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INTRODUCTION

The present anthology of the Pythagorean and Platonic tradition disagrees in certain important respects with the modern understanding of philosophy in general and of Platonism and Pythagoreanism in particular. Following the valuable insights of Pierre Hadot (supported by the witness of countless traditional sages throughout the world) we regard ancient philosophy as essentially a way of life: not only inseparable from "spiritual exercises," but also in perfect accord with cosmogonical myths and sacred rites. In the broader traditional sense, philosophy consists not simply of a conceptual edifice (be it of the order of reason or myth), but of a lived concrete existence conducted by initiates, or by the whole theocentric community, treated as a properly organized and well-guided political and theurgical "body" attended to the principle of *maat*—"truth" and "justice" in the ancient Egyptian sense of the word.

In Plato's definition of philosophy as a training for death (*Phaedo* 67cd) an implicit distinction was made between philosophy and philosophical discourse. Modern Western philosophy (a rather monstrous and corrupted creature, initially shaped by late Christian theology and post-Descartesian logic) has been systematically reduced to a philosophical discourse of a single dogmatic kind, through the fatal one-sidedness of its professed secular humanistic mentality, and a crucial misunderstanding of traditional wisdom. The task of the ancient philosophers was in fact to contemplate the cosmic order and its beauty; to live in harmony with it and to transcend the limitations imposed by sense experience and discursive reasoning. In a word, it was through philosophy (understood as a kind of *askesis*) that the cultivation of the natural, ethical, civic, purificatory, theoretic, paradigmatic, and hieratic virtues (*aretai*) were to be practiced; and it was through this noetic vision (*noesis*) that the ancient philosophers tried to awaken the divine light within, and to touch the divine Intellect in the cosmos. For them, to reach *apotheosis* was the ultimate human end (*telos*). Christos Evangeliou correctly observes that, "Neither Aristotle nor any other Platonic, or genuinely Hellenic philosopher, would have approved of

what the modern European man, in his greedy desire for profit, and demonic will to power, has made out of Hellenic *philosophia*."[1]

The purpose of our highly selective anthology is to glimpse the Pythagorean and Platonic tradition from the traditional Hellenic and especially Neoplatonic perspective. However, one ought to remember that the term "Neoplatonism" itself was an artificial invention of the 18th century Protestant scholars and preachers of the Enlightenment era, who rejected the claim that Plato's philosophy was propounded in unwritten doctrines and oral teachings, and the "Neoplatonic presumption" of harmony between Plato and Aristotle. These founders of modern philosophical hermeneutics pretended to understand Plato better than the latter understood himself. Looking down upon Plato, Plotinus, and Proclus from the tower of their so-called "Enlightenment," they claimed to have discovered "the real Plato"—one who had to be thoroughly cleansed from the filth of Neoplatonic interpretations. Thus, Neoplatonism was pictured as the root and source of all evils. This highly prejudiced opinion prevailed as unquestioned dogma despite the heroic resistance of such Platonic scholars as Thomas Taylor, and is still prevalent among the contemporary "priests" of current scientistic ideologies. According to the narrow Protestant mentality of the 19th century, and even that of modern secular scholarship, the ancient Hellenic Neoplatonists were madmen, liars and foolish forgers, who preferred illusions and imaginations to sound reason. They were regarded as "men inflated by metaphysical dreams, who always opposed Plato to Christ," trying "to find a new way of impeding the progress of Christianity."[2] It is little wonder, then, that in reading certain texts of classical scholarship (even those that are quite sympathetic), and thereafter proceeding to the ancient authors themselves, one cannot escape an impression of hearing two different stories and following two different paths that never really meet, despite certain appearances to the contrary.

The essential aspect of the ancient philosophical tradition was its oral transmission and living praxis. Theory, therefore, was never

1. Christos C. Evangeliou, *The Hellenic Philosophy: Between Europe, Asia, and Africa* (New York: Binghamton University, 1997), p.71.

2. E.N. Tigerstedt, *The Decline and Fall of the Neoplatonic Interpretation of Plato* (Helsinki: Societas Scientiarum Fennica, 1974), p.55.

regarded as an end in itself, but was put in the service of practice, often understood in terms of an "alchemical" transformation and an elevation of the soul through the rites of purification and the cultivation of the virtues. In most cases this cultivation was so all-encompassing as to make the philosopher—as a "lover of wisdom"—strange to the world of mortals and close to the immortal gods, or archetypal principles (*archai*) of cosmic manifestation. Since putting oneself in accord with the divine principles allowed one to experience the eternal irradiation of the Good, Platonic and Neoplatonic philosophy was not simply a discourse about the gods and the world, but an anagogic path leading the soul to a concrete union with the divine Intellect and the ineffable One. All complementary sciences and arts served as the direct or indirect means to this goal and provided meaningful symbols and icons for contemplation. In a sense, there was a lived logic, a lived hermeneutics, physics, and ethics. Hence, as Pierre Hadot has pointed out, the practice of philosophy did not ultimately consist in "producing the theory of logic, that is the theory of speaking well and thinking well, nor in producing the theory of physics, that is of the cosmos, nor in producing the theory of acting well, but it concerned actually speaking well, thinking well, acting well, being truly conscious of one's place in the cosmos."[3]

Most narrow-minded modernists—for whom philosophy as such is tantamount to an abstract philosophical discourse based on the rationalistic scientific method and its methodically obtained "truths"—believe that Thales of Miletus must have been the first to use a rational method to investigate the interrelationship of visible things and their inner causes. In a highly presumptuous and uncritical manner, they assert that Thales made a deliberate break with the mythology of the past and was seeking a new, rational account of the cosmos. They therefore installed him as the founder of *philosophia* as such and pictured him as a distant forerunner of modern Western thought, without, however, presenting any evident and reliable support for this view. As S.H. Nasr has remarked:

3. Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, ed. with an intro. by Arnold I. Davidson (Oxford and Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1995), p.24.

> The perspective within which the origin of modern philosophy is conceived and the choice of which philosophers to include and which to exclude in the account of the history of philosophy all reflect a particular "ideology" and conception of philosophy and are related to modern man's view of himself.[4]

In this respect the Safavid Persian *hakim*s were perhaps closer to the truth when they identified the water of Thales with the Breath of the Compassionate (*nafas al-Rahman*) of the Sufis, and considered the so-called Presocratic philosophers to have used a symbolic language in order to reveal the unity of Being. Indeed, "when one reads the Presocratics with an open mind and sensitive ear, one cannot help being struck by the religious note in much of what they say. Few words occur more frequently in their fragments than the term 'god.'"[5] To conventionally assume that Thales simply opposed myth to "rational account" (*logos*) is to misunderstand the Greek word *logos* and follow the modern reductionist tendency to render it exclusively as "reason" or "discursive reasoning" (*dianoia*). But even Plato himself, who finally recognized that the only thing worth being serious about was God, made no clear distinction between attitude to myth and philosophical reasoning. If practiced with real wisdom, he maintained, both myth-telling and dialectic could lead towards truth; but otherwise they would misguide. Since the ultimate God was beyond human speech, "Plato repeatedly tends to set up the two apparently opposing categories of myth and logic only to end up merging and demolishing them."[6] But the Greek word *logos* can also mean divine speech (the demiurgic word of Ra rendered into operative wisdom by Thoth, to use the Egyptian theological terms) as well as noetic apprehension of the first indemonstrable and sacred principles, archetypes, or gods (Gr. *Theoi*; Eg. *neteru*), which are transcendent and immanent at the same time. In addition, *logos* can mean analogy and proportion.

4. Zailan Moris, "The Essential Relation between Revelation and Philosophy in Islam and its Importance in Understanding the Nature and History of Islamic Philosophy" in *The Philosophy of Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, ed. Lewis Edwin Hahn, Randall E. Auxier, and Lucian W. Stone, Jr. (Chicago and La Salle: Open Court, 2001), p.634.

5. Gregory Vlastos, "Theology and Philosophy in Early Greek Thought" in *Studies in Presocratic Philosophy*, vol. 1, ed. D.J. Furley and R.E. Allen (New York: Humanities Press, 1970), p.92.

6. Peter Kingsley, *Ancient Philosophy, Mystery, and Magic: Empedocles and Pythagorean Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), p.166.

In the original Orphico-Pythagorean sense, philosophy meant wisdom (*sophia*) and love (*eros*) combined in a moral and intellectual purification in order to reach the "likeness to God" (*homoiosis theo*, [Plato, *Theaet.* 176b]). This likeness was to be attained by *gnosis*, knowledge. The same Greek word *nous* ("intellect," understood in a macrocosmic and microcosmic sense) covers all that is meant both by "spirit" (*spiritus*, *ruh*) and "intellect" (*intellectus*, *'aql*) in the Medieval Christian and Islamic lexicon. Thus Platonic philosophy (and especially Neoplatonism) was a spiritual and contemplative way of life leading to enlightenment; a way which was properly and intrinsically intellectual; a way that was ultimately based on intellection or noetic vision (*noesis*), which transcends the realm of sense perception and discursive reasoning. Through an immediate grasp of first principles, the non-discursive intelligence lead to a union (*henosis*) with the divine Forms. "Knowledge of the gods," says Iamblichus, "is virtue and wisdom and perfect happiness, and makes us like to the gods" (*Protr.* 3). Even for Aristotle, who seems to be a much more earthly-minded rationalist, the highest and eternally active Intellect, or God, as the ultimate metaphysical *telos* of any true philosopher, erotically attracts and harmoniously moves everything in the multi-dimensional cosmos:

> It is the great Beauty with which the entire Cosmos seems to be in Love. It is the Great Light and cause of enlightenment for the mind of the true philosopher in the triple Socratic manifestation: as lover of Hellenic *mousike* (that is, practitioner of the art of poetic rhythm, harmonious sound, and all audibly appreciated beauty); as lover of Hellenic *eidike* (that is, practitioner of the art of visible patterns, symmetrical forms, and all optically appreciated beauty); and as lover of Hellenic *dialektike* (that is, practitioner of the art of logic, ordered form, principled life, rational discourse, intuitive grasp of principles, and noetically appreciated truth).[7]

Of course, Hellenic philosophy in general differed from the earlier traditions of wisdom precisely by its developed set of formal logic and dialectic, along with its abstract technical vocabulary, as well as a new type of rationality of a more or less "scientific" character. But this additional edifice was built on the ancient metaphysical superstructure itself—supported by certain divine revelations, cos-

7. Christos C. Evangeliou, *The Hellenic Philosophy: Between Europe, Asia, and Africa*, p.55.

mogonical myths, and rituals aimed at the establishment of cosmic order and justice, as well as the transformation and elevation of the soul by a restoration of her true identity. By the time of Plato the soul was no longer regarded as the phantom (*eidolon*) of the body. On the contrary, the body had become a simple appearance and transitory image of the soul, which, by reminiscence (*anamnesis*), purification, concentration, separation and philosophical *askesis* was able to restore the memory of her divine abode. Thus, to be a philosopher in this sense was to turn away from the realm of seeming and to transcend the simulacrum-like body, thereby elevating the soul to the intelligible world of the stars. This reawakened soul, regarded as an image of the divine Intellect, is actually the same as the winged Egyptian *ba* which was to be turned into the spiritual light, *akh*, in the same way as Osiris was transformed into Ra. It meant that finally the soul was assimilated to that God who is the All.

In some respects a one-sided philosophical discourse, instead of being a love of wisdom, was indeed turned into the passion for merely speaking *about* wisdom, and in some cases developed into skepticism. However, in most cases the goal of ancient philosophy remained the same. Thus, by "philosophizing" was meant both noetic activity and spiritual practice; and this was attributed not only to various Hellenic philosophers who belonged to different *haireseis* (schools or theoretically founded ways of life), but also to the Egyptian priests, Chaldeans, and Indian Gymnosophists. As to the sources of truth and wisdom, many *haireseis* and traditions were agreed in tracing their origins back to the gods themselves.

According to Isocrates, the Egyptians, who were famous for their piety and practical wisdom (*eusebeia kai phronesis*), introduced for the soul the practice (*askesis*) of philosophy as a means to strengthen the laws and to investigate the nature of the cosmos. Pythagoras was the first to have brought to Hellas the philosophy of the Egyptians (*Busiris* 21–22). Parmenides, Plato, and Aristotle developed theories of the world in the light of the distinctions between opinion (*doxa*) and knowledge (*episteme*), which repeat the distinction between the outer surface of myths, rites, and statues, and their inner meaning—the shining power of spiritual archetypes, *akhu*—revealed by the anagogical hermeneutics practiced already by the Egyptian priests of the 18th dynasty (1551–1292 B.C.E.) and earlier.

Both Plato and Aristotle traced the origin of philosophy to wonder; by "philosophy" they meant the contemplation (*theoria*) of the manifested cosmic order, or of the truth and beauty of the divine principles (be they visible stars or invisible noetic archetypes). Therefore Aristotle asserts:

> That philosophy is not a science of production is clear even from the history of the earliest philosophers. For it is owing to their wonder that men both now begin and at first began to philosophize .... And a man who is puzzled and wonders thinks himself ignorant (whence even the lover of myth is in a sense a lover of wisdom, for the myth is composed of wonders) (*Metaph.* 982b, 11–19).

But if human wonder is the true origin of philosophy, then Christos Evangeliou is correct in his claim that the beginnings of philosophical speculation go back as far as the appearance of *Anthropos*.[8] In fact, Adam himself was the first prophet, according to the Islamic tradition. To put the matter in other terms: the Egyptian Thoth (regarded as both the Intellect and the creative Word of Ra), or Hermes (who became identified with the mythical prophet Idris, called "the Father of philosophers" [*Abu'l-hukama*]), was the first philosopher in the archetypal sense. This primordial philosophy was originally a form of revealed truth and intellectual hymns sung by those who kept an image of Hermes in their hearts and belonged to the "Hermaic chain" (*Hermaike seira*). This chain symbolized irradiations from the divine Intellect. Thus, the true philosopher was *theios aner*, the divine man, who contemplated the light of the noetic gods and tried to live philosophically, i.e., in accord with the divine wisdom. At the highest grade of philosophy, learning, instruction, and purification came to an end, and the pure vision—analogous to the *epopteia* of the mysteries—was granted to the sage. Finally, he was able to return to his "starry Heaven"—the original inner abode of the unbearable glory reached through recollection and spiritual exercises, including intellectual training (dialectics) and theurgy.

Contrary to the prevalent view of modern historians of science and philosophy, the ancient Hellenes considered themselves to be students of the much older Oriental civilizations. It seems that Plato was substantially indebted to the so-called Orphic tradition (*Orpheos*

8. Christos C. Evangeliou, *The Hellenic Philosophy: Between Europe, Asia, and Africa*, p.105.

paradosis, partly based on Indian and Egyptian influences) and the Pythagorean oral teaching. Though the strong Neoplatonic conviction that the philosophy of Plato was a prolongation of the Orphic theology is disregarded by some modern scholars, Olympiodorus may be partly correct in asserting that "Plato paraphrases Orpheus everywhere" ("*pantachou gar ho Platon paroidei ta Orpheos*," [Olympiodorus, *In Phaed.* 10.3.13]). To summarize the matter briefly: Platonists believed in a revelation given to the ancient sages and theologians, i.e., to divinely inspired poets and hierophants. This primordial revelation was viewed as unchangeable; there could be nothing "new" regarding metaphysics and divine truths. According to Celsus, Plato never claimed to have discovered anything new. Plotinus, too, plainly rejected the idea that he taught anything new—though changing historical conditions, the personal characteristics of philosophers and their audiences, as well as concrete philosophical problems to be solved, inevitably determined certain logical forms and the style of any particular philosophical discourse. One ought also to remember that the curious figure who since the time of Pythagoras was called a *philosophos* (though the equivalent ancient Egyptian term *mer reh* was already attested) was practically analogous to the figure of the specialized expert in purificatory rites and words of power; this figure was an initiate craftsman, magician, and healer, as well as legislator, poet, and inspired interpreter (*hermeneus*) of divine tokens, signs, and symbols. The *philosophos* wandered across the Mediterranean Sea, Assyria, and Egypt, and their practical wisdom (*sophia* or *hikmah*)—applied at every level of existence—was based on the ancient cosmological, theurgical, medical, and mythological traditions of the Near East. They were true forerunners of the later Pythagorean brotherhoods.

Various branches of the Egyptian *scientia sacra* (including the science of an alchemical transformation and theurgical ascent to the realm of the divine light; a theory of hieratic symbols and hermeneutics; as well as the principles of mathematics, music, medicine and politics) contributed to the purifying of the entire state, regarded as tantamount to the temple; in addition to transforming different levels of the statue-like human being. By establishing cosmic equilibrium and keeping to the truth (*maat*) they led the soul (*ba* and other vital principles) back to the stars, or spiritual archetypes. The same goal of "philosophizing" was attested within the

later Hellenic traditions. The schools of Pythagoreanism and Platonism founded the chain of transmission which was partly rooted in ancient Egyptian wisdom. According to Porphyry, such doctrines as that the soul is immortal; that it changes into other kinds of living beings; that all living things are akin; that events recur in certain cycles, Pythagoras imported from the Egyptian and Mesopotamian sources. The Pythagorean number theory and the Platonic theory of Ideas, as well as the Orphic and Socratic conception of the immortal soul, and the image of the philosopher as a semi-divine figure, or as an ideal ruler in the theocratic body-like state, also have their deep Egyptian and Mesopotamian roots.

Due to this ancient metaphysical and cultic legacy, followers of Orpheus, Pythagoras, Empedocles, and Plato regarded their philosophical tradition as a mystery into which one might be initiated. Thus, the mathematician Theon of Smyrna, who belonged to the so-called Middle Platonic period, distinguished five stages of this initiation: (1) purification; (2) communication of the ritual; (3) vision (*epopteia*); (4) "adornment with garlands"; (5) "the joy that comes from unity and converse with the gods." In the context of such philosophical mystagogy, Plato himself can be viewed as a hierophant of the truest rites (*teletai*).

By now it should be clear that the Neoplatonic promotion of theurgy as both the transcendent and immanent background of "philosophizing," and the very summit of philosophy itself, was simply an attempt to revitalize the ancient transformative wisdom ("the Assyrian dogmas," as Proclus was wont to say) against the degenerated form of one-sided rationalism, sentimental hedonism and the Academic skepticism of Arcesilaus and Carneades.

Antiochus of Ascalon broke away from the skeptical tradition, and Numenius of Apamea, the Pythagorean and Middle Platonic forerunner of Plotinus, urged the rediscovery of the sacred paths of Platonism and early Pythagoreanism, which he traced back to the doctrines and rituals of the ancient Near East. Through a Pythagoreanizing allegorical exegesis he tried to reestablish a sort of primordial *philosophia perennis*, regarded as the common wisdom of the Chaldean, Egyptian, Phoenician, Jewish, and Indian sages. The semi-mythical Pythagoras himself, to whom the origin of the Greek term *philosophia* is credited by some traditional Hellenic authors, was eager to build up a great philosophical and scientific

synthesis of various ancient metaphysical doctrines, mythical accounts and practices. He undoubtedly used mathematical and astrological materials from Babylonia and practiced an incubation rite related to the esoteric conception of the immortal soul. The Pythagorean table of opposites was close to the Akkadian and Babylonian rules for interpreting auspices and tokens in divination. Even the imagery of Parmenides, who is counted among the fathers of Western philosophy, was rooted in the Assyrian and Babylonian cosmic mythology and related religious cults.

Since the time of Plato, genuine lovers of wisdom and truth considered the tree of the Orphic (Apollonian and Dionysiac) tradition, and Hellenic philosophy in general, to have grown out of Oriental seeds. So, for Porphyry, the famous student of Plotinus, the entire Hellenic philosophy is a relatively modern and in many respects corrupted version of the divinely inspired Egyptian and Chaldean wisdoms. Searching for the universal way of salvation, Porphyry understood that only a few were capable of following the way of philosophy and escaping from the cycle of existences. In thus dismissing philosophy as a universal means of salvation, he looked towards the Chaldean theurgy and Indian *disciplina*, regarding the Indian Gymnosophists (the Brahmans and Samanaeans) as true philosophers concerned with divine wisdom who lived a life of righteousness, with "the whole day and greater part of the night set apart for hymns and prayers to the gods" (*De abst.* IV.16–18). According to such a universalist and perennialist perspective, the teachings of Neoplatonism were not a sort of regrettable innovation (as modern classicists would have it), but the faithful perpetuation of pre-Platonic metaphysics put into a new dress. Plato himself was merely a link (albeit crucial) in the Golden Chain of the Pythagorean, Orphic and different Oriental traditions.

Another crafty fable invented by modern historians of philosophy, along with the label "Neoplatonism," is the artificial division between early (and therefore "true") Pythagoreanism and later (hence "false") Neopythagoreanism, despite the undoubted similarity and underlying continuity between them. But, as Peter Kingsley has pointed out:

> To portray the Platonizing reinterpretation of Pythagoreanism as an aberrant departure from the "true," "pure" pre-Platonic

> Pythagoreanism is to overlook the essential fact that—before Plato's time as well—Pythagoreanism was perpetually changing, reformulating itself, consciously adapting to incorporate new developments.[9]

There was no rigidly established "orthodoxy" or official certification in the realm of Platonic tradition, which maintained itself by a process of oral transmission from master to pupil. Thus, philosophers might provide quite different solutions to a common set of problems whilst, nevertheless, belonging to the same Golden Chain. They might, for example, differ on such questions as the basic tenets of cosmology and the creation of the world, or the definition of virtue and the best system of logic; however, all would agree as regards the transcendence of God, the theory of Platonic Ideas, or eternal divine archetypes, and the immortality of the soul, which required that it be purified, elevated and reestablished in its original union (*henosis*) with the divine source.

In the Athenian school of Syrianus and Proclus, the Homeric image of the Golden Chain (*seire chruseie*, *Iliad* VIII.18), stretching from Heaven to Earth, was used to describe both the unbroken vertical connection with the first principles (noetic sources of the demiurgic descent, as well as paradigms of the revealed wisdom), and the horizontal, or historical, succession of the qualified masters and interpreters—a succession which was not always based exclusively on direct physical relations. In fact, the Golden Chain is the same as the Hermaic Chain. This chain was both the chain of theophany, manifestation, or descent (*demiourgike seira*), and the ladder of ascent. This imagery of the Golden Chain was inseparable from the metaphysics of light and solar symbolism. Socrates also regarded the Homeric Golden Rope as referring to the Sun. It signified that "so long as the Heavens and the Sun continue to move round, all things in Heaven and Earth are kept going, whereas if they were bound down and brought to a stand, all things would be destroyed and the world, as they say, turned upside down" (Plato, *Theaet.* 153c8–d5). Thus, the Emperor Julian's claimed descent from the Sun (Helios) meant his vertical (or inner) relationship with the divine Intellect which was the source of illumination and manifestation of the *logos*, or *logismos*—including the power of reasoning in

9. Peter Kingsley, *Ancient Philosophy, Mystery, and Magic: Empedocles and Pythagorean Tradition*, p.328.

general. According to Marinus' testimony, Proclus was convinced that he belonged to the Hermaic tradition: he believed, following a dream he once had, that he possessed the soul of the Pythagorean philosopher Nichomachus of Gerasa. And so he used to say that the philosopher must be the hierophant of the entire cosmos ("*koine hierophantes tou holou kosmou*," [*Vita Procli* 19.28]). Marinus also attests that the young Hegias, an attendant of the Athenian school, "showed clear signs from childhood of possessing all the virtues of his ancestors and of belonging to the Golden Chain of philosophers that started with Solon" (*ibid.*, 26).

Since the Golden Age was the Age of Kronos, and the rule of Kronos, as a blissful time, meant the rule of Intellect (*nous*), the Golden Race of Platonic philosophers can be understood as an idealized succession of god-like sages. Their mythical status in the hierarchy of being and knowledge is akin to that of the Egyptian Horus—the golden philosopher-king, who was son of Ra (Sun, or Intellect) and the manifested wisdom of Thoth—the Hindu *avatara* and the Sufi *qutb* or *al-insan al-kamil* (the axial and perfect man). In Egypt, gold was a symbol of the perfect god-like state. The same was true for the Orphic and Pythagorean tradition. According to Empedocles, exiled gods had to wander for thrice ten thousand seasons far from the company of the blessed (fr. 115). At last they were able to restore their original perfection through purificatory rites (*teletai*), regained virtues and a knowledge that implied the recollection of their own god-like-nature. Thus for Proclus, Platonism was the divine philosophy which shone forth through the grace of the gods. The philosophers who belonged to the Golden Chain were "true priests and hierophants of the divine Plato" (*Plat. Theol.* 1.1). They (e.g. Plotinus the Egyptian and his pupils) were regarded as the exegetes of the Platonic vision and the promoters of the true interpretation of the divine mysteries.

Philosophy, as understood by Proclus and other Neoplatonists, was not just a rational training and a sport of mind merged in doubts. To put the matter in later Islamic terms, the Platonic philosophy was tantamount to *hikmah* (wisdom) derived from "the niche of prophecy" (*mishkat al-nubuwwah*). It combined discursive philosophy and spiritual practice in order to attain illumination, direct vision (*epopteia*) of truth, and union (*henosis*) with the divine principles. In his Gifford Lectures, S.H. Nasr significantly remarked that:

> The rediscovery of the sacred character of knowledge today would lead, almost before anything else, to a rediscovery of Greek wisdom, of Plato, Plotinus, and other Graeco-Alexandrian sages and writings such as Hermeticism, not as simply human philosophy but as sacred doctrines of divine inspiration to be compared much more with the Hindu *darsana*s than with philosophical schools as they are currently understood.[10]

Plato's "Orphic" conception of the philosopher seeking release from the wheel of cyclical time and return to his native Star is analogous to the Hindu doctrine of the path of escape developed by the Ajivika teacher Gosala, the Jain master Mahavira and the Upanishadic philosophers Yajnavalkya and Uddalaka, who promoted the so-called Tripartite Doctrine[11] of philosophical monism, itself perhaps influenced by the Egyptian Osiris cult at some early stages of formation. Alain Daniélou has suggested (though at first sight his claim sounds unlikely) that even Orphism was derived from the influence of Jainism;[12] and according to Giovanni Reale,[13] "without Orphism we cannot explain Pythagoras, nor Heraclitus, nor Empedocles and naturally not Plato and whatever was derived from him." Thomas McEvilley goes much further in his statement that:

> In Greece, the word philosophy—*philosophia*, "love of knowledge," or desire for the knowledge that frees the soul from the wheel (which is what this word, coined, they say, by Pythagoras, must have meant to him)—is the closest equivalent of yoga; *sadhana* finds a very close equivalent in *bios*, meaning a specially adopted lifestyle, such as the Orphic *bios*, the Pythagorean *bios*, and so on.[14]

10. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred* (Albany, New York: SUNY, 1980), p.35.

11. The Tripartite Doctrine claims that (1) the world is *samsara*, (2) it is governed by *karma*, and (3) the goal of escape is *moksha*, liberation, release. *Samsara* refers to the cyclic process of transmigration (gr. *metempsuchosis*).

12. Alain Danièlou, *Siva and Dionysus*, trans. K.F. Hurry (London and the Hague: East-West Publications, 1982), p.28.

13. Giovanni Reale, *A History of Ancient Philosophy, vol. 1, From the Origins to Socrates*, trans. John R. Catan (Albany, New York: SUNY, 1987), p.15.

14. Thomas McEvilley, *The Shape of Ancient Thought: Comparative Studies in Greek and Indian Philosophies* (New York: Allworth Press, 2002), p.100.

According to Hermetic doctrine, there were four kinds of men who received human bodies with the task of being transformed into divinity: just kings, true philosophers, genuine prophets, and root-cutters, or magical healers (*Kore kosmou* 41–42). An image and function of the "philosopher" partly depended on the archetype of the divine ruler and priest who was a son of Ra, or the divine Intellect, in the terms of Egyptian solar theology. Thus one can say that true *philosophia* was an inspired task aimed at a transformation of the soul—an intellectual search for the meaning of forms and ideas, symbols and images, metaphysical and natural causes. The Pythagoreans considered philosophy in terms of medicine and therapeutics and regarded themselves as adherents of a tradition greater than their own personalities, in most cases preserving anonymity and attributing their achievements to the archetypal figure of Pythagoras or to other semi-legendary sages.

For Iamblichus and his successors, who were concerned about the gradual corruption and distortion of knowledge in their time, the origins of Hellenic philosophy were to be traced back to ancient revelations. As the Egyptians and Chaldeans were original revelatory sources for all mankind, so Pythagoras was for Hellenic philosophy.[15] Hence, the science of the divine established by Plato, including the famous theory of Ideas, was thought of as being derived and developed from the Pythagorean sources which, in turn, depended on certain "perennial" patterns drawn from the various civilizations of the ancient East. For the late Neoplatonists, the true Hellenic "love of wisdom" could be supported and illustrated not only by the inspired poetry of Orpheus, Homer, and Hesiod, but also by the Egyptian, Phoenician, and Assyrian myths and "theological dogmas," including the so-called *Chaldean Oracles* (*ta logia*). Endeavoring to show the close relationship between Pythagoras and Plato, Proclus gave Pythagoras a central role and asserted that his teaching was

> … in harmony with the first principles of Plato and with the secret revelations of the theologians. For all Greek theology derives from Orphic mystagogy, Pythagoras first learning from Aglaophemus the secrets concerning the gods, Plato after him receiving the com-

15. Dominic J. O'Meara, *Pythagoras Revived: Mathematics and Philosophy in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p.103.

plete science of the gods from Pythagorean and Orphic writings (*Plat. Theol.* 1.5.25).

Accordingly, both in metaphysics and physics, Platonism can be reduced to Pythagoreanism and subordinated to the revealed wisdom of the ancient East. What distinguishes the theology of Plato from that of the Egyptian, Babylonian, and Assyrian initiates as well as the Homeric, Orphic, and Pythagorean sages, is its scientific and demonstrative character. The proper objects of the Platonic science of dialectic are higher realities, or metaphysical "things" (*ta pragmata*), not passing phenomena. But in Neoplatonism this science itself was finally surpassed and transcended by the supra-rational "vision" and theurgic union conducted by the gods themselves.

Proclus described the Orphic and Pythagorean approach as inspired, symbolic, anagogic, and revelatory in contrast to the Socratic approach which was rational, ethical, and demonstrative. He thought that Plato was able to combine both these methods. Thus, just as Iamblichus tried to prove that Pythagoras provided scientific form to revelations of the Egyptian and Chaldean wisdom, so Syrianus and Proclus granted to Plato the role of the first strictly scientific thinker, who put the ancient revelations into scientific and dialectical terms. But Orphism and Pythagoreanism still belonged to the revelatory realm of anagogic symbolism. In short, philosophy was a tradition of divinely revealed truth which might be more or less successfully rendered into the auxiliary set of abstract logic and strictly rational categories that were "philosophical" in the narrow sense of the word. But this revealed truth—revealed and then rationalized (i.e., adapted to the rules of human logic)—was conveyed to fallen souls for their salvation by the superior daemonic souls of those hermeneutists who belonged to the Golden Chain and were directly connected with the divine realm.

The fall in philosophical insight, as well as the mission of the superior souls sent down to recall corrupted souls to the divine abode, was exemplified in the *Phaedrus* of Plato. Thus even Socrates, who described philosophy as a kind of divinely inspired madness (*mania*), was referred to as a savior by Hermeias of Alexandria. According to him, Socrates had been sent down to the world of becoming as a benefit to mankind and to turn souls—each in a different way—to philosophy. Not only Pythagoras, Archytas, Socrates, and Plato, but also later philosophers such as Ammonius Saccas,

Plotinus, Porphyry, Iamblichus and Syrianus were "companions of the gods" (*apadous theon andras*) and belonged to the revelatory and soteriological tradition of philosophy, the main principles of which were received from daemons and angels. Such men were ranked with divine beings and called "daemonic" by the Pythagoreans. They were members of the divine choir, free from subjection to the body and "instructed by the divine" (*theodidaktos*). Thus philosophy was "sent down" along with those who preserved intact their pure vision of the gods in the heavenly procession (or the solar boat of Osiris-Ra, to express the matter in Egyptian terms), who were the providential agents of Eros and the inspired interpreters of the noetic realities. They were the keepers of anagogic power, because dialectic and discursive thought were regarded as necessary aspects of the ascent. According to Hermeias, true philosophers were divine-like souls who derived their wisdom from the immaterial realm and then translated it to fallen souls—those who ought to regrow their wings through the complete course of purification and recollection of their archetypal origins.

The ultimate goal of Pythagorean and Platonic philosophy was assimilation to god through the cultivation of virtue and truth. It meant a return to the first principles reached through philosophical education (*paideia*) and recollection (*anamnesis*), scientific investigation, contemplation, and liturgy (or theurgic ascent), based on the ineffable symbols and sacramental rites. By this philosophical practice the initiate student was transformed into a saintly and divine man (*theios aner*). As Hermeias says, Socrates

> … thought it right to call the divine men gods in the *Sophist*, for the wise and divine men are as gods in relation to men. And so he was wont often to credit his works to the divine men, in the *Phaedrus* to Pythagoras, in the *Charmidas* to Zalmoxis, a wise man, and the story of Atlantis in the *Timaeus* to the Egyptians (*In Phaedr.* 253.18–25).

* * *

The present anthology consists of four unequal parts, starting with accounts on the life of Pythagoras as attested by comparatively late Hellenic and even Byzantine writers, who strictly obey the rules of the particular genre. We are thus not too preoccupied with the historical precision of these accounts; we wish, rather, to present an

archetypal and sometimes idealized mythological background, along with the important hermeneutical contents of the Pythagorean and Platonic tradition. Even if frequent references to the Eastern sources cannot be proved as valid in a strictly historical sense, they serve as the important icons and symbols of a consciously constructed Pythagorean-Platonic self-image, and mark the frame of certain metaphysical horizons.

Some Pythagorean excerpts presented in the second part are regarded as "spurious" by many modern scholars simply because their real authors or editors belong to times later than claimed. The majority of scholars too easily forget that in the ancient world an "author" could be regarded as *auctoritas*: sometimes the whole tradition (or school, *hairesis*) was concealed under such archetypal names as Hermes, Solomon, or Pythagoras. The ideas were not their personal belongings and so those who searched for a sacred meaning paid attention to the inner contents, not the outer personal identities. As 'Allamah Tabataba'i has remarked: "for us the person who wrote the *Nahj al-balaghah* is 'Ali even if he lived a century ago."[16]

The excerpts selected from Plato's *Symposium*, *Phaedrus*, *Timaeus* and other dialogues are pivotal for the understanding of what sense is conveyed by the word "philosophy" and how Plato used cosmological and philosophical myths in order to build an integral and meaningful world picture.

The fourth and largest part of the anthology is devoted to Hellenic Neoplatonism, from Plotinus and Porphyry to Damascius. The main emphasis is laid on various hermeneutical aspects of late Platonic metaphysics and sacred mythology, as well as philosophical ethics and theurgy. The close relationship between the Platonic and Pythagorean perspectives is revealed, while referring to the Egyptian and Near Eastern parallels attested by the Neoplatonists themselves. This is a view "from the inside" of the Neoplatonic tradition (*paradosis*).

Despite the minor shortcomings and anachronistic renderings of the Hellenic divinities by Roman names, we have used some texts translated from the Greek into English by Thomas Taylor, the

16. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "Reply to Zailan Moris" in *The Philosophy of Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, p.635.

famous Platonist who has been systematically neglected by the narrow-minded scholars of the 19th and 20th centuries. The first reason for including these texts is that Thomas Taylor had a deep understanding of Hellenic philosophy and his renderings are in principle quite correct. The second reason is very simple: there are no other English translations at all. Because of the prevailing negative attitude toward late Neoplatonism by modern historians of philosophy (with Plotinus as a rare exception), certain works by Proclus, Hermeias and Damascius are to this day only available in the Greek originals. What seems most important to a student of metaphysics, hieratic imagination, and theurgy is regarded as a worthless fable by the positivist heirs of the Enlightenment.

The rediscovery of this ancient Hellenic wisdom allows us to see the crucial importance of the Neoplatonic doctrines for the formation of traditional Christian, Jewish and Islamic thought. If freed from modern misreadings—which, unfortunately, even had an effect on some contemporary Traditionalist writers—the ancient Pythagorean and Platonic tradition can be regarded as one of the main intellectual pillars of the *sophia perennis*.

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"Introduction" to The Golden Chain

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