sophia was knowable and, as follows, he who participated in her, loved her, and identified with her received access to “absolute knowledge.” Renaissance Humanism was therefore Sophiological. Sophia was treated as the Angel of humanity, the latter’s living and eternally present, eternally youthful archetype or eidos.

It is by all means possible that European Modernity’s claims to the universalism of its values are to be sought in precisely this source. As Catholic ecumenism was abandoned, the cultural messianism of the West demanded new substantiation, and such was found in “Perennialism”: the new Europe, post-Medieval Europe, conceived itself to be the privileged region of the revealed, eternal Sophia, and on these grounds the Europeans of Modernity acquired their mandate to newly master and conquer the world, seeing themselves as not merely raptorial colonizers, but as the bearers of higher universal knowledge. This explains the special incandescence of the era of geographical discoveries and (Francis Bacon’s) call to discover Atlantis not only in the new colonies, but in the Old World itself. Thus, Renaissance Platonism and its corresponding Perennialism ought to be considered a most important factor in the formation of the structure of Modernity as a whole. The profane universalism of progressist and rationalist Europe has its roots in the sacred super-rationalism of the Renaissance Platonists oriented towards eternity and deep antiquity.

The construct of Sophia

The “constructivist” character of Renaissance Neoplatonism is obvious to us. We can easily trace how and on what sources it was constructed. The Hermetic Poimandres and Asclepius attributed to Hermes Trismegistus, as well as the cosmological and anthropological dialogues of Plato (the Timaeus, the Republic, the Laws, the Symposium, etc.) were taken to be universal and interpreted in the spirit of the Neoplatonic systematizations of Plotinus and his followers. Neoplatonism situated Sophia as its main content, its systematized philosophical hologram. And it is through this prism that other religions and philosophical systems were interpreted as individual cases of a generalized perennial(ist) paradigm. René Guénon acted in approximately the same manner as he employed a system of definite metaphysical, cosmological, and anthropological views to examine various traditions, religions, and the modern world itself as a denial of these views and, in its final phase (the opening of the egg from below) a parody of them. Not a single religion, theology, or philosophical system contains the paradigmatic matrix with which Guénon operated. But it is with the aid of this matrix, taken from somewhere else, that historical religions, theologies, and philosophers were altogether successfully treated and interpreted by him. Guénon based himself on the “Primordial Tradition”, sanātana dharma, or Sophia Perennis, and he drew his knowledge directly thither. The Renaissance Platonists acted in precisely the same way.

With Sophia, both the Renaissance Platonists and Guénon in the 20th century deconstructed everything else. The very algorithm of their deconstructions was, in turn, represented by a construct: the construct of Sophia.

The “Dark Logos” of Neoplatonism

The artificial character of Renaissance Perennialism is rather transparent. But here the question should be posed: how does this Renaissance Platonism, which lies at the origins of 20th century Traditionalism, relate to the Platonism on which it was constructed? In other words, was this constructivist nature a quality of the Renaissance anticipating Modernity, or did the very material upon which Renaissance Sophiology was constructed lend any definite grounds to this approach and display any convergent qualities?

With regards to Neoplatonism (from Plotinus and Porphyry through Iamblichus to Proclus and Damascius), this is nearly obvious: Neoplatonism presented a construct developed on the basis of the main ideas of Plato, but in synthesis with other Hellenistic and Middle Eastern philosophical, religious, and mystical systems. This Neoplatonism was distinguished by its extraordinary inclusivity: it selectively incorporated Platonic re-interpretations of Aristotle (and accordingly, a re-thinking of the Stoa), Orphism, Pythagoreanism, Egyptian Hermetism, cults from Syria and Asia Minor (theurgy, the Chaldean Oracles), and Iranian dualist doctrines and Chaldean astrology. On the basis of Plato’s Parmenides and his main hypotheses, Proclus constructed an elaborate “Platonic theology” which was carried on and substantially re-interpreted by Damascius. The latter’s commentaries on the Timaeus thoroughly and in great detail described a synthetic cosmology built on the principle of noocentrism.

The system that the late Neoplatonists of the Hellenistic era built with their open metaphysics and apophatic, dialectical Logos can, without a doubt, be fully considered to be an earlier version of the “Perennialism” which we encounter in the Renaissance. In Proclus’ works, particularly his exegeses, we can see the skeleton of all the later derivations of Neoplatonism, both religious and philosophical. His theories and methods can unmistakably be sensed in the Areopagites and, further, in the whole tradition of “mystical theology” which became so widespread in the West (from Scotus Eriugena to Meister Eckhart, Henry Suso, and Jakob Böhme) as well as in the East. We can find the dialectic of the uncreated One developed by Proclus in the works of the Islamic thinkers of Al-Falasifa, in Ibn Arabi and the Ishraq school, whereby it defined the dramatic picture of Ishmailite theology and eschatology. Moreover, the classical method of Kabbalistic interpretations of the Zohar and early Kabbalah fully reproduced Proclus’ fixation on certain words and phrases (and their numerological equivalents) in Plato’s dialogues which at other times seemed only secondary. Henry Corbin rightly noted that the Parmenides was for Proclus the Theogony, on the basis of which he would later develop his Platonic Theology. Plato’s Parmenides was a kind of Bible or Sacred Scripture for negative, Neoplatonic, apophatic theology.[5] Every word of Plato’s was subjected to detailed and comprehensive hermeneutics. The idea that Plato was the “sail” of the Divine became a Neoplatonic dogma in its own right.

Neoplatonism conceived itself to be a universal tradition on the basis of which one could interpret all existing religions and philosophical systems. It was the religion of the Logos, a noocentric cosmology and apophatic metaphysics claiming the ability to interpret any and all forms of polytheism, symbolism, and theurgic rites. Following the Greek Neoplatonists, this idea penetrated other religious environments as well, such as in the works of al-Farabi and Ibin Sina, the Sufis, the philosophers of the Ishraq school, the initiatic verses of Rumi and the diaries of Ruzbehan Baqli, to the synthetic doctrines of Haydar Amoli or Mulla Sadra. Something analogous can also be encountered in Kabbalah, as well as in Christian mysticism (with some reservations). Everywhere we look, we encounter the idea of Sophia Perennis and spiritual universalism, reproducing in one form or another the noocentric, and at times paradoxical and dialectical, “Dark Logos” of the Neoplatonists. This Logos is “dark” because it postulates the pre-existential nature of the Principial (the One), the vertical of the Logos is opened upwards, and because it constantly and repeatedly upturns the strict laws of Aristotelian reason with its foundational principles of triumph, denial, excluding the third. Instead of logical clarity, we are dealing here with a paradox, an aporia, or a super-rational ambiguity (amphibole) which is evasive, demanding of the high art of dialectics, and which leads the “philosopher” (whether the Sufi, the adept, or the initiate) through the dizzying chain of insights and initiations, upon each new link of which consciousness collapses and is recreated anew.

Having established this state of affairs, we can easily extend the history of Renaissance Platonism and its Perennialist construct of Sophia even further back than a millennium. Gemistus Plethon and his Neoplatonic reform in Mystras on the eve of the fall of the Byzantine Empire can be seen as a link in the direct transmission of this tradition from the last Diadochi of the Athenian Academy expelled by Justinian, to Michael Psellos, to the unsuccessful Neoplatonist deemed heretic John Italus, and to the Florentine circle established by Marsilio Ficino around Prince Cosimo Medici. In addition to the Greek branch, we can also consider the “Islamic trace”, where the Dark Logos of apophatic “Platonic theology” became the common denominator of a wide range of different currents representing the heights of Muslim philosophy, theology, and culture. Another route ran through Jewish Kabbalah, which was structured according to the very same algorithm. Finally, in the Latin world, we can see the numerous streams of Hermeticism, alchemy, mysticism, as well as all Gnostic sects and millenarian currents (in the spirit of the doctrine of the Three Kingdoms of the Calabrian Joachim de Flore) which flowed into the revolutionary ocean of the Reanissance. Still further from the Renaissance, following Sedgwick and Yates and numerous other authors studying modern mystical and occult orders, lodges, and sects, we can trace the line of the dark Logos through even more reliable and well-researched material, from Giordano Bruno to the Rosicrucians, Masons, mystics, and the representatives of “occultism” among whom Guénon discovered it and laid it at the heart of his completely original and extremely influential Traditionalist philosophy.

Thus, tracing the genesis of this construct of Sophia leads us to the history of the Logos as it has unfolded in the periphery of Western European culture and, as Corbin has shown, in the center of the Islamic spiritual tradition (where the “Dark Logos” was not exclusive and one, but was adjacent to and sometimes sharply rivaled rationalist kalam, Asharite atomism, Fiqr, and Salafist purism). The difficult reception of Kabbalah in the Jewish world and its nearly full and final acceptance as a flawless orthodoxy make up yet another page in this history. Jewish Kabbalah fell into the sphere of interests of the Renaissance Neoplatonists, and in the works of Pico della Mirandola and Reuchlin (and later of Knorr von Rosenroth) we can detect the outlines of a project to establish a “Christian Kabbalah.” Further, once again through Masonry and Hermeticism, Kabbalah reached Fabre d’Olivet, Eliphas Lévi, Papus, Saint-Yves d’Alveydre, and Guénon himself. In Guénon and in his “revolutionary” Perennialism, all of these numerous streams come together to compose the most modern, capacious, and systematized worldview.

Theory as Homeland

Now we are left with posing a final question, namely: To what extent did the Neoplatonists of the first centuries of our era create something completely unique and original out of the texts, ideas, and traditions associated with the name of Plato, and to what extent can we find something similar in the works of Plato himself? Here the works of the great scholar of Plato, Neoplatonism, and Hermeticism, the French curé André-Jean Festiègere, come to our aid.[6] Festiègere draws our attention to the meaning imbued in the notion of “Theory” (θεορία) in Plato’s era and in his own philosophy. Originally, this notion meant an “inspection”, “survey”, “contemplation”, “meditation”, or “observation.” In Ancient Greece, in philosophical milieus, it bore two subtle terminological nuances:

A “theory” was a survey of the cultures and societies of different peoples, among whom the philosopher should travel and dwell as part of his preparation for a new life (hence why we constantly read of the travels of philosophers to other countries: “traveling” is a purely philosophical occupation).

By analogy with the survey of different nations, societies, and their religious and ritual systems, a “theory” was a survey of different systems and ideological connections leading to a higher principle.

This connection between traveling and theoretical contemplation is extremely important. Theory is the contemplation of that which is different, taken to culminate in a common, universal model. Plato’s doctrine of ideas itself is directly associated with contemplation. The contemplation of ideas is active “theorizing”, or the distinguishing of common and unchanging paradigms as well as constantly changing phenomena. Just as the Hellenic philosophical traveler studies the religions and customs of different Mediterranean societies, seeks correspondences with the Greek religion and Greek traditions, establishes analogies and, when necessary, replenishes his own religious views and his language, so does the Hellenic philosopher contemplate ideas, the universals of the infinite order of things and phenomena. There are many societies, religions, and cults, and the contemplative traveler strives to deduce from his survey that which is common, that which he has already identified in the places he has been and in the new, still unknown countries and lands in which he finds himself. The case is strictly the same with immersion into the world of ideas and in the process of comparing them with the world of phenomena. Contemplation and theory are the construction of the common, the culmination of a model.

In Plato, this acquires a distinct and salient character. Theory as construction is simultaneously illumination, enlightenment, and absorbing the rays of the Good. Ideas are indifferent to things, but they are not indifferent to those who strive to theorize, whom they passionately rush to meet, in excelsis. The field of theory thus transforms into the space of epiphany, where ideas are not only reflected, but acquire a specific being and are embodied in the theoretical existence of the philosopher. By traveling to temples and shrines to various gods and by being present at different rituals, the theoretician (the one who contemplates) prepares to meet with the real God for whom all the different gods of different cults serve as masks, names, and messengers (angels). In different rites and sacred ceremonies, the philosopher rushes to the main philosophical rite, the rite of rites, where the main realization to be accomplished is the discerned merger of the noetic cosmos with the aesthetic cosmos, the “fulfillment of all fulfillments”, the magical meeting of God with the raging sea of multiplicity. Later, this ritual of all rituals would be conceptualized by the Neoplatonists as theurgy.

Plato’s Theory is therefore not simply a preparation for something – for political activism or sacred rites – but is a higher form of reality, the ultimate expression of concentrated praxis. Contemplation is thus the work of the gods, and is their blissful rest and the source of higher pleasure. Theory is the place where being, dispersed into multitude and elusive in difference, is tied together into the knot of intense concentration, finding in itself elastic unity and bright clarity. The contemplative philosopher stands above the priest and the king, for he rises to the zone of pure divinity, un-diluted by any additional functional burdens and completely free from multiplicity, both temporal (the change of moments) and spatial (the change of places). The culmination of this journey is the return to the philosophical Homeland, where there is no more time or relative forms. Theory is the Homeland. None other than nostalgia for it pushes the philosopher to travel through both countries and the networks of light-like ideas in search of the point of Sophia, whom the philosopher loves with all his being.

This understanding of Theory illustrates how Plato’s philosophy was that very synthetic universalism which generalizes different philosophical systems and knowledge just as the traveler generalizes the experience of the societies he witnesses. Plato’s works therefore present not one point of view to one or another question, but always several; they become material for contemplation and, like steps, they lead to a higher synthesis. At the peak of this synthesis, ideas begin to live beyond the discursive Platonic text and reveal themselves directly to those who have followed Plato and the personages of his dialogues to the very end, where the stairs leading to the sky end. There dialogue ends, but theory does not. Now the philosopher must take one more step, this time without Plato and texts – this is the step of thought, the step of illumination, the step of contemplation. The step into the sky. Only there does real Platonism – the “secret doctrine” – begin. It has not been transmitted to anyone; it can only be discovered independently, through the sacred experience of theory.

Open Philosophy

As the formulator of theory, as the guide to the geography of ideas, Plato created a consciously open philosophy, in which the main point is not uttered, but must be sought and experienced independently. Hence the term “philo-soph”, or “lover of Sophia”, of Wisdom. If the question at hand was simply who bears this Wisdom, we would be dealing with a closed system, that is, something individual. Wisdom cannot be learned, it is not a given. One can only break through to it upon enormous labor and at the cost of incredible efforts. Philosophy is the realm where minds and hearts gather together in passionately thirsting for Wisdom, whey they are fallen in love with Sophia and are excited contenders for her hand. No one has any guarantees. There is only Love. Led by Her, they embark on their journey, towards contemplation, towards theory. They settle in the vicinity of Sophia and inch ever closer to her. They seek the universal, and thereby themselves become more and more generalized, eidetic, and less and less individual. Philosophers construct themselves in the vicinity of Wisdom. Purifying themselves in Her rays, they reveal evermore distinct contours.

In the case of Plato, this means that we are dealing with the Logos as such, for the Logos is in its nearly original form, is still undefined, and is open to being opened or closed, understood in one way or another, or conceived and outlined in one or another vector. In Plato, philosophy is the sharp impulse of nearing Sophia Perennis, the leap into the ocean of eternal light, it is contemplative and divine praxis. In this sense, philosophy is higher than religion and myth, insofar as religions and myths are but testimonies to the main actor – Saint Sophia. Therefore, Plato himself can be called a “Perennialist” and, correspondingly, a Traditionalist. It does not matter whether Plato adhered to Greek civil piety and offered sacrifices to the gods and heroes of his polis. Such was part of a much more important and significant philosophical cult: the cult of Sophia, the cult of the pure Logos.

Plato as an Event

Let us pose the final question. Did “Perennialism”, Traditionalism, universalism, and the philosophical cult of Sophia all begin with Plato’s Theory? With his doctrine of ideas? With his Timaean cosmology?

For Guénon and Traditionalists, such a personification would be a scandal. But upon fully recognizing Plato’s direct connection to the “Primordial Tradition”, Traditionalists would undoubtedly begin to see Plato as a link in the golden chain of initiates which stretches back to the dawn of creation, to the earthly paradise, and which has become increasingly difficult to access, closed, and exclusive in our time, the Kali Yuga, the “end times”, the era of the “great parody.” Traditionalists understand “perennialism” literally and even somewhat naively. Such can by all means be seen as a symmetrical response to the just as literal and even more naive historicism which predominates in Modernity. Yet in the vicinity of eternity, “before” and “after”, “now” and “then” are not so important. Indeed, they have no meaning. What is important is what. Plato, like Zarathustra in Iran, might have been both an historical figure and a sacred personage, like al-Khidr or the Angel-Initiator. Perhaps there are multiple Platos. And this means that Plato’s spirit can be called upon (as Plotinus did in the temple of Isis); he can be appealed to. His return can be awaited, for there is no irreversibility in eternity. In eternity, everything is reversible – everything has even already been reversed. In the most rationalized form, one could accept that Plato merely transmitted knowledge that he had acquired along the chain of initiation, and in this sense was their ordinary re-translator who became world famous only by virtue of the importance of the truths he voiced, as a kind of philosophical prophet.

Yet Plato can be approached in other ways as well, for example, as an Event in the spirit of the Heideggerian Ereignis. This would distance us from both the “Perennialists” and the “historicists.” Plato happened and philosophy happened. Sophia was designated and the philosophical geography was marked. If this was supposed to have happened, then it would have happened no matter what – whether by way of Plato or someone else, should we be reproached on this matter. But perhaps it would be better to think differently: if Plato did not exist, there would be nothing else. In particular, there would be no notes in the margins of his texts. There would be no philosophy. If Plato was in fact divine, then he cannot be subordinated to any mechanical necessity. Nothing can oblige him to be. Further, if he had not risked everything to become Plato, his philosophy would have been negligible. Thus, Sophia might not have been. Or in other words: instead of Sophia, instead of the secret bride of the order of lovers, something else could have been revealed to Plato.

Plato’s exceptionality (although perhaps this is just as wrong and does not correspond to the truth) is more existentially attractive and productive than his link in the chain, even if it is the golden one. Plato’s divinity lies in that he was human.

Modern Traditionalism is, of course, more adequate than profane academic philosophy and is more prosperous than Post-Modernity. But all the signs of Traditionalism’s transformation into a convention, a routine, into a “scholasticism”, of its conscious quenching of any living movement of the soul or heart, are glaring. Here it is discovered that “Perennialism” is a construct and always was such from the very beginning. The appeal of a Traditionalist towards really existing tradition decides nothing, just as Plato’s reverence for his paternal gods did not exhaust his philosophy.

Traditionalism is something other than tradition. It is a breakthrough to that which is the tradition of traditions, the secret grain, the theory. But being a theory, a construct, it needs to be continuously recreated. A construct is not so bad if the matter at hand is something rooted in the light nature of man himself. By creating, man creates himself. Therefore, Traditionalism must either happen or disappear. Its claims are too enormous and its bar has been set too high by Guénon and the Sophiologists on whom he constructed his doctrine. “Perennialism” means that Sophia is Perennis: she is here and now. But how can we relate the fact of the Kali Yuga, our God-abandoned “now” and the dustbin of the modern Western-centric global world, our vile, desolate “here”, with the rays of the Angel-Initiator, the light of Great Love, and the nature of man as a winged divine being? The Gnostics offered a dualist answer which often seems to be the only one acceptable and applicable to us. But is this not simply a recognition of our own weakness, of our own personal inability to transform the “Cover” into the “Mirror”, Absence into Presence, apophany into epiphany, and occultation into revelation? Is this not the signature on the warrant for the death of the Logos, the insuperability of Western nihilism, or the recognition of the closed, self-referential world to be the only possible and real?

Traditionalists frequently speak of the “great parody” that is the modern world. This is true, but are they themselves not a parody? After all, not only Guénon, but the Neoplatonists, and Plato himself can all be parodied.

The discrepancies between Traditionalism and Heidegger did not hinder Henry Corbin from engaging Neoplatonism in Islam with love and delicate refinement over the course of his life. Such is the behavior of a living person who responds to Sophia’s whisper no matter where it resounds.

Today this whisper is more silent than ever. But it cannot be so quiet as to be indistinguishable at all. We must learn to listen to silence, for silence sometimes conveys extremely meaningful things.

Footnotes:

[1] Mark Sedgwick, Against the Modern World: Traditionalism and the Secret Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

[2] Frances Yates, The Art of Memory (Saint Petersburg: 1997); Ibidem., The Rosicrucian Enlightenment (Moscow: Aleteia, Enigma, 1999); Ibidem., Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2000).

[3] Réné Alleau, De Marx à Guénon: d’une critique ‘radicale’ à une critique ‘principielle’ des societés modernes (Paris, Les dossiers H., 1984).

[4] Some aspects of this question have already been treated in Alexander Dugin, Postfilosofiia (Moscow: Eurasian Movement, 2009).

[5] Henry Corbin, Le paradoxe du monothéisme (Paris, 1981).

[6] André-Jean Festugière, Contemplation et vie contemplative selon Platon (Saint Petersburg: Nauka, 2009).

Translator: Jafe Arnold

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