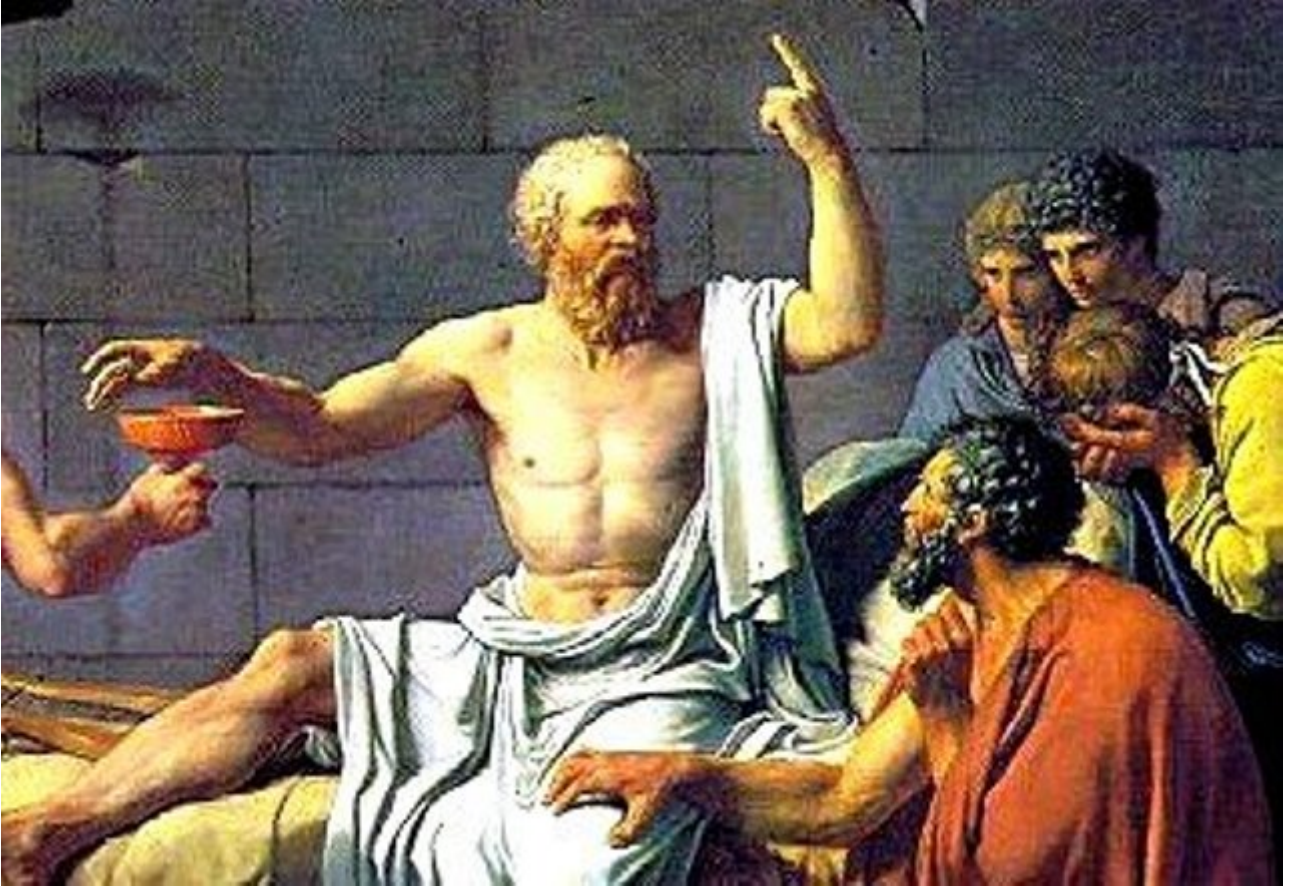
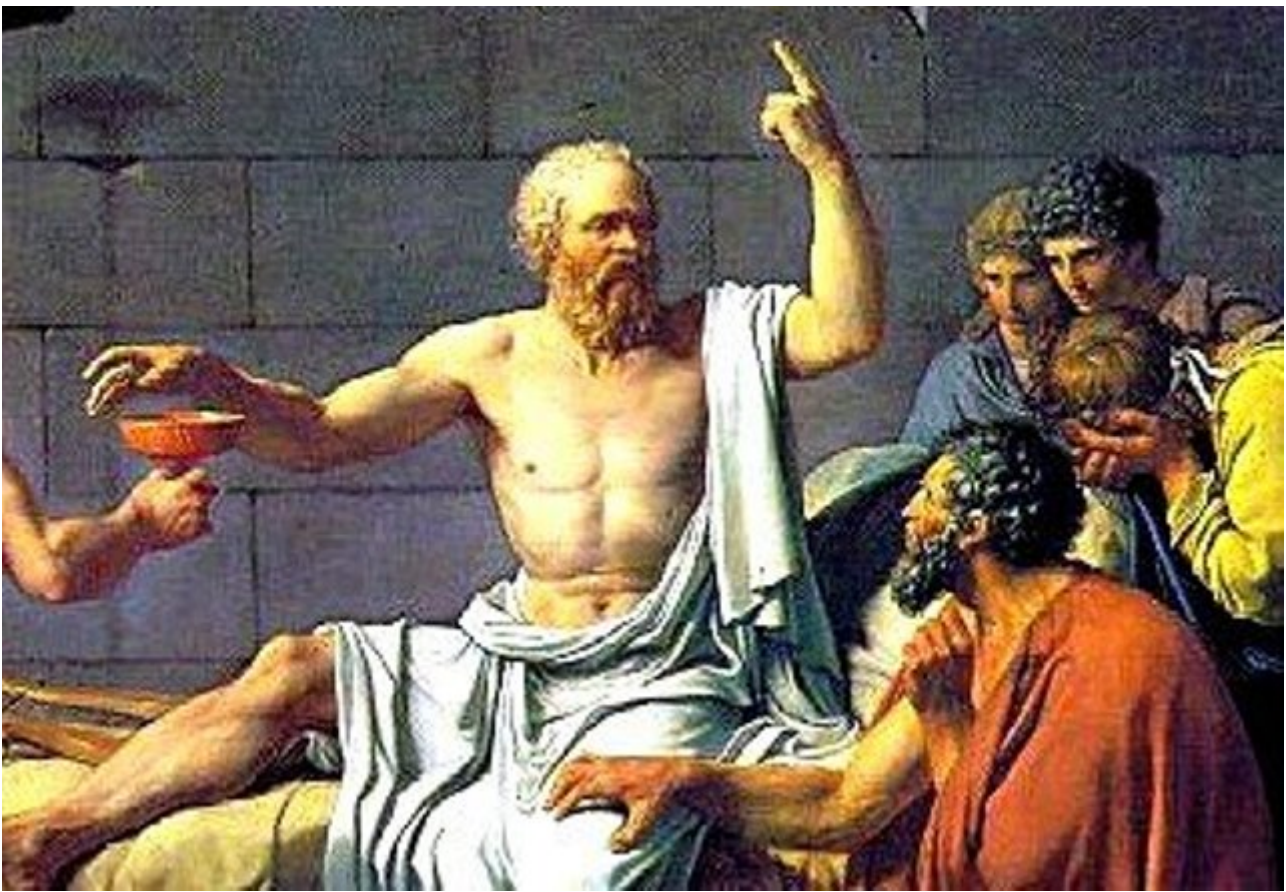


The Moves to Transcend Idolatry in Ancient Philosophy and Modern Idolatries (Protopresbyter Nikolaos Loudovikos)

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The ancient Greeks came down into what became their territory at the beginning of the 2nd millennium B.C. They were an Indo-European tribe with a particular historical dynamism which would be strengthened by their encounter with indigenous, pre-Greek tribes, such as the Pelasgians and with those from Asia Minor, such as the Carians and Leleges, who had already created a striking culture. The Greek gods were cultural creations or composites, which would reach their height after the Mycenaean era, in Homer.

Since this paper is not about Religious Studies, we shall simply note the generally agreed view among the experts that, even all-powerful Zeus included, these gods were, to a remarkable degree, creations made in the image and likeness of human beings and susceptible to exclusively human passions. Even though there was an enormous and unbridgeable gap between God and people, this gap was created only by His superior powers and immortality. In these aristocratic stories of Homer's, the gods tended to appear as super-aristocrats who played leading roles on a higher level, naturally losing some of their divine nature in the course of this procedure. Certainly this was a poetic codification of the liberal sentiments and prejudices of the upper class in Greece at the time, which was reflected in the creation of a series of gods venerated by the people, although the latter continued

to worship their own, more humble gods.

Naturally, all the above does not exhaust any possible positive significance of the Ancient Greek religions in themselves, here and there, but that is another matter. It was, then, against these demythologized Homeric gods that the Greek philosophical tradition would rebel: the pre-Socratics initially, either directly, as in the case of Xenophanes, or indirectly in the context of a sober philosophical transcendence of the Twelve Gods of Homer, a transcendence which was to run secretly but steadily through a whole millennium of Greek philosophy, until Plotinus.

We would say unreservedly that Ancient Greek philosophy was, in reality, monotheist throughout, which, rephrased, means that the philosophically cultured Greeks of the upper classes often lived in a perceptible tension between public worship on the one hand and their own philosophical ideals on the other, with a clear intellectual preference, naturally, for the latter.

Within the limits of this paper, an attempt will be made at an illustrative presentation of a few of the heroes of this transcendence. One important philosophical transmutation of the Homeric gods in the direction of monotheism is represented, for example, in the notion among Ionian thinkers of Anaximander's infinite. The philosopher gives divine attributes to the infinite, which he sees as incorruptible, ageless, eternal and indestructible. The infinite is the all-inclusive foundation of everything, while the fundamental elements of all things are delineated by Justice (*Dike*) and Recompense (*Tisis*). In other words, the harmonious balance between beings throughout the course of their lives in time. A process in which they complete each other, in juxtaposition and harmony.

As regards the great thinker Heraclitus, de-idolization is also the meaning of wisdom (*logos*) here. Wisdom which links opposites in an continuous becoming, nevertheless characterized by a functional, dialectic, structural unity, wisdom being common, hence the fragment: "Though wisdom is common, yet the many live as if they had a wisdom of their own". If wisdom is common, then prudence and philosophy mean precisely communication with this wisdom, concurrence with wisdom, in such a way that wisdom is the experience of unity, despite the process of becoming and within process of becoming.

The notion of wisdom in Heraclitus approaches that of God, a God naturally both in the world and transcendent at the same time, created and uncreated as we would say in the language of theology and yet one and the same. Nevertheless the early apophatism is remarkable. Heraclitus uses this *via negativa* to describe this wisdom as God, as, for instance in fragment 67: God is day and night, winter and

summer, war and peace, surfeit and hunger, taking different shapes, like fire when it is mixed with various herbs and is then called by the scent of each one of them". There is no trace of folk religion or idolatry here, while formulations such as the one above seem to be seeking a theology entirely untenable of course within the context of Ancient Greek monist cosmological ontology. In other words, a theology of discrimination between the essence and energies in God. Similar to that which was developed in various entirely Biblical ontological premises- the distinction between created and uncreated- by the great Fathers of the Church.

We can, of course, continue with Parmenides, a philosopher from Magna Graecia (Southern Italy), the great thinker about Being, which is often presented in histories of philosophy as being in contradistinction to Heracleitus' "process of becoming", though, in fact, the two do not differ, in the sense that they are both concerned with understanding the one and unalterable absolute truth. In Parmenides, this truth is the Being, as the rational and ontological foundation of everything, endowed, again, with the features of the Homeric God (296/8, 1-14): "is uncreated and indestructible, complete, only-begotten and immovable, that is perfect". Naturally, in this ontological approach, which considers the Being the fundamental meaning and truth of all things, not able, of course, to distinguish as yet between the Being and all these things, we encounter the same philosophical transcendence of any idolized mythical version of it that we do in Heracleitus.

This is a transcendence which was to continue in Anaxagoras from Clazomenae, in whom, however, the position of fundamental being was occupied by the mind. Naturally, here, too, the nous was not entirely separated from the world: it participated in its schematization but was still its physical and metaphysical cause and not an image of a god with human passions.

An essay such as this could not, of course, leave out Xenophanes, the apophatic philosopher of the 6th century B.C., from whose work we might also read a few excerpts: "Homer and Hesiod attributed to the gods everything that is shameful and worthy of condemnation in people: theft, adultery and deceit among themselves... But mortals believed that the gods were born and had clothes, bodies and voices like their own... The Ethiopians think their gods have flat noses and are black, the Thracians that their gods are blue-eyed with red hair... But if the cattle and horses or the lions had hands, as well, and could form things with their hands and do the works that people do, then horses would depict gods in a similar fashion, cattle as cattle and they would make the bodies like theirs... There is one god, the greatest among the gods and men, not at all like mortals in body or spirit".

What is apparent here is a kind of theological apophatism which does not wish to

approach the being of God through any of the created beings: “(God) always remains in the same place and does not move at all, nor would it be fitting for him to move from place to place, but, without effort, with the thought of his mind, he moves all things, he sees all things and hears in his entirety”. These are theological formulations which are advanced for their time and even, I would say for the Middle Ages in the West. Schofield says that this god of Xenophanes had some kind of body, since an entirely bodiless entity would have been unthinkable at that time, but, despite that, as regards the human, theological aspects of this new thinking, his being remained transcendent.

There is no need even for me to speak about a transcendent god in Plato. He is identical with the “beyondness” of the essence, the One of the Republic (6, 509ab), who, as overwhelming beauty is the cause of knowledge and truth, providing the truth to the things “known and gives the power to the one who knows, is the idea of the good. And, as the cause of the knowledge and truth, you can understand it to be a thing known; but, as fair as these two are— knowledge and truth — if you believe that it is something different from them and still fairer than they, your belief will be right” (Transl. Allan Bloom). The good is beyond essence, despite the fact that it is the foundation of the essence of beings.

This tradition was to be taken up, of course, in an exceptional way by Plotinus. Here the One is even more extremely transcendental than in Plato, since here there are now clear Judeo-Christian influences. So the One is entirely undifferentiated, it does not conceive, does not see itself (VI, 7, 39; 7, 41) and it has no reason, feeling or knowledge. It does not even produce itself (VI, 8, 10) but most of all it does not want us, “it does not yield to us” (VI, 9, 8). It is only we who desire it and, indeed, “out of necessity” (VI, 9, 9).

Despite this, however, there is a detail in Plotinus of colossal importance to the second part of this paper: the opportunity to equate the transcendental One with the human subject, and it is this which forms the philosophical source for every neo-idolatry in the Western world. Indeed, in the sixth Ennead (VI, 9, 11) and after a effort to disclaim the real psychosomatic self, the human intellectual ego is identified with the One (“in both”), without, of course, containing it, but becoming, like it, beyond essence. For the first time, the human subject becomes beyond essence, identified with the One. This is a peak moment in human thinking with catalytic effects on modern spiritual history.

Through Augustine, these positions would pass into the West, in Christianized form, giving us a subject founded on the concept that a person, in essence, is the will to power, a kind of second absolute who gradually becomes related, as regards

essence, to the divine absolute. And then, related to the divine absolute, we gradually begin to conceive it in our image. In essence, people are souls which have will and they expend their essence on willing for domination over anything which is not animate- history, the body, the community- and their being in expressed early on in Augustine in a manner in which, much later, Nietzsche, reversing the poles, of course, was to call the will to power.

There are, then, two great and dreadful consequences of this philosophical proto-idolatry. The first is modern subjectivism, best known in the version brought to the fore by Descartes as the mental Ego, disconnected from the body and from the community. Which requires merely the power of the spirit in order to be real. This is what a great sociologist, Norbert Elias, described as the “we-less I”. It is a subject which is disconnected from anything that might be considered tradition or community or something that would link it to the real world. It is the supra-dependent, disconnected ego which we encounter in the metaphysical thinking of Descartes and which is completed in the phenomenology of the 20th century. The Freudian ego itself comes from formulations of this sort, even though it thereafter acquired some very interesting dimensions, particularly with Lacan.

Descartes is particularly significant because he took a turn that made modern Western subjectivism much more anthropocentric than the ancient, and this is very important. The truth no longer lies outside us, in the “One”, in God, but in our self-validation, in our reflections which think up the One or God. The subject is the thought of the One; not the equation of the One with him or her, but, simply, thought as the inclusion of the One within the notion of the subject.

The second tremendous consequence is onto-theology as Heidegger called it. This is the great philosophical-cum-theological idolatry of modernism, where God becomes a notion within the human mind, albeit the most sublime, and this notion functions as an idol of God. God becomes people’s thought about Him, or, as Feuerbach would say, an image of Man. This is precisely the God who has collapsed in the West, the God of the moralists and pietists, as Nietzsche would have said. Subjectivism and onto-theology are, in turn, founded on a plethora of idolatrous, popular or stochastic elements, the common denominator of which is the independence of created things from their discredited creator and the construction of the “social”, also, as Kastoriadis would say, in precisely this autonomy.

The Orthodox, too, have followed this road. A fundamental philosophical-cum-theological notion in the circles in question has been that of Wisdom. Russian theology in the 19th and 20th centuries, from Soloviov to Bulgakov, was, at bottom, an attempt at the autonomous foundation of the being of things created in relation

to that of God, though without doing away with Him. Of course, Sophiology can be corrected on the basis of Patristic theology, and, insofar as it does not abolish God, it is more theological than the corresponding Western trends, but it remains in the same neo-idolatrous orbit, which was shown to be the case, in terrible fashion, by Soviet Marxism, which, in part, inherited this kind of autonomous view of creation in relation to God. It is an autonomous view because, in essence the notion of Sophia is a pantheistic one: it exists in God and it exists in beings, and it exists autonomously in beings in such a way that it is possible to think of them in a more secular version, even without God altogether.

But, in concluding this paper we should do our Christian duty and exercise self-criticism, especially as every kind of idolatry has been totally and radically overcome within Orthodox theology, with the absolute distinction between created and uncreated and their Godly, profound communion through the uncreated energies in the Church, in Christ. God is ineffably present in the creation, without being confused with it or separated from it. The Holy Spirit makes the world the Body of Christ, a multiple incarnation of the Word (Wisdom), opening it up to His apophatic mystery and His indefinability. So, indeed, if we were Christians, no-one would be an idolater, as Saint John Chrysostom said, but for that to happen this whole tradition needs to be engaged, not in self-justification or ideologically (like another idol- the supreme one!) but selflessly, existentially, humbly and, I would say, in dialogue with the whole of the world, Western and Eastern, which is suffering today, desperately seeking the meaning and truth of its history. There is, at this point the need to look again at this tradition and to interpret it existentially and with discrimination, in the full meaning, intellectually and existentially, of the word "interpret". To accept tradition as given is a huge error. Tradition is overpowered, tradition is re-acquired, tradition is reclaimed, in no way is tradition a given legacy, but a font in which we are baptized. Unless tradition is this, then it will be very difficult indeed for us to avoid making an idol of it, that is to avoid the temptation to believe that we at last hold the key to truth and history. When tradition is reclaimed humbly, selflessly, cathartically, interpretatively, then we see within it our own limits and, in that case, of course, enter a dialogue both with the other. In this way, the other benefits and we also have historical identity and existential authenticity.

Let us therefore speak to all those who are seeking the truth of their history today, the Western world, but also any people seeking it, stumbling and exalted, full of self-doubt and also self-assertion, with their reflections and desire, which justify and convulse them. Christ loves this great and poor world and wishes us to be His Cyrenian fellow-sufferers and not, of course, merely His censors.

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