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Romantic Platonism, Teleology, and the Problem of Origins

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Abstract: The paper argues that a new philosophical paradigm is emerging, which may be called Romantic Platonism. It is rooted in the traditional Platonic and Neoplatonic metaphysics, but includes modern insights and responds to the ever-changing conditions of human reality. A great challenge of the paradigm will be to include both the traditional metaphysics and the insights of natural sciences. The paper attempts to identify potential problems in the future dialogue between Romantic Platonic philosophers and scientists, using the example of teleology and the concept of the logoi or rationes causales.

Keywords:

logos;
metaphysics;
modernity;
nature;
Platonism;
Romanticism;
science;
teleology

Introduction

This article claims that a new philosophical paradigm seems to be emerging, which I propose to call Romantic Platonism. In the first section of the article, this intellectual and spiritual movement is briefly described, both in terms of its historical roots and its present shape. In the next section, drawing on Thomas Nagel's **Mind and Cosmos**, I suggest that one of the key problems in the dialogue between Romantic Platonic metaphysics and natural sciences that will emerge is that of origins, due to the contradictory understanding of causation in the mainstream of contemporary philosophy and science, and in the premodern tradition on which Romantic Platonism is largely based. Third section of the article is fo-

cused on teleology as a potential point of convergence between natural sciences and Romantic Platonism, claiming that the concept of *logoi* may be a good way to start the dialogue. Finally, some inevitable problems are pointed out which will emerge in that dialogue and I am clarifying certain popular misconceptions about causality as it is understood in the Platonic tradition.

A New Paradigm

It has become a cliché to say that the Western culture is currently in a profound crisis and that the crisis permeates many areas of it. Its most fundamental aspect appears to be the crisis of the core worldview, that is, of the metaphysical or ontological basis for this particular cultural formation that developed within the Latin Christian Europe during Late Antiquity, the Middle Ages, and early modernity. It is on that core worldview that not only the structure of morality and politics, but also the vision of knowledge and science as well as the experience and practice of beauty and art rests. [1] The Christian European culture enjoyed a unified, coherent vision of reality from Late Antiquity until, roughly, the seventeenth century; that vision has disintegrated and fragmented in the recent centuries. [2]

The good news about the crisis, as always, is that a new paradigm is emerging or at least it may seem so. I would describe that new paradigm, tentatively of course, as Romantic Platonism. Both "Romantic" and "Platonism" need to be understood very broadly, as their redefinition is a crucial part of the very emergence of the new paradigm. The new paradigm will challenge in profound ways the popular and already culturally embedded view of these movements or traditions (by "popular" I also mean what can be found in contemporary manuals of the history of philosophy or the history of culture).

[1] Charles Taylor's concept of ontological "background picture" or "inescapable framework" (see Charles Taylor, **Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity**, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1989) is akin to what I mean by the metaphysical core as well as Alasdair MacIntyre's "rival versions of moral enquiry" (see Alasdair C. MacIntyre, **Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition**, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre-Dame 1990).

[2] On that fragmentation see e.g. David C. Schindler, **Freedom from Reality: The Diabolical Character of Modern Liberty**, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre-Dame 2017.

In his recent book **Platonism and Naturalism**, Lloyd P. Gerson proposed a new look on the history of Western thought, in which there are two basic forms of philosophy, indicated in the title of the book, at war with each other, making truce and negotiating compromises at various points throughout centuries. [3] For Gerson, Platonism is not the philosophy of Plato or even of his followers, but rather an umbrella term, polemical in nature. It is an attack on the five main tenets of Naturalism (as defined by Gerson): nominalism, materialism, mechanism, skepticism, and relativism, which were already present in the philosophy of Democritus or the sophists in the times of Plato. Plato's philosophy was a reaction against them and Gerson describes what he calls "Ur-Platonism", based on the "five antis": anti-nominalism, anti-materialism, anti-mechanism, anti-skepticism, and anti-relativism. Plato built his philosophy on this "Ur-Platonism" and the five "antis"; since that time every form of philosophy which has followed his footsteps can be described, for Gerson, as Platonism, whether it accepts Plato's philosophical views or even refers to him at all.

Gerson believes there are compromised forms of Platonism, for instance, when an anti-materialistic, anti-mechanistic, anti-skeptical, and anti-relativistic metaphysics embraces nominalism (e.g. Descartes). There are also compromised forms of Naturalism, for example, materialistic and mechanistic philosophies which, nonetheless, claim the existence of an objective, changeless moral order in the universe (certain forms of Stoicism). In Gerson's view, not only the three Abrahamic religions have always been representatives of this widely understood Platonism, but Christianity, specifically, is still the most powerful proponent of Platonism.

Another way of looking at Platonism in such a broad way across time is the concept of "the Platonic tradition", which can be found, for instance, in the works of Douglas Hedley. [4] This tradition is primarily stems from Plotinus, as the recent

[3] See Lloyd P. Gerson, **Platonism and Naturalism: A Possibility of Philosophy**, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 2020.

[4] Cf. his groundbreaking studies on the concept of imagination or sacrifice (see Douglas Hedley, **Living Forms of the Imagination**, T&T Clark, New York 2008; Douglas Hedley, **Sacrifice Imagined: Violence, Atonement, and the Sacred**, Continuum, New York 2011; Douglas Hedley, **The Iconic Imagination**, Bloomsbury Academic, New York 2016) or an interesting volume see Douglas Hedley and Sarah Hutton (eds.), **Platonism at the Origins of Modernity: Studies on Platonism and Early Modern Philosophy**, Springer, Dordrecht 2008.

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volume edited by Stephen Gersh shows, [5] but Plotinus' influential synthesis needs to be seen in the context of his predecessors: Plato and Aristotle, the Middle Platonists as well as the Alexandrian philosophers such as Philo Judaeus, Clement, and Origen. The difference between Gerson's view and that of Hedley's would be, primarily, that for the former Platonism is "systematic philosophy itself", [6] while the latter emphasizes the importance of religion, literature and art in that long tradition. These cultural expressions emanate from the core worldview, which C.S. Lewis dubbed "the model" in his **Discarded Image**. [7]

Here comes the second element, that is, Romanticism. Hedley and others showed the way the Cambridge Platonists, working in the seventeenth century, mediated the premodern metaphysical tradition and Renaissance Platonism to the Romantic movement. [8] The continuity of that tradition can be seen and, consequently, conceive of Romanticism as a form of Platonism in that very wide sense that is advocated here. The polemical nature of Romanticism, so akin to that of Platonism, does not require much explanation and arguing for. The Jena Romanticism and German Idealism (Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling in particular), the British authors like William Blake, William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley or John Keats, the Polish poets and thinkers, like Adam Mickiewicz, [9] Joseph de Maistre and the entire French tradition influenced by him, [10] or Vladimir Solovyov and the Russian Silver Age poets, thinkers,

[5] On the continuity of the Platonic tradition via the influence Plotinus' metaphysics see Stephen Gersh (ed.), **Plotinus' Legacy: the Transformation of Platonism from the Renaissance to the Modern Era**, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2019.

[6] Gerson, **Platonism and Naturalism...**, p. 370. He discusses this identification of Platonism with philosophy, expressed by Richard Rorty, but this is, by no means, an eccentric claim. Martin Heidegger, for instance, made that point much earlier (see Martin Heidegger, "The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking", in: Martin Heidegger, Basic Writings, David Farrell Krell (ed.), **Basic Writings**, Routledge, London 1993, pp. 427–449).

[7] See C.S. Lewis, **The Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature**, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1964.

[8] See Douglas Hedley and David Leech (eds.), **Revisioning Cambridge Platonism: Sources and Legacy**, Springer, Dordrecht 2019; Douglas Hedley and Christian Hengstermann, **An Anthology of the Cambridge Platonists: Sources and Commentary**, Routledge, London 2024.

[9] See Adam Mickiewicz, **Metaphysical Poems**, Jerzy Fiećko and Mateusz Stróżyński (eds.), transl. Mateusz Stróżyński and Jaspreet Singh Boparai, Brill Schöningh, Paderborn 2023.

[10] See Carolina Armenteros, **The French Idea of History: Joseph de Maistre and His Heirs, 1794–1854**, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 2011.

and mystics, were united in their multifaceted attack on the pervading fragmentation and polarization of modern consciousness in the West, that has become painstakingly clear in the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The Problem of Origins

A good example of the point in which our culture found itself regarding to the issues that were raised at the beginning is Thomas Nagel's 2012 book **Mind and Cosmos**, whose subtitle is a genuine spoiler: **Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature Is Almost Certainly False**. [11] Nagel expresses in this concise book what others have been saying for quite some time (Blaise Pascal, Friedrich Schlegel, or Owen Barfield), namely, that the modern worldview, even though it describes itself as supremely rational, scientific, and irrefutable, simply does not work. Nagel points out that the following, key questions of reality cannot be explained by natural sciences: life, consciousness, thinking, and moral value. He claims that a new paradigm has to emerge and that it will have to be teleological as well as include objective moral order of the universe and the inherent meaning of it.

Nagel's book has been harshly criticized by the contemporary Naturalists, but its most interesting aspect is the *a priori* rejection of what Nagel calls "theism" and what seems to be identified by him with the views of contemporary Protestant philosophers like Alvin Plantinga or William Lane Craig. When Nagel writes about this theism, which, as I have said earlier, Gerson understands as a part of religious and theological form of Platonism, he betrays his unfamiliarity with the history of the Platonic tradition. For Nagel, God as a hypothetical First Cause of reality, is an extremely powerful mind, which designed the universe, made it and controls it, like a super-powerful and intelligent human could do, if it had inexhaustible resources and powers at his disposal. What Nagel calls "theism" may be called at best, to quote Brian Davies, "theistic personalism", as distinct from the premodern "classical theism". [12]

[11] Thomas Nagel, **Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature Is Almost Certainly False**, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2012.

[12] See Brian Davies, **The Reality of God and the Problem of Evil**, Continuum, London 2006, pp. 58–62.

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Nagel does not want this God to be a part of the new paradigm and I suspect that some Christian theologians and philosophers (like Davies) do not either. However, Nagle is hoping for some kind of "Aristotelianism" to save him from God, without giving much thought to the fact that God, understood as the divine Intellect, is the central feature of the philosophy of Aristotle. "Aristotelianism" has become a modern construct, according to which Aristotle rejected Platonism and embraced materialism, Naturalism and (as a result) common sense. Then, in some occasional fit of intellectual dizziness, he spoke, here and there, something about the immortal human intellect or about God being the principle of all reality. The tailored "Aristotelianism" is necessary as an alternative to the relentless machine of Naturalism, sucking all meaning and intelligibility out of the universe in its pursuit of empirical knowledge, but as an alternative which does not expose us to the worrying prospect of discussing the eternal Forms, angels, demons, or God.

On the other hand, Nagel's book opens up possibilities of dialogue between all those who are interested in transcending the old paradigm and looking for something that would really integrate our shared human experience of the world with natural sciences and religion. Some experiences I have had in recent years make me somewhat pessimistic about that dialogue, since the modern fragmentation is also, inevitably, the fragmentation of language. And even those who study philosophy do not speak the same language, which means that they sometimes use the same words but mean quite different things. During a meeting with a successful young philosopher from a Western country, I told him that God, traditionally conceived, is not an anthropomorphic super-mind that he seemed to associate with the Creator. He asked: "What is she [sic!] then?", to which I replied: "Infinite existence". And here our conversation had to end, because the philosopher claimed that the very term "existence" was not something that he found meaningful or useful, let alone any claim that there may be something like "infinite existence" or the existing "to be".

These differences can be overcome, of course. I am myself guilty of not following, for instance, the current developments in the Anglo-Saxon philosophy of the mind, so, perhaps, I should not criticize those who do not study Plotinus, Aquinas or Nicolas of Cusa closely enough. However, speaking more seriously, I believe that studying Plotinus, Aquinas and Cusanus is absolutely essential, if we want to create a working paradigm for the future, which would include, like the Romantics wanted, religion, science, art, politics, and the way we buy groceries, play with

children and accompany a dying friend or parent. Just one crucial element needs to be pointed out here which is not dependent on language only, but which, I think, will be very difficult to overcome in a potential discussion between physicists and biologists on the one hand, and Romantic Platonic philosophers, on the other.

There is a metaphysical principle which is of key importance to the entire Platonic tradition. The principle is that causation is infusion of reality, from which it follows that the cause has always more reality than its effect. It can be expressed in various ways, of course, for instance, that the effect is contained within the cause in a manner higher than it exists in itself or that something cannot come out of nothing. Plotinus put it simply and succinctly: "every original maker must be in himself stronger than that which he makes; it is not lack of music which makes a man musical, but music". [13] In the previous century, Simone Weil tied the rejection of this principle to the dominating modern spirit of atheism and naturalism: "The supreme atheistic idea is the idea of progress, which is the negation of experimental ontological proof, for it implies that the mediocre can of itself produce the best". [14]

The principle is problematic, like all metaphysical principles, as it cannot be proven. It can be "seen", by intellectual intuition or, as Blaise Pascal or some of the Romantics would say, it can be "felt" by the heart, yet there is no logical argument for it. Logical arguments depend on it, like geometrical proofs depend on axioms. And the subversive nature of this principle lies in the fact that, driven to its ultimate form, it entails the existence of what has been traditionally called "God". Not only in the sense that the existence of the First Cause, which is infinite and beyond being, is entailed if only the principle that "causes have more reality than effects" is true; also if the First Cause is the cause of everything that exists, it possesses the nature traditionally attributed to it by many Platonists and vigorously denied today not only by authors like Nagel, but also by many of those who still feel inclined towards metaphysics and spirituality. That nature is more aptly called "he" (or even a "she", if someone is not bound by the Abrahamic dedication to a Scriptural revelation) than "it", which is an obvious stumbling block today.

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[13] Plotinus, **Enneads**, trans. Arthur Hilary Armstrong, V.8.1.30–32.

[14] Simone Weil, **Grace and Gravity**, trans. Emma Craufurd and Mario von der Ruhr, Routledge, London — New York 2002, p. 174.

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Everything that is perceived by the senses, the entire sensible universe, must have a cause, as its reality is a limited and finite reality, which does not explain its own existence or nature. It could not be there and many physicists believe that it has not always been there, and that it will not always be. Still this cause or source of the universe, must be something more powerful, as Plotinus put it, richer in existence and reality, than the entire universe with all the things in it. Ultimately, this source has to be infinite, in the sense of being infinitely real, not merely mathematically or spatially infinite; it is what Nicolas of Cusa called the *Maximum* or what Anselm of Canterbury called "that than which nothing greater can be thought of". [15]

The *Maximum* or the Plotinian One beyond being does not have to be explained in turn or cannot have a cause apart from its own existence, because if it had, it would not be the *Maximum*. Being self-explained by virtue of its nature is something greater than requiring something else to explain its existence, so a caused God would be lesser than the true God (and Plotinus, in fact, believed that such a caused, finite God also exists and that he is Aristotle's divine Intellect). The *Maximum*, being the cause of everything, contains all possible reality in itself. It is everything. Therefore, not only is its existence a part of what it is, but it has a nature and this nature must be everything which exists, but in an infinite mode. The cause of finite things is, *infinitely*, these finite things.

That is why, ultimately, it is more a he than an it. Since the First Cause is, in its infinite simplicity, all things that it makes, it means that it must be also a person, since it makes persons. And because it is a metaphysical commonplace in the tradition that a person is ontologically richer than other forms of being, persons resemble the First Cause more than impersonal things like water, light or space. The difference between what Davies calls theistic personalism and classical theism lies both in the fact that in the latter God is more than a personal being and in the fact that the very concept of the person is incredibly broader than the standard meaning of the word as implied today.

The Platonic God is "personal" not because he resembles us, but because we resemble him, as far as a finite image can resemble the infinite archetype. His "personality" is infinitely remote from whatever we experience as our personality and the personality of other people, but all that good things which we possess as

[15] Anselm of Canterbury, **Proslogion** 2.

human persons: consciousness, understanding, capacity to love, are in God and in God's simplicity they are God. Again, as Plotinus points out, "it is not a lack of music which makes a man musical, but music". And therefore it is not a *lack* of consciousness, understanding, love, justice, or sense of humour that made humanity conscious, understanding, loving, just or capable of making jokes, but precisely That which is all those things. [16]

Teloi and *Logoi*

What I have sketched above is merely a hypothesis concerning the anxieties that will arise in the dialogue with scientists, as the participants would, at some point, realize that God is on board, whether we want it or not, to the delight of some and the horror of others. The conversation or collaboration has to start, however, at lower levels of reality and it may not be fruitful to begin a potential dialogue with open-minded agnostic physicists or biologists by trying to show them that a coherent, meaningful world entails the Lord of Hosts as depicted in the **Old Testament** or even the Plotinian One or Cusanus' *Maximum*.

The initial topics, however, would still revolve around the problem of origins: the origins of the physical universe, of life, of consciousness, of cognition, of morality. Natural sciences today are based on a dogma according to which something which has less reality can produce and does produce, randomly, things which have more reality than their causes. The very word "evolution" seems to suggest that, if we assume that everything evolves and there is not anything that is beyond evolving. The non-existent and unreal produced the existing and the inanimate, the inanimate produced the living, the living and unconscious produced the conscious, and the subrational and non-moral produced thinking creatures who know the difference between good and evil. All of the above will eventually vanish without leaving a trace, according to that worldview, but we are still trying, for mysterious reasons, to understand why this series of extraordinary miracles occurred in the history of our universe.

The entire modern worldview is the reversal of the Plotinian principle that it is music that makes man musical. The reason is that this is what we observe with

[16] Plotinus, **Enneads**, V.8.1.30–32.

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our senses: the mature tree grows out of a tiny seed and we do not see the tree in the seed. A naked, screaming infant becomes a brilliant philosopher, although, at least in many cases, it is hard to see the former in the latter. These are things that we observe, so we assume that this is the universal law of nature and that we can extrapolate it to developments which we cannot observe, that is, the emergence of the universe from non-existence, the appearance of life on our planet, the elusive, haunting moment when a group of hominids became a community of humans. In the first case, science explains well *how* things happen, how from a seed a tree grows or from an infant an accomplished philosopher comes to be, but no science can really explain *why* this is so in a satisfactory manner.

Plato in his famous "intellectual autobiography of Socrates" in the **Phaedo**, [17] distinguishes between a cause and "that without which the cause could never be a cause". [18] The latter we could also call a "condition". The natural sciences have achieved astonishing success in studying the conditions of the sensible realm without which causes would not be able to produce effects. But they have not studied what Plato's meant by "causes" which always have more reality than their effects, the effects which are mirror images of them. There is hope that scientists in cooperation with Romantic Platonic philosophers will be able to tell us how the causes and the conditions act together, and by virtue of that we will understand better the way reality works at various levels.

And example of that cooperation would be the question of teleology vs. mechanistic and random "causation" of the dominant Naturalistic view. Some scientists (and Thomas Nagel, for that matter) are open to the idea that purpose exists in the universe and, for instance, that the appearance of plant and animal life on our planet was not a side-effect of the random way in which less complex corporeal beings, like molecules, were organized into more complex ones, like stars or planets. On that tentative, but still heretical view, when the stars, galaxies, or our solar system were coming to be, the entire universe was already tending towards the appearance of life on our planet. And, perhaps, it was not random that such a planet as the earth appeared in the universe, but the appearance of that particular planet, with this set of particular conditions which enabled the existence of plant and animal life, was the purpose of whatever had been going on before.

[17] See **Phaedo**, 96a–102a.

[18] See **Phaedo,** trans. M.S., 99b.

Such a teleological view still seems more rational to some people than the widely accepted belief that various realities randomly pop out of other, always less real and less ontologically rich realities. But I do not think we can have a meaningful teleology without the framework of causality which I described above. When we think of some purpose or end (*telos*), to which things are oriented or towards which they move, we have to provide some way of understanding how exactly this orientation or movement works. Isaac Newton, discussing gravity in his 1692-1693 correspondence with the English classicist Richard Bentley, says that it is not possible for two bodies to interact without touching each other, unless "another agent" is involved, and he confesses that he does not know whether this "agent" is material or immaterial. [19] For Newton, there was nothing preposterous in wondering whether God or angels could be involved in the mysterious force of gravity. I can understand that scientists may in the future accept teleology or some mysterious pull that future, that is things which do not yet exist, exercise on the things which exist right now, without knowing how that works exactly. Philosophers, however, need to try to understand and explain this "how". If teleology is to be some kind of "gravity across time", we still stumble upon a simple question: how can something non-existent act on or influence in any way something that exists? Gravity may not be force, but a universal curvature of space, but any teleology must provide a similar "curvature" also of time, if it is to have any meaning at all. For now, randomness is accepted as the only causal curvature of the universe, but its explanatory power is highly questionable.

Teleology without some version of the traditional Platonic metaphysics seems to imply, just like the entire dominant Western worldview, that a musical man can become musical without the existence of music or without another musician. The claim that life on the earth was in any sense the purpose of the previous history of the universe, during which there was no life, is just as unintelligible as the popping out of life from the inanimate by random, chaotic movements of molecules. If we accept that the universe was being organized towards more complex forms of corporeal reality in order to create conditions for the appearance of life, some kind of life, probably in a much broader sense than that on which biology is based, had to exist already to influence the inanimate and "draw it to itself". Of course, I

[19] See letter from Isaac Newton to Richard Bentley, 1692/3, February 11, *The Newton Project* 2007, October, 189.R.4.47, f. 6, Trinity College Library, Cambridge, UK, https://tiny.pl/qwg7r993 [17.3.2025].

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am assuming all the time, with the metaphysical tradition, that life has more reality to it than the inanimate. Many philosophers today will either deny that or say they do not understand what it means or that they see no reason to think in this way at all. Since there are no indications that plant or animal life had existed before life on the earth appeared, we are entering a dangerous ground of speaking about things which go beyond what science can study.

Or, alternatively, we could give space to philosophers who can try to say something about these things which go beyond the scope of natural sciences. The most difficult task being combining the two in a meaningful way, which would enrich both sides of the conversation. Nagel calls upon the dead ghost of "Aristotelianism" to help us with teleology without disturbing more dangerous, slumbering spirits of Plato, Plotinus or Augustine. There are several ways in which the metaphysical, Platonic and Romantic tradition tried to deal with the problem of origins, including a more specific problem of teleology on the intersection of the inanimate and the animate realms. Nagel suggests that we should not talk about God, but find some other way to explain how the unconscious, dead molecules were organized *as if* there was an intention and purpose to make life possible. That's entirely viable, up to a point, because the Platonic metaphysics is hierarchical and assumes that the First Cause acts always through secondary, mediating causes. The good news, then, is that we can focus on those secondary causes; the bad news, for the Naturalist, is that secondary causes are secondary. They have any meaning only if the primary cause exists.

An example of a traditional concept that could emerge and is already emerging in such possible dialogues is the concept of *logoi*, "words" or "reasons", as developed by Plotinus out of Stoicism, and later further developed by Christian Platonists such as Augustine in the West and Maximus the Confessor in the East. Plotinus believed that the One makes the divine Intellect who consists of the eternal, Platonic Forms which are intellects, personal beings, endowed with consciousness and the capacity to understand and love. The divine Intellect makes the World Soul who, in turn, creates and shapes the sensible, corporeal universe. The way she does it, for Plotinus, is based on the *logoi*.

The Stoics thought there are *logoi spermatikoi*, that is, "seminal (or "seed-like") reasons", which are responsible for growth of things in the universe. The seed of a tree contains the principle of the mature tree, like a concept or an active reason, which drives the transformation of the seed into its mature form. While

the Stoics were materialists, Plotinus identified these *logoi* with the essences of various things or Aristotelian forms, and thought they were images of the eternal Forms, through which they exercise their causal powers in the corporeal realm. In every tree, at every stage of its growth, there is an incorporeal, invisible, but powerful and active something, which is called its *logos*, and it makes the tree out of the seed. It is more real, most substantial and intense than the actual, living tree in a forest, and that is why it can make a tree grow and live. It is the whole of the tree, both its structure and its living form and purpose (*telos*), which cannot be reduced to anything that we observe in the tree with our senses.

Augustine accepted this view and the entire Middle Ages, out of respect for Augustine's authority, embraced it. He called these principles *rationes causales*, "causative reasons", and believed (following Plotinus) that they must exist on three levels: in God, in the angelic, collective mind, created by God before all else, and, finally, in the material and corporeal universe. Let us leave God and angels for now, and focus on the claim that the universe is filled with active powers (*rationes*) which influence whatever happens with physical bodies in order to realize their intended nature.

The *rationes* or reasons for life have existed from the very beginning. Augustine, as the majority of ancient and medieval Christian philosophers, did not believe that the world was made in six days. Rather, he suggested that the universe was created at once as a whole, but the whole containing the "reasons" which would become active later. This is the first version of the modern theory of evolution, but a logically coherent one, as the universe is conceived as evolving from the inanimate to the living and from the living to the conscious and from the conscious to the intelligent and free, but this evolution is governed by the fact that beings which are to appear in the future are somehow *already present*. Not in their physical, material existence, but in their intelligible archetypes. A similar use of *logoi* can be found in the philosophy of Maximus the Confessor.

On the one hand, it may be fruitful for both scientists and Platonic philosophers to refer to the *logoi* as a hypothesis explaining the evolution of the universe, without speaking about God. There may be even a discussion whether the concept of the *logoi* entails something which is labelled "panpsychism" today, or not. However, from a philosophical point of view, a problem always lurks ahead of us: whence and why did these *logoi* come from? What or who made them? Where do

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they exist, if not in the physical space and place? And how do they influence quantum fields, particles, molecules, chemical compounds, planets, and stars?

Whatever the answers, it is not the lack of music that makes a man musical, so these "reasons" are made by something which has more reality than they. Since the *logoi* or *rationes*, as their very name betrays, are something like meaningful words spoken or thoughts which are being thought, there must be a mind or minds which think and speak them into existence, just like they "speak" and "think", or, in a less Romantic parlance, make or produce physical beings. For Plotinus, Augustine, Maximus, and others, it was obvious that these *logoi* must come from some eternal, powerful Mind and, ultimately, from something (or rather someone) who is not "a mind" but the incomprehensible, infinite reality, which is also what the mind is and which made the finite mind.

A candidate for a dialogue between the metaphysical concept of *logoi* and biology would be, perhaps, systems biology about which Denis Noble writes in his 2006 book **The Music of Life**. He says there that we need to abandon the reductionist approach to biology "develop ways of thinking about integration that are as rigorous as our reductionist procedures, but different. This is a major change. It has implications beyond the purely scientific. It means changing our philosophy, in the full sense of the term". [20] Could Romantic Platonism be the philosophy that would create intellectual space for developing new scientific procedures, rigorous, but not reductionist? It seems so.

Not Very Explanatory

However, one misunderstanding needs to be always borne in mind. From the hierarchical and participatory point of view of Platonic metaphysics it is impossible for the methods of natural sciences to penetrate into the intelligible level proper. Taking the example of the *logoi*, there is no possibility of testing empirically the hypothesis that the *logoi* exist, that they are involved in the teleological unfolding of the universe (including the origin of life, consciousness or intellectual cognition) or, least of all, how exactly their causation is exercised. The existence of

[20] Denis Noble, **The Music of Life: Biology Beyond Genome**, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2006, p. xi.

the *logoi* can be, indeed, experienced directly, according to Plotinus, Augustine, John Scot Eriugena or Maximus, but through a non-conceptual, non-discursive, intuitive faculty of the mind. But this does not meet the current scientific methodological criteria of falsifiability or intersubjectivity. How are we to start selecting people for our randomized controlled groups, if the intuitive experience and knowledge of the *logoi* usually comes after decades of rigorous study of metaphysics, involving also virtuous life, usually in a similarly-minded, supportive community, and it requires a personal transformation the causes of which cannot be entirely identified and pointed to? It is the philosopher who is his own laboratory and his own scientific instrument for "running the tests". I suspect the patience of scientists ends here immediately, as they feel it has nothing to do with their methods and their entire approach.

They will probably use "belief" or "faith", understood in a very narrow sense, as the acceptance of claims without rational evidence, when they speak about approaching the intelligible realm, since the only kind of knowledge that they believe is valid is that produced by science. This claim, namely that knowledge is what is achieved through forming hypotheses and testing them empirically in a controlled way, is, in itself, obviously immune to any controlled empirical testing. The assumption that there is no certain knowledge beyond science is what the majority of unbiased scientists today would call a "belief", but many would not want to admit that, according to their own views, it is *merely* a belief, because it would have exactly the same status as Platonic claims that there are things incomparably more real than electrons, molecules, chemical compounds or living organisms, such as the *logoi* of all those things.

Even if scientists are open to dialogue with Platonic philosophers, they will soon stumble upon an even more serious problem. They will focus on discovering aspects of philosophy that can help address specific problems in their field. And this they will not find easily or at all. In a YouTube conversation on the "Unbelievable" podcast, an exchange took place between Roger Penrose and William Lane Craig, which was hosted by Justin Briarley on 4th October 2019. They discussed, among other things, Penrose's triadic view of the universe, in which there is the realm of mathematics, the realm of consciousness, and the realm of matter, which exist independently and intersect only to a small degree (only a small particle of matter is conscious, only a small section of mathematics is inherent in the structure of matter, and only a part of mathematics is discovered by the human mind).

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Craig, a Protestant philosopher and theistic personalist, suggested to Penrose that his view would make even more sense if those three realms were considered as deriving from God. [21]

"God" was immediately defined by everyone in the studio as "the divine Mind", and not as the *Maximum* or the *Ipsum Esse* of the premodern tradition, so Penrose observed that God as some "super-mentality", which "can do anything", would not be the common ground of all reality, but belong to a realm of consciousness as some kind of conscious being whose existence, unlike the human one, cannot be scientifically proven or studied. That is, of course, an excellent point and it is what had driven Plotinus to criticize Aristotle's concept of God. After a short while Penrose added that the hypothesis that God is the cause and source of the three realms is not of much help to him as a scientist. "I find it not very explanatory", he said, and pointed out: "I don't see how you can do much with this".

This is precisely the problem I am attempting to present here. A scientist wants to "do something with" any hypothesis, namely, to test it and try to falsify it, but also to use it to formulate further hypotheses or to enhance the theory that is the matrix of the hypotheses he forms. And what are we to do with the divine Mind or even with the *Maximum*? Using the example of the *logoi* shows that it is not just the First Cause that is "not very explanatory" for scientists, but also anything that exists on a metaphysical level higher than a given level. Can we use biology to explain quantum mechanics? Can we use psychology to explain physiology? Can we use the theory of the *logoi* to explain the origin of plant and animal life and how it evolved over millions of years?

When it comes to the question of origins, a popular but crude view of how "God" could be combined with "science" assumes that we can, in some way, imagine a chemist, a biologist, and a theologian agreeing that at some point in the history of the earth, when there was not any life present yet, God intervened by making a living cell appear in some way. First of all, this is history and the past, which cannot be tested in any way, confirmed or disconfirmed, so I cannot see how we advance by positing a hypothetical event which no-one can possibly observe. But leaving that aside, even if a chemist and a biologist agree that something like that

[21] "Sir Roger Penrose and William Lane Craig, "The Universe: How did it get here & why are we part of it?", YouTube, 2019, October 4, https://tiny.pl/304cpsck [17.03.2025]. The exchange in question is taking place around 29 minute of the conversation.

"intervention" happened it does not contribute to chemistry or biology, and I doubt whether it contributes to theology. So the current fixation on such an imagined "intervention" of God in certain points of the evolution of the universe, whether to reject that as belief in magic, or to promote this as some kind of "evidence for the existence of God", seems mistaken.

Let us for a moment dwell upon a fundamental principle of Platonic metaphysics, which, by the way, was accepted by the most prominent ancient and medieval Christian philosophers and theologians (Augustine, Boethius, Bonaventure, Aquinas), so it can be with relative certainty considered also to be the orthodox, mainstream Christian view. None of the Christian churches, let alone the Bible, teaches it authoritatively, but it is the basis of the Letter to Hebrews and it is everywhere in the Catholic, Orthodox, and to some extent even Protestant tradition. The principle is that the sensible universe and corporeal beings in it are images of the spiritual reality, and, ultimately, of God. Image in this Platonic tradition is understood as something which is actively produced by the archetype, like an image of the human face in the mirror, but also which exists not outside the archetype (like the face reflected on the surface of the mirror), but is united with it: it exists in the archetype and the archetype, in another sense, exists in it. [22]

Let us take a look at the closest analogy, that of a face reflected in the mirror. It appears not only in Plotinus, but became a medieval commonplace, appearing in such philosophers as Bonaventure of Bagnoregio or Nicolas of Cusa. Bonaventure writes: "the whole universe is like one mirror filled with lights manifesting the divine Wisdom". [23] Let us assume that someone is studying the mirror reflection of the face of a person and the only thing that he can study is this surface of the mirror with the reflection on it. Where is the "evidence" for the existence of the face? Can any detail of the face-image in the mirror tell us something about the real face? Everything does!

Every single detail of the face-image is telling us something about what the real face is, but no detail can make us see the real face or prove that it exists. To see the real face would mean to turn around and see something existing in an entirely different and incomparably more real way. Only then would we realize, by comparing the archetype with the image, that whatever we saw (shape, propor-

[22] See e.g. Plotinus' discussion of it in **Enneads** VI.4.

[23] Bonaventure, **Collationes in Hexaemeron**, trans. M.S, 2.27.

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tions, colors, emotional expression, beauty) was the face, but, at the same time, nothing of what we saw was the real face beyond the mirror surface. Defects and imperfections of the world are not produced by God, just like the key difference between the reflected image and the real face is not caused by the face, but by the mirror. As Pascal observed: "Nature has perfections to show us that she is the image of God and she has defects to show us that she is no more than an image". [24]

The idea that sciences, after additional couple of hundreds or thousands years, will tell us something about the immortal intellects, the divine Mind, angels, demons, the *logoi*, or the First Cause is, in light of that, rather unrealistic. But, at the same time, the sciences are telling us about those things all the time, by studying the reflection of the spiritual world in the physical, sensible world. For Aquinas, creation is not an act or an event, but a dependence relationship of creatures to the Creator, or of the finite *esse* ("to be") to the infinite *Ipsum Esse* ("to be as such"). God of Aquinas does not "intervene" at any point, as, among others, Brian Davies has argued. [25] Everything is God's intervention and nothing is, at the same time. If we imagine God butting in at certain points to throw in some life, or some consciousness there (presumably, having waited, with divine patience, millions of years in each case), we are not understanding that every single thing is produced as a reflection of "his face", to use Bonaventure's mirror analogy.

Even if sciences were finally capable of showing us how the inanimate appears to transform itself, without any "supernatural" cause, into the living, it would not be a final triumph of Naturalism or a reason to reject metaphysics and religion as outdated superstitions, but, for a Romantic Platonic, merely another of the countless proofs of God's action. It is God who creates and sustains the inanimate, and whatever the inanimate does, is done by God as the First Cause. That is a standard medieval understanding of causality, supported, for instance, by the authority of the *Liber de causis,* a popular summary of Proclus' metaphysics, widely studied at medieval universities.

The theory of the *logoi* is also an attempt to say precisely that. God creates corporeal beings unfolding in time by the mediation of powerful, intelligible principles which give coherence and purpose to everything and organize beings into

[24] Blaise Pascal, **Pensées**, Paris 1670, 762 (numeration according to Sellier's edition: Blaise Pascal, **Les Pensées**, Garnier-Flammarion, Paris 1976).

[25] See Davies, **The Reality of God...**, pp. 73–77.

wholes or, as Denis Noble would call them, "systems". The corporeal things we can measure and experiment with are reflections of the *logoi*, just like the reflections of faces in the mirror-surface. This is a coherent theory, which does not allow conjuring up something more real from something less real. It does not insist that a mirror-reflection of a face created the real person who is looking into the mirror.

Is it "very explanatory"? Can scientists "do anything with it", to return to Penrose's point? Well, philosophers should, perhaps, let the scientists decide, but I do not think it can serve them in any other way than as an inspiration and a warning. Perhaps it is too little for some, but maybe it is enough for others. Romantic Platonism can provide scientists with a powerful context for their endevours and an overarching sense of direction and meaning. It can give them a sense that they are studying an expression of something beautiful, intelligible, ordered, true, and good; some of them or many of them already feel that intuitively. Since every form is a limitation, such a formal context would also need to set some limits and for now it seems impossible that natural sciences could accept the Platonic metaphysics as some higher principle, due to its devaluation in the public sphere. These limits would amount to a warning not to treat the universe and beings existing in it, including living and conscious beings, as intrinsically random and mechanical. In this way it can open up new possibilities and new hypotheses to test. As Gerard Manley Hopkins pointed out: "science is atomic, not to be grasped and held together, 'scopeless,' without metaphysics: this alone gives meaning to laws and sequences and causes and developments". [26] Would contemporary science listen to a poet?

Nicholas of Cusa calls the universe a "contracted *Maximum*", that is, a "contracted God". [27] Studying the contracted God, we study, in a way, God, and that is, for Romantic Platonists, the ultimate meaning of scientific endeavor. This is also how Copernicus, Kepler, Galileo, and Newton understood their vocation as scientists, but it is not how Maxwell, Schroedinger or Hawking did. At the same time, scientists do not study God in himself, but only his contraction, so they do not have to fall on their knees in rapturous delight, but can proceed with their rigorous observations, tests, controlled experiments, although rapturous delight still

[26] Gerard Manley Hopkins, "The Probable Future of Metaphysics" (DIX.3), in: R.K.R. Thornton (ed.), **The Collected Works of Gerard Manley Hopkins. Volume IV: Oxford Essays and Notes 1863-1868**, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2006, p. 288 [277–291].

[27] See Nicholas of Cusa, **De docta ignorantia**, book II.

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seems to play an important role for great scientists. Can a contracted God become an evidence of the uncontracted, infinite God? On the one hand, it can. On the other, it cannot, because we cannot find within the contracted that which is being contracted and which is infinitely transcendent. God of Romantic Platonism is not something that we will find in the world or above it, or beyond it, or next to it, or under it. When we study the image of the face in the mirror, nowhere in this image will we find the traces of the real face as separate from the entire image, which would not be itself and would not exist, were it not for the real face.

The proposition of the dialogue between science and Platonism is not aimed at handing some useful tips to the scientists for their theoretical work or for their experimental activities. It is not aimed at using science by theologians to finally prove that there is infinite Existence. However, the enrichment of both sides by a mutual dialogue may surprise us. Perhaps scientists will see their work in an integrated, coherent framework and context, and that will make them appreciate their fragmentary efforts even more. Maybe philosophers and theologians will see how their general insights and principles are expressed and realized with astonishing beauty in the details of the physical universe.

Conclusion

Perhaps, we will not see in our lifetime any fruits of the conversations between scientists and philosophers discussing teleology in terms of the *logoi*. But we will see more and more of such conversations. We have to, if we do not want to live in a meaningless, fake world, constructed by ourselves in the image of the machine, which is disintegrating into dust as soon as we ask why and for what purpose all of this exists. But there will be confusion which can be clarified only by a mutual, good faith effort of all the parties involved. In Plato's **Phaedo** Socrates may be ironic, when he says about the naturalistic philosophy of his time: "And I no longer believe that I know by this method even how one is generated or, in a word, how anything is generated or is destroyed or exists, and I no longer admit this method, but have another confused way of my own". [28] Still we have to embrace uncertainty and confusion, which arises when we no longer believe that a rational person should hold that something came out of nothing, life came out of

[28] Plato, **Phaedo**, trans. Harold North Fowler, 97b.

that something, then consciousness suddenly came out of that, and, finally, knowledge and love out of what is incapable of knowing and loving. All of that happened by sheer accident and we cannot even describe how, but this is what rational people should firmly believe.

If we no longer accept that model, we can become open to "another confused way of our own", as Plato's Socrates put it, which proposes to deal with the problem of origins in a very different way. But we do not have to invent the way from scratch; it has already been marked by some of the most intelligent and creative minds that have ever lived. But there is still confusion, because we do not know how to reconcile and integrate (and in every detail!) all the things that we have discovered and which seem to be in conflict. Perhaps, it is within our ability to tolerate that confusion without giving up the task the future of our culture and of humanity as we know it ultimately depends on.

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