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Aleksey Losev on Religious Essence and the Generative Power of Platonism

Each person who was brought up in the Soviet Union
feels an incomparable sense of recognition
upon first opening the relevant pages of Plato's *The Republic*.
Paul Y. Rakhshmir, from a lecture of 1997

The idea of the high significance of Platonic studies for our comprehension of many phenomena in politics, ideology and philosophy of the twentieth century and of our days is all played out. The social project of Plato was considered to be the paradigmatic model for totalitarian regimes of Nazi Germany and Bolshevik Russia¹ or—recently—the only basis for the solution of all contemporary global problems.²

¹ Karl R. Popper, with his famous first volume of the classical *The Open Society and Its Enemies—The Spell of Plato* had the predecessors here. So, Bertrand Russell, having visited Soviet Russia in 1920, remembered in 1956: “I said ... that Russia was exactly Plato's *Republic* and it shocked the Platonists and shocked the Russians, but I still think it was true.” Russell, *Détente or Destruction*, 211. Multiple allusions on Plato's social project can be seen in the famous Eugene Zamyatin's novel-antiutopia *We* (1921), see Semyonova, “Roman E. Zamyatina ‘My’ i ‘Gosudarstvo’ Platona.” The approach to Plato as historically the first theoretician of a repressive state and hence—a politically actual thinker was presented in the works of Warner Fite and Richard H. Crossman, see Fite, *The Platonic Legend*, and Crossman, *Plato Today*.

The statements of Russell, Fite, Crossman and Popper, the hints of Zamyatin or Losev at the Platonic nature of the Soviet state are all the more interesting that Plato himself was considered in the official Soviet ideology or philosophy only as an ideological enemy, the creator of “the objective idealism,” but not as a figure authoritative for a Marxist philosopher. Karl Radek's surprise at the Russell's comparison of Soviet Russia with the Plato's *Republic* is very characteristic he re: “he says that in many respects soviet Russia reminds him of Plato's *Republic*. Since up to now, the word ‘Plato’ has not been considered derogatory, we ought to be grateful to Russell even for that.” Radek, “Sentimental'noye puteshestviye.” See also the series of Frances M. Nethercott's works on the issue: “Endings and Ends, Russia's Plato” and “Vospriyatiye Platona.”

² See Dillon, “Platonism and the World Crisis.”

In this paper I would like to discuss some of the main aspects of the analysis of “the social nature of Platonism” by the Russian philosopher and historian of philosophy Aleksey F. Losev (1893–1988)—predominately as this analysis is given in the outline of the same name, *Social Nature of Platonism*, included in *The Outlines of Antique Symbolism and Mythology* (1930).³

Two aspects make this outline extremely interesting for our discussion. Firstly, according to Losev, the analysis of the social nature of Platonism finds itself a necessary basis for the explanation of the social specifics of Orthodoxy and Catholicism. Secondly, having being forced to cover up his phenomenological and neo-Platonic *tropoi* with quasi-Marxist rhetoric, or to conceal his own philosophical and theological constructions and polemical statements under the screen of scholarly studies on the history of philosophy, Losev uses all the complex of indirect expressive ways to demonstrate the similarity of Plato’s social project and the reality of Bolshevik Russia. Moreover, he is able to explain this similarity with all the convincingness of logical necessity.⁴

Losev begins his consideration of the social nature of Platonism from the statement about the impossibility to examine Plato’s theory of ideas and Plato’s social project as two isolated doctrines. We cannot admire the sublime idealism and at the same time shut our eyes to manifold “unexpectednesses” and “inconveniences” in Plato’s project of ideal state. In fact, Losev affirms, “the only *quite definite* social system follows from Plato’s ‘Idea;’ his ‘Idea’ is throughout social and the social dimension of the Platonic reality is throughout “ideal.”⁵

Losev formulates his task as an attempt to trace this dialectical inner dependency between the theory of ideas and the theory of the ideal state. He seeks to explain philosophically all these “strange places” in Plato’s texts, when the theory of family turns into “the doctrine of a stud farm,” when instead of a sublime theory of art and beauty we find in Plato’s texts recommendations about expatriation of artists and poets from the ideal state, together with prostitutes, actors, milliners, barbers, cooks, and other “mass of useless people.”⁶

³ Losev, *Ocherki*, 773–904.

⁴ It may be noted that Losev’s strategy of “intellectual contraband” was not consistent enough: several months after publishing *The Outlines* Losev sent to the press his another book, *The Dialectic of Myth*, with the inclusion of some paragraphs which had not been approved by the censors. This led to his arrest on a charge of counterrevolutionary activities and his being sentenced to ten years in labor camps (in 1933, ahead of time, Losev was dismissed on the score of disability).

⁵ Losev, *Ocherki*, 773, cf. 774: Plato’s “sociology” with dialectic necessity follows from the “ideology” and is itself the most developed form of it.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 775. It is important to note that this phrase, “mass of useless people,” typical for the Soviet rhetoric of twenties and thirties, is presented in Losev’s text as Plato’s. Ana-

So, what social structure, according to Losev, is deduced with dialectical necessity from Plato's teaching about ideas? Prior to proceed to the answer, our author offers a methodological note. Accordingly to Losev, each type of culture, in all multiplicity of its aspects, can be deduced with logical necessity from some basic principle. This principle may be not recognized by the representatives of this cultural tradition, moreover—in fact, these representatives may have some private views and tastes, which contradict the principle (so, some great scientist can be a committed Christian and some Russian Marxist can love Pushkin's poetry), but nevertheless this principle determinates the whole character of the tradition. Platonism, according to Losev, is one such cultural tradition and may be deduced from some initial principle that manifests itself in any aspect of this tradition: equally in Platonic social philosophy (and in practical implementations of such philosophy—as far as it has an occasion to be realized) and in the theory of ideas. So, Losev says, anybody who claims himself to be a Platonist “*must draw all the social conclusions, which follow with the inexorable dialectical necessity from Plato and were drawn by Plato himself.*”⁷

Everyone feels that any social-democracy, any parliamentarism, any equality, any liberalism at all are not consistent with Platonism. ... Platonism is not consistent nor with believing in progress (this believing is a creation of the European liberalism exclusively), nor with the religion rejecting rituals (a creation of European dualistic metaphysics), nor with economical materialism. ... We must ... demonstrate, how does some social structure enter in the essence of Platonism ... *what social doctrine is contained immanently in the clear Platonism?*⁸

Losev marks out in Plato's texts on the ideal state three main moments. In the first: individual life in the ideal state is entirely submitted to the total:

logical examples are scattered throughout all the text of the outline: these are the phrases about “workers’ and peasants’ population” of the ideal state (p. 819), about ... and so on: cases of Plato's state are described by Losev in the terms of the Soviet reality of the end of 1920s. What is it? Losev's accidental anachronisms, stylistic negligence? No, Losev had a brilliant sense of style. I'm inclined to see here a very important feature of the text under discussion: in the situation of strict ideological control, Losev explores such intentionally “anachronistic passages” among other indirect ways for demonstration of the similarity of Plato's and the Soviet social and political projects. He never compares Plato's state with the Bolsheviks' project clearly. But already in this relatively early work Losev demonstrates the examples of the “intellectual contraband”—a strategy, which later, after his return from the labor camp in the White Sea–Baltic Canal, would become one of the most significant characteristics of his style.

⁷ Losev, *Ocherki*, 778.

⁸ Ibid., 779 (Losev's italic).

“Plato’s social philosophy is filled with aspiration for *the unity*, for *the totality*, for such kind of the social life that in all its aspects would be something absolutely united and univocal.”⁹

The second moment is linked with the specific meaning of *justice* (*dikaiosyne*)—the main value of Plato’s social philosophy. Justice here is interpreted as “the wise equivalence of all soul’s aspects, of all its virtues, and—consequently—of all social classes.”¹⁰ No one certain element has here any independent force or significance. So, justice is the benefit of the total. *The Republic*, V 462ab, gives a good illustration of this understanding of justice: “Have we any greater evil for a city than what splits it and makes it many instead of one? Or a greater good than what binds it together and makes it one?”¹¹ “Justice” in the ideal state is the *geometrical* symmetry of sculpture: the ideal polis is “the whole statue, interesting only as *whole*,”¹² and the whole ideal polis is nothing more than a perfect statue, made beautiful by the perfect geometrical symmetry of its proportions.

Losev’s style becomes here very expressive and full of emotion. He just cites and paraphrases Plato, but the structure of sentences, the selection of words and the italicizing demonstrate that Platonism here is not a mere subject of distant scholarly interest.¹³

These statements about (1) the complete absorption of the personal by the total in the ideal state and (2) about the statuary, geometrical character of the ideal state’s perfection give Losev the possibility to postulate the final formula of the social nature of (ancient, heathen) Platonism. Yes, says Losev, essence of Platonism is the idealism. But the Platonic Idea is *the idea of a body*, but not of a person. This is the idea, which, having been embodied, doesn’t permit the transformation of a terrestrial individuum into a spiritual individuality, which “generalizes all individualities, formalizes their spiritual content.”¹⁴ It is on the strength of matter’s and body’s primacy that social being in Platonism consumes all the individual and implacably subdues anything to the whole and to the total.

⁹ Ibid., 808, see after, 811: “we find *the complete absorption of the personal by the total*” (Losev’s italic).

¹⁰ Ibid., 809.

¹¹ *The Republic of Plato*, 141.

¹² Losev, *Ocherki*, 810 (Losev’s italic).

¹³ See, for example, the italicizing of the sentence “*There is not and there cannot be any private property*” (p. 809). By the way, here again Losev explores the terminology specific for his own time in interpretation of Plato’s texts. After such “intentional anachronism” we will see in the phrase about the “workers’ and peasants’ population” of the ideal state.

¹⁴ Losev, *Ocherki*, 811.

Socially Platonism is the doctrine about the *substantial primacy* of matter, about the essential priority of body and creature, earth; this results with necessity in the doctrine about formal and semantic primacy of the idea, about domination and priority of the whole over the individual. This is the logic of any materialism.¹⁵

This definition is a remarkable example of Losev's "contraband style." What is the real subject of this definition, its *definiendum*?—Platonism? Obviously. To be more precise—ancient, heathen Platonism, as the intellectual quintessence of the main intuition of the Greek culture—the intuition of body.¹⁶ As the Platonic idea is, according to Losev, a sublime, abstract form of a geometrically perfect body, heathen Platonism paradoxically proves to be a form of materialism. But, since Platonism is the only possible form of any real dialectical thinking (for example, a form of Platonism having as its basis the idea or intuition of the absolute *person* is, for Losev, the genuine Christian philosophy), heathen, non-Christian Platonism is, for Losev, the paradigmatic form for *any* materialism, including the Russian Bolshevism. So, speaking about social philosophy of Plato, Losev reveals the (onto)logical schemes, which determine the theory and practice of—among others—Russian Bolshevism.¹⁷

All subsequent expositions of Plato's social project, in all the multiplicity of its details, Losev presents as the dialectical unfolding of this formula. His study demonstrates that in its relation to social practice Platonism reveals itself as a *religion*—embracing, overmastering and determining by itself all aspects and features of the social life. Aleksey Losev shows that the three estates of Plato's polis are turned, by the force of dialectic necessity, into the estates of a *heathen monastery*—monks (i.e. philosophers-rulers), policemen (i.e. guards) and novices (i.e. craftsmen and tillers);¹⁸ that the real essence of mythology in the Platonic state is the dogmatic theology¹⁹ and the only permissible forms of art are hymnography and iconography.²⁰

He demonstrates that the only possible form of the theory of family in Plato's "heathen monastery" is such that excludes any privacy, any individual love:

¹⁵ Ibid., 812.

¹⁶ Here we could recall the strong influence of Oswald Spengler upon the early Losev.

¹⁷ See *ibid.*, 812–13: this paradox exists "not only in heathenism and in Platonism," but it will appear with the dialectic necessity "*anywhere* and *always* where the person is understood as terrestrial and material body. Materialism is dialectically connected with the abstract dictatorship of the general formal idea over the alive person."

¹⁸ Ibid., 813–29.

¹⁹ Ibid., 829–33.

²⁰ Ibid., 834–37.

antique Platonism permits the marriage, but throws away any spiritual and personal content from it. ... *Delivery of children is necessary, but nor family, that is nor a father, nor a mother, nor children (in proper sense), nor any love shall exist.*²¹

Moreover, as Platonism, is the highest (and, consequently, the general) form of dialectical thinking for Losev, and as the main opposition between Antiquity and Christianity is concentrated in opposition of two basic cultural intuitions—body and personality—the antique, *heathen Platonism*, in all manifoldness of its social explications, is contrasted with the *Christian Platonism*, the most strict form of which is found by Losev in Byzantine Palamism (with all dialectically deduced forms of appropriate type of sociality).²² Catholicism, with all its specific forms of social explications, is interpreted by Losev as a transitive cultural principle—“the Christian Aristotelianism.”²³ Christianity rejects *heathen* Platonism, but any of its main historical forms is a special cultural form having at its heart a special form of Platonism, nevertheless: “the heathen Platonism is opposed to the Christian, in its three basic forms: (1) the Orthodox-Eastern (the Palamism), (2) the Catholic-Western, and (3) the Barlaamitic-Protestant.”²⁴

Any described variant of Christian culture preserves its specific nature even in its degraded form. So, “Catholicism perverts into hysteria, casuistry, formalism and inquisition. Orthodoxy, having been perverted, gives hooliganism, anarchism and banditry.” Only degraded Protestantism is able to correlate these forms by means of “cold and dry lust of political and economical theories.”²⁵

The similarity of the methodological approaches allows one to correlate the positions of Aleksey Losev and the German philosopher and theologian Paul Tillich (1886–1965):²⁶ a religion (and a quasi-religion, equally) in Tillich’s and Platonism in Losev’s works are models, generating one or another type of social reality, in inner necessity of the total complex of its multiform features.

²¹ Ibid., 849; Losev’s analysis of Plato’s theory of family is presented on pp. 847–60.

²² Ibid., 865–73.

²³ Ibid., 873–92.

²⁴ Ibid., 892.

²⁵ Ibid., 891–92. Surely, “degraded Protestantism” here is Marxism, and the synthesis of perverted forms of Christianity is one more formula of Soviet reality of twentieth century.

²⁶ See, first of all, his *Christianity and Encounter of the World Religions*, where Tillich develops the principles of his “dialectical theology,” elaborates the conception of “quasi-religion,” describes the mechanisms of unfolding of the highest value, immanent to one or another religion (or a “quasi-religion”) in all aspects of a corresponding cultural tradition.

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DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15633/9788374384452.14>