

Cambridge University Press
0521662621 - The Innovations of Idealism
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SYSTEM

SCHELLING'S DISCOVERY AND SCHLEIERMACHER'S APPROPRIATION OF PLATO

Forgive us, sacred Plato! We Have transgressed against thee.
 Hölderlin, Preface to *Hyperion*
 (penultimate version)

I. The Historical Background

The names of Plato and Aristotle have together accompanied the winding course of European philosophy from the beginning. It is true that Aristotle was regarded during the High Middle Ages simply as 'the philosopher'¹, but the period between Saint Augustine and Nicholas of Cusa also saw the survival of a Platonic tradition that attempted to interpret the relationship between the soul and transcendent reality in a Christian fashion.² The Florentine Renaissance celebrated the revival of a theology that, enlivened with the spirit of neo-Platonism, undertook to integrate Plato's treatment of love and beauty into a single doctrine. And a century later, the circle associated with Jacobus Zarabella was striving to renew the Aristotelian interest in the philosophy of nature.³

¹ Cf. the general discussion by Fr. Cheneval and R. Imbach in the introduction to their edition of Thomas Aquinas, *Prologe zu den Aristoteles-Kommentaren* (Frankfurt am Main 1993).

² On this, one should still consult Cl. Baeumker, *Der Platonismus im Mittelalter* (Beiträge zur Geschichte der Philosophie des Mittelalters, 1927); also W. Beierwaltes (ed.), *Platonismus in der Philosophie des Mittelalters* (Darmstadt 1969).

³ J.H. Randall, *The School of Padua and the Emergence of Modern Science* (Padova 1961). On this, one can also consult the knowledgeable but largely summarising recent study by H. Mikkeli, *An Aristotelian Response to Renaissance Humanism: J. Zabarella on the Nature of the Arts and Sciences* (Helsinki 1992).

Modern scientific thought in general, however, soon began to turn against the verbal subtleties of Scholastic philosophy in favour of an increasingly empirical method of approach. Francis Bacon, the principal protagonist in this, expressly endeavoured in his *Novum Organon* to break with the conceptual hold of Aristotelianism, although he simultaneously appealed to the traditional rhetorical status of *epagoge* to secure the principle of induction so fundamental to empirical science.⁴ To some extent, the Cambridge Platonists grouped around Whichcote and Cudworth subsequently represented a reaction against empiricism, returning to the explicitly theological orientation of the Renaissance and attempting to defend the claims of faith by appealing to Plato.⁵ During the intervening period, the Scholastic Aristotelian heritage had passed into Protestant hands, and subsequently exercised a distinct influence on the established eighteenth-century philosophical schools upto the time of Kant.⁶ During the same period, the Platonic heritage of the Cambridge School was also kept alive in the Earl of Shaftesbury's aestheticised concept of 'enthusiasm'.⁷ The English thinker found a particularly vivid response in German eighteenth-century aesthetics precisely because he seemed to defend a new and versatile freedom in the domain of sensibility over against the still dominant influence of French classicism.⁸

These brief allusions to a number of familiar connections, all of which have been subjected to detailed research, already bring us to the threshold of German Idealist philosophy. It was this tradition of thought that discovered, in an original way of its own, the *authentic Plato* in place of the various mediated substitutes of before, and indeed saw him as a thinker who was to provide continuing inspiration to the needs of post-Kantian philosophy.

Kant's critical revolution had brought the classical metaphysics of the Aristotelian tradition to a decisive end precisely by demanding

⁴ Cf. L. Jardine, *Bacon. Discovery and the Art of Discourse* (Cambridge 1974) and my outline of this story, 'Antike und moderne Wissenschaftstheorie', in R. Bubner: *Antike Themen und ihre moderne Verwandlung* (Frankfurt am Main 1992), especially p. 120 ff.

⁵ Cf. C. Patrides (ed.), *The Cambridge Platonists* (Cambridge 1969). The anthology also contains a very instructive introduction under the title, 'The High and Aiery Hills of Platonisme'.

⁶ Cf. the excellent and still unsurpassed study by P. Peterson, *Geschichte der aristotelischen Philosophie im protestantischen Deutschland* (Leipzig 1921; reprinted Stuttgart 1954).

⁷ On this, one should still consult Ernst Cassirer, *Die platonische Renaissance in England und die Schule von Cambridge* (Berlin 1932).

⁸ Also cf. M. Wundt, *Die Wiederentdeckung Platons im 18. Jahrhundert*, *Blätter für deutsche Philosophie* 15, 1941.

self-conscious reflection upon the constitutive limitations of subjectivity in relation to possible experience. At the same time, Kant had discovered the spontaneous character of the synthetic achievements of self-consciousness. For the early idealist thinkers, this situation naturally suggested that the immediate task was that of going beyond Kant by recourse to Kantian means. This meant re-conceiving metaphysics on a quite new basis independent of the traditional approaches, constructing a metaphysics that could effectively present itself as the systematic completion of the philosophy of subjectivity. This itself required a new repertoire of concepts over and above the obsolete ones already discredited by the Critical Philosophy, one that was capable of finally realising the Kantian idea, anticipated but not accomplished by Kant himself, of a new metaphysics that could properly aspire to scientific status.

Such concepts would have to be independent of experience, like Kant's synthetic *a priori*, and yet permit us, through the power of reason alone, to grasp that intrinsic relationship to the world that transcendental philosophy had derived from the *a posteriori* character of contingent experience. For all of his distrust of spurious 'enthusiasm' and irresponsible speculation, Kant himself had emphatically expressed respect, in Plato's name, for the original conception of 'Ideas'⁹ in the transcendental dialectic.¹⁰ In this matter, Kant claimed to have 'understood Plato even better than he had understood himself', and thereby provided the classical formulation for all attempts at retrospective reinterpretations of the philosophical past. It was thus quite natural from the post-Kantian perspective on the problem to regard the doctrine of Ideas, and the idea of a dialectic grounded in the latter and capable of producing real knowledge rather than purely apparent sophistical conclusions, as the appropriate point of departure for further intellectual development. And it is this path that the early idealists were in fact to pursue.

II. The Emergence of the History of Philosophy as a Discipline

In this connection, it is important to understand that the early idealist rediscovery of Plato represented far more than a revival of the familiar

⁹ Cf. Kant's essay of 1796 that was explicitly directed against Schlosser, Goethe's brother-in-law, 'Von einem neuerdings erhobenen vornehmen Ton in der Philosophie'. On this, cf. my study, 'Platon, der Vater aller Schwärmerei', in R. Bubner, *Antike Themen und ihre moderne Verwandlung* (loc. cit.).

¹⁰ *Critique of Pure Reason* B 369 f. Cf. the general discussion in H. Heimsoeth, 'Platon in Kants Werdegang', in: H. Heimsoeth/D. Henrich (eds.), *Studien zu Kants philosophischer Entwicklung* (Hildesheim 1967).

and traditional amalgam of Platonic, neo-Platonic and Christian elements in a new form, since it effectively opened up the Platonic sources themselves for the very first time. The initial stirrings of an authentically philological attitude may have also played a certain role in this respect. But it was, above all, the project of a rationally grounded metaphysics of substance, as mediated through the thought of Spinoza and Leibniz, that helped to realise the possibility of overcoming the traditional philosophy of the Schools.

The contemporary consciousness of the history of philosophy, however, was not alone responsible for these developments. For considerable historical research had already been progressively undertaken by Brucker through to Tiedemann and Tennemann, and the historical scholarship of these writers certainly exceeded the occasional and extremely indeterminate references to the classical thinkers to be found in the works of Kant or Fichte. The revolutionary sense of renewal so characteristic of the early idealist philosophers derived rather from their conviction that they could decisively present the essential questions of philosophy now liberated from the dead weight of tradition, and from the fact that the necessary doxographical support had already been provided by their predecessors.

It is nonetheless the case that the rudiments of something like the history of philosophy in the modern sense had been developed during the eighteenth century.¹¹ Yet the massive erudition of a Jacob Brucker, so appreciated by his contemporaries, did not prove to be particularly helpful for an actual understanding of Plato.¹² And the *Universal History of Philosophy*, which J.A. Eberhard presented as a 'pragmatic history' in terms of progressive development, dedicated only a few pages to Plato, and treated him in a rather condescending manner.¹³ Dietrich

¹¹ Moses Mendelssohn's famous reworking of Plato, his *Phaidon* of 1764, simply presents the school of philosophy of his own time in antique garb. J.J. Engel's *Versuch einer Methode, die Vernunftlehre aus platonischen Dialogen zu entwickeln* (Berlin 1780) is similarly designed as a pedagogical manual for school teachers that is supposed to introduce the contents of Aristotle's *Organon* in an easy and attractive manner: 'more as delightful play than as challenging labour' (p. 5).

¹² J. Brucker, *Historia critica philosophiae* (Leipzig 1742). On this topic, cf. A. Neschke (*Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*, 1993).

¹³ Eberhard's compendium 'for use in the course of academic lectures' seeks rather laboriously to disclose the 'systematic structure' behind the 'dialogical form' and the 'poetic diction' (Halle 1788, p. 139). He thus sets 'dialectics' and 'physics' over against 'theology' and 'ethics'. A. Neschke is not entirely convincing when she attempts to trace Schleiermacher's understanding of Plato's system back to Eberhard. It is true that Eberhard was Schleiermacher's teacher in philosophy, and the synopsis of Platonism as handed down

Tiedemann's history of 1791, which surveys *The Spirit of Speculative Philosophy from Thales to Plato* in the firm conviction of narrating an 'uninterrupted progress of reason', represents a certain advance on Eberhard. Wilhelm Gottlieb Tennemann's *History of Philosophy* of 1798 produced an even more thorough examination of the subject.¹⁴ As his four-volume *System of Platonic Philosophy* of 1792–95 already reveals, he was himself a Kantian, and regarded the history of philosophy very much in the spirit of the final chapter of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, which brings the 'history of pure reason' to an end with its emphatic announcement that 'the critical path alone now lies open before us'.¹⁵

III. The Earliest System Programme of German Idealism

The early idealist appeal to Plato, however, takes place quite independently of all these still rather modest efforts. We know that Plato was already being read in the original at the Tübingen Theological Seminary, the *Stift*, at the beginning of the last decade of the eighteenth century.¹⁶ The famous and much-debated text generally known as the *Earliest System Programme of German Idealism*, probably composed around 1796–97, is a kind of summary that emerged from an immediate exchange of views between Hegel, Schelling¹⁷ and Hölderlin. It addresses

by Alkinoos may also have exerted a remote early influence upon him, as Neschke surmises ('Platonisme et le tournant herméneutique au début du XIX. Siècle', in: A. Laks/A. Neschke (eds.), *La naissance du paradigme herméneutique*, Lille 1990, 139 ff.). But the few pages that Eberhard dedicates to the subject are so arid and schematic that it is impossible to find any interesting traces of this treatment in Schleiermacher's own interpretation of Plato.

¹⁴ Plato is extensively discussed in the second volume, which appeared in 1799.

¹⁵ Critique of Pure Reason B 884.

¹⁶ As a small example, one might compare the way in which Schelling casually weaves a reference to the *Meno* (70c) into a letter of 1795 to Hegel, who had just moved to Bern. 'You wish to know how things are with us? – by God in Heaven an *avchmos* has come upon us which will only give renewed succour to the ancient weeds. Who will pull them up?' This learned allusion to that 'dearth of wisdom' lamented by Socrates in the opening scene of Plato's dialogue, delivered *en passant* in a personal letter to a friend with shared interests, surely presupposes an extraordinary familiarity with the text in question. Schelling's commentary on the *Timaeus* also refers a number of times, and always affirmatively, to the Latin paraphrase of Plato by D. Tiedemann, *Dialogorum Platonis argumenta* (Zweibrücken 1786), which also discusses the *Timaeus* on p. 302 ff.

¹⁷ Some knowledge of Plato on Schelling's part is documented even for his time in Bebenhausen before he took up his university studies in 1790 (according to the biographical fragment by his son K.F.A. Schelling, as cited by G.L. Plitt, *Aus Schellings Leben in Briefen*, Leipzig 1869, I, p. 25). Schelling also mentions Plato in the dissertation he wrote in Tübingen, *De malorum origine* (AA I, p. 83, p. 128).

all the themes that would be involved in the ensuing rise of systematic idealist thought, and concludes by placing the Platonic 'Idea' at the centre of attention.

Beginning with the ego as an 'absolutely free being', there 'simultaneously emerges an entire world out of nothing'. This new philosophy of nature, which attempts 'once again to give wings to the physics that slowly and laboriously advances by means of experiment', requires certain 'ideas' that can only be supplied by a philosophy that poses the fundamental and systematic question, 'How must the world be constituted for a moral being?' After the domain of nature, we confront the 'work of man' – the issues of the state, peace and history. This is followed by the 'moral world' of free spirits in which God and immortality represent more than the mere postulates permitted at the end of Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason*.

'Last of all the Idea that unites all the rest, the Idea of beauty, taking the word in its higher Platonic sense. I am now convinced that the highest act of Reason [*Vernunft*], through which it encompasses all Ideas, is an aesthetic act, and that truth and goodness only become sisters in beauty. The philosopher must possess just as much aesthetic power as the poet. Men without aesthetic sense is what the philosophers-of-the-letter of our times are. The philosophy of spirit is an aesthetic philosophy. [. . . .] Here it ought to become clear what it is that men who understand no Ideas properly lack. [. . . .] Poetry thereby acquires a higher dignity, and she becomes at the end once more what she was in the beginning – the teacher of humanity; for there is no longer any philosophy or any history here, and the art of poetry alone will survive all other arts and sciences'. This ardent appeal concludes by turning to contemplate an 'idea which, so far as I know, has never yet occurred to anyone else', namely that of a 'new mythology'.¹⁸

This is not the appropriate place to discuss the numerous questions provoked by this textual fragment, which, like a prism, casts a refracted light upon the entire subsequent development of systematic idealist

¹⁸ Cited from the text in *Hegel-Studien*, Beiheft 9, 1973. For the recent state of research, cf. Chr. Jamme/H. Schneider (eds.), *Mythologie der Vernunft. Hegels 'ältestes Systemprogramm des deutschen Idealismus'* (Frankfurt am Main 1984). The authors follow their teacher Otto Pöggeler in ascribing the still-contested authorship of the fragment to Hegel. F.P. Hansen has published an entire book on the 'Systemprogramm' (Berlin 1989), which thoroughly documents the history of previous interpretations. Cf. also Section IV, and K. Düsing, 'Ästhetischer Platonismus bei Hölderlin und Hegel', in: Ch. Jame/O. Pöggeler (eds.), *Homburg vor der Höhe in der deutschen Geistesgeschichte* (Stuttgart 1981).

thought through to its culmination in Hegel, and beyond this into the post-Hegelian debate surrounding the question of 'theory and praxis'. The grounding of the ego in a theory of subjectivity provides the perspective from which both nature and the realm of spirit are to be reconstructed. In this process, it is aesthetics that comes to represent the culminating point of this unifying approach since it is precisely in beauty that the natural and the spiritual merge indistinguishably into one another.

This involves a central claim quite unparalleled in the previous Kantian tradition of aesthetic thought – namely, that the task is to develop, under the aegis of Plato, a form of philosophy so fused with poetry that art and science will no longer have to travel separately upon their divided ways as they have typically done since the beginning of the modern period. From the perspective of the history of philosophy, therefore, the true *telos* of modernity leads us back to the very beginning of the tradition. According to the ancient way of thinking, Homer and Hesiod represented teachers for the Greeks precisely because they had helped to make the world intelligible by creating that collective fabric of explanation mediated by images and imagination that we call a 'mythology'.

The ambitious early idealists wanted to restore this original and transfigured condition of a shared relationship to the world, where people and priests, the many and the wise, were not yet separated one from another. Thus the wounds inflicted by the abstract and alienating reflection of an age now remote from its origins could in future be healed again by recourse to the most advanced means available to thought. The hope was precisely to re-establish through philosophy that connection between life and thought whose loss the Germans felt so keenly in the wake of Rousseau's influential critique of culture. An intellectually independent and publicly effective philosophy would be the specific agent for transforming the shattered reality of the post-revolutionary present into something better. That is precisely what the promised new mythology would help to achieve. But even the more sober conception of a philosophy that seeks to comprehend its time in thought, as Hegel had always demanded from his first publication right through to the mature expression of his thought in the *Philosophy of Right*, also has its origins in this constellation of early idealism.

The central concept that is to unlock the treasures of all these previously sealed chambers of thought is the 'Idea'. The latter names a content that can only be grasped through the dedicated commitment

to rational insight beyond the domain of empirical data and sensible experience, that presents the essence of something in its perfect form as determined through the untrammelled exercise of reason in accordance with its own intrinsic character. The *System Programme* itself gives as yet no inkling that the methodical art of dialectic will eventually be required here. The relevant insight in this respect represents Hegel's true breakthrough, which thereby brings him into a proximity with Plato with which none of the aforementioned historical variants of the Platonising tradition can bear comparison.¹⁹ Since the relationship between Plato and Hegel with regard to the 'dialectic' has often been treated before, and I have already contributed to this debate in detail elsewhere²⁰, this complex of questions will be relegated to the background in the following discussion. This difference of emphasis, determined by the present context, does not of course affect the real importance that must still be ascribed to the question of the dialectic.²¹

IV. A Return to Schelling's Beginnings

The *System Programme* arose from a confluence of ideas shared by the three famous students – Hegel, Hölderlin, Schelling – at the Tübingen *Stift*. We have simply recalled some of the elements involved in this synthesis here, but the task now is to take *a further step back* into the origins of Schelling's thought. Alongside the various early student pieces relating to Plato and Aristotle, all of them corrected by a foreign hand, and some elementary studies of Fichte's thought, Schelling's literary remains

¹⁹ We are particularly indebted to the contributions of French scholarship for comprehensive clarification of the role played by classical Greek thought in German idealist philosophy. Cf. J. Taminiaux, *La nostalgie de la Grèce à l'aube de l'idéalisme allemand* (The Hague 1967), D. Janicaud, *Hegel et le destin de la Grèce* (Paris 1975), and the thorough investigation by J. Vieillard-Baron, *Platon et l'idéalisme allemand 1770–1830* (Paris 1979). Vieillard-Baron has also edited a transcript of Hegel's lectures on Plato and provided a relevant explanatory introduction: G.W.F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über Platon 1825–1826* (Paris 1976/ Frankfurt am Main 1979). Further studies concerning the German reception of Plato are gathered in Vieillard-Baron's *Platonisme et interprétation de Platon à l'époque moderne* (Paris 1988).

²⁰ 'Dialog und Dialektik oder Platon und Hegel', in: R. Bubner, *Antike Themen und ihre moderne Verwandlung* (loc. cit.).

²¹ As far as Schleiermacher is concerned, we are principally interested here in his translation of the Platonic dialogues. In this context, I shall ignore Schleiermacher's own later concept of 'dialectic' as the 'skilful art of dialogue in the domain of pure thought'. The most careful and committed study of Schleiermacher's concept of dialectic – one that is even more detailed and elaborately differentiated than the original under examination – is F. Wagner's *Schleiermachers Dialektik* (Gütersloh 1979).

also comprise a previously unknown manuscript that significantly enhances our understanding of the beginnings of idealist philosophy. This well-ploughed field of research could indeed hardly have been expected to promise such an important find at this stage. Yet Schelling's Berlin papers include a bundle of manuscripts comprising around 230 pages²², which was obviously later given the title *Typical Conceptions of the Ancient World on Sundry Subjects as Gathered from the Works of Homer, Plato and Others*. The piece largely consists of numerous more or less systematically arranged notes and excerpts on Gnosticism and various preparatory materials for Schelling's 1795 dissertation, *De Marcione*.²³

Right at the beginning of the collection, we discover approximately twenty pages of excerpts that are more synoptically connected in relation to the later material, expressly dated by Schelling himself to 'August 1792' and designated as follows: 'On Poets, Prophets, Poetic Inspiration, Enthusiasm, Theopneumatics and Divine Influence upon Mankind in general as Related by Plato'. As far as I am aware, this textual source has never been seriously examined before.

Schelling begins with a motto from Plato's dialogue *Timaeus*²⁴ on the subject of necessary and divine causes. It is the latter that require our particular attention if we are ever 'to accede to a blessed life'. And Schelling himself has expressly underlined the passage in the Greek text where Plato exhorts us to follow this path to blessedness. It is also rather surprising to discover that Schelling's exegetical labours are directed towards the dialogue *Ion*, which is centrally concerned with the kind of knowledge ascribed to the rhapsode. This was regarded at that time as an extremely marginal dialogue that hardly belonged amongst the preferred texts as far as the contemporary literature on Plato was concerned.

The dialogue is usually overlooked because it does not seem to represent any of the essential ideas associated with Platonism. Herder quotes it occasionally²⁵, but the histories of philosophy compiled by Brucker, Tennemann and Tiedemann clearly pay no attention to it whatsoever. The first German translation of the dialogue, by Graf Stolberg,

²² The manuscripts are preserved in the archives of the newly established Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences.

²³ For detailed clarifications of the text and background, cf. the editorial report provided by J. Jantzen in the new critical edition of Schelling's works (AA II, p. 195 ff.).

²⁴ *Timaeus* 68c.

²⁵ *Über die neuere deutsche Literatur* (1767), in: J.G. Herder, *Frühe Schriften*, ed. U. Gaier (Frankfurt am Main 1985), for example, pp. 315, 339 f.