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## NEOPLATONIC TENDENCIES IN RUSSIAN PHILOSOPHY

The essence of Russian philosophy is its focus on the Absolute, approached in a great variety of ways, from basically materialistic to almost fideistic – but always dynamic. An early-antique example was the philosophy of Heraclitus, its late-antique counterpart the thought of Plotinus; in later eras this view of the Absolute appeared at various stages of European philosophy, attaining a somewhat pathetic albeit subtle maturity in the systems and sub-systems propounded by Hegel and Schelling and generally considered to be the inspiring force of Russian philosophy.

Thus, the issue of the Absolute is not unknown to Western philosophical tradition and has even occupied a major position in its searchings. In a very general sense, which we will refer to at the outset of this essay, the Absolute is a basic and fundamental issue for philosophy as such. In this sense it embraces the Eleatics, Democritus' atomism, the ideas of Plato, and even Thales' water doctrine<sup>1</sup>. Here the Absolute's divinity, awareness or personality is in a sense the effect of philosophical development, never problem-free and never permitting total denial of the naïve early Absolute theories.

The Absolute concept we are interested in is very general (one may even say superficial), nonetheless it can be explained with relative precision and this explanation is at once an explanation of the psychological and rational sources – in other words the theoretical and historical base – of philosophical thought. The fact is that at the source of man's philosophical and rational relations with the world lies an awareness of the plenitude of the world's things and phenomena (in

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<sup>1</sup> This understanding of the Absolute is by no means usurpatory or superficial. It is used by Hegel, specifically in relation to Thales (cf. G.W. F. Hegel, *Wykłady z historii filozofii* /Lectures on the History of Philosophy/, vol. 1, transl. by Ś. Nowicki, Warsaw 1994, p. 243).

other words its diversity, also in time, in which case it becomes transience), a plenitude Aristotle found surprising and Shestov doleful, and which indeed signifies the world's abundance but can also easily steep us in non-comprehension, chaos and despair – which in turn humans are reluctant to accept. Because of this awareness man postulates global unity, constance (not necessarily in the passive-substantial sense but in laws, norms and regulations), wholeness and sense. This seems to be the very essence of thought and, in the most simple sense, that what determines our activity as human beings. Philosophy attempts to seek this world unity (a plane in whose light the world would appear as one) in a deliberate, methodical and critical way. The Absolute might well be the concept by whose means we could instill sense and unity into the world as a whole (or our visions of a united world) with a relative dose of objectivity.

As earlier reflections and philosophical history show, world unity can be discussed on two planes, each of them offering two contradicting approaches. On the first plane, where world unity is discussed from the perspective of the uniting factor's "position" in the material world, the question is whether it is to be a source, basis, precedent and transcendence towards the sensual, or an immanent mystic bond combining all these roles? Thales' water doctrine, Democritus' atomism theory and Aristotle's Prime Mover, where the uniting factor is evidently something primary and prototypical, are the most obvious (though unlasting) examples of the first approach (let's call it "substantialistic"), which can be said to dominate in Western culture. On the other hand Heraclitus' *logos* and the various pantheic divinities present in the Oriental mystic tradition – especially Hinduistic – are examples of the second approach, which we may call "energetic".

However, one can also view world unity on another plane, where the question is about the analogicality of the uniting factor with the world: is this factor fundamentally different from the material world in the metaphysical sense

(transcendent, albeit in a somewhat different sense than above)? Does it discredit the world of matter in extreme situations? Or is it an energizing force bringing order to sensual reality (immanent, but again in a different sense than above), and in this sense commensurable with this order (and in extreme cases even instrumental towards the empirical)? A good example of the first approach (which we may call “escapistic”) is the nirvanic tradition of Eastern mystical philosophy – although some of its aspects also appear in the Western tradition (e.g. in Gnostic and Christian mystical theories and practices); the second approach, which we may call “methodological”, is best exemplified by the vast majority of European philosophies, which accept the uniting factor’s ties to the wealth of the material world<sup>2</sup>. Let us note that in this classification Eastern culture would be immanentistic in the first case and transcendentalistic in the second (therefore generally energetic-escapistic), while Western culture on the contrary – transcendentalistic in the first case and immanentistic in the second (which would make it substantialistic-methodological). This is what would happen in a general and simplified version of this model. In reality, however, philosophy’s position with regard to this classification is more complicated, with almost every philosophical project simultaneously participating in both discussed classification models. Moreover, this usually develops beyond the initial division into “Eastern” and “Western”, which we applied merely to define the general starting positions. The abandonment of the East-West classification is very adequate to the historic and spiritual-theoretic influence the cultural worlds of the East and West exert on each other. Especially when we consider the East’s impact on the West, we see that it begins at least with Plato, continuing through gnosis, the formation of Christian thought, sundry Christian and non-Christian mysticisms, up to, say, Schopenhauera. Therefore, the presently-discussed categories – substantialism, energetism, escapism,

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<sup>2</sup> An important inspiration for these classifications was Igor Yevlampiev’s work, И. И. Евлампиев, *История русской метафизики в XIX–XX веках*, т. 1-2, С.-Петербург 2000, especially vol. 1. pp. 9-11.

methodologism – would be difficult to apply conclusively to specific philosophical systems or schools, although the categories do refer to some of these systems’ quite real aspects and tendencies and are a good starting-point for further, more ordered investigations – a task we will attempt to tackle below.

Let us begin with a few examples: in light of the above classification the philosophies of, say, the Ionians, Democritus, Aristotle or Descartes understood world unity as deriving from a source preceding the empirical world but with a uniting factor commensurable with the world of material phenomena (to use our terminology, these were substantialistic and methodologicistic philosophies); more typical for the East was to view unity as an inner bond connecting all things, but far different from a world of sensual diversity (these philosophies were energetistic and escapistic). However, it would not have been difficult to find voices claiming that world unity was a force which penetrated all things and at the same time did not differ much from what it penetrated. Such a philosophy – energetic and methodological – would have been voiced by Heraclitus, the Stoics and European pantheistic schools; the exact opposite – recognition of the uniting factor’s priority and simultaneously its distinct separateness from the experientiable world would have been voiced by the Eleatics, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche.

Of particular interest would have been philosophies reaching beyond the above classification models. In the first place this would have been Plato, who would have belonged strictly to transcendentalism when it came to “situating” the uniting factor, but whose philosophy would have been a constant wavering between escapism and methodologism, or between recognizing ideas as wholly incommeasurable on the one hand, and analogical to the material world on the other. In keeping with schoolbook terminology, we would thus call Plato’s philosophy objective idealism, but now aware of its ambiguous elements – elements that would be inspiring from the theoretical point of view and typical for other objective idealism propagators like Thomas Aquinas. Another example

would be Plotinus, whose thought is also subject to the Platonic oscillation from escapism to methodologism (or between an affirmative and quietistic approach to the sensual world), but which would be decidedly energetistic (would understand unity as an inner force binding everything in a diversified world) in its situating of the uniting factor. Using schoolbook terms again, we could call Plotinus's philosophy emanationism, but again aware of its unclarities, which especially come to the fore in the further development of the broadly understood Neo-platonic trend in philosophy (from Pseudo-Dionysius to Hegel). Here, too, would be Russian philosophy as a whole. Despite all similarities between Plato's objective idealism and Plotinus's emanationism, let us note a fundamental difference between them: while the first philosophy is static, non-historicistical and non-personalistical, the latter is dynamistic, historicistical and personalistical. Let us also not forget that in our present interpretations and classifications we have abandoned premature, over-easy and stiff divisions of the discussed philosophies by their eastern or western provenance. Both have entered diverse relations with one another over history, hence final conclusions as to their descent are difficult – especially in the case of European philosophy.

Indeed that which characterized practically all European philosophies were their attempts to define not only world unity and its sources, but also the relations between the unity of the metaphysical Absolute and the diversity of the material world. Eastern schools showed a tendency to reduce matters to unity, which finally evolved into the nirvana ideal, while Western philosophies, having first found unity definitions to grow on, approached the unity-diversity relation in two ways, which we will discuss briefly here and which will take us from the ontology (metaphysics) to the epistemology (gnoseology) of the Absolute:

- in the first case the cognitive attainment of the Absolute takes place by generalization: from concrete to abstract, diversity to unity, part to whole; starting out from the sensual, our path leads through species-related and generic

concepts until we reach the supreme ideal (Plato's Good, Aristotle's Prime Mover, Berkeley's God). We may call this the rationalistic approach;

- in the second case relations between the Absolute and the material world are defined by concretization, the path leading from unity to diversity, from general to detailed, and from whole to part; to start out here we must seek out and experience absolute world unity directly and through mystical intuition; by expanding knowledge and discovering more and more about the world we concretize unity into metaphysical and ethical concepts, into ideas increasingly closer to the sensual world; in a slightly narrower and less general sense than above, we could link the Absolute concept here to mystical cognition and primary experiences of unity; let us add that mystical unity is essentially incapable of assuming clear and unambiguous forms, but neither must it stand opposed to rational thought.

Although mystic intuition does not necessarily have to stand in opposition to rational cognition, the danger does exist – as was frequently evident in the history of culture and philosophy. Mysticism was certainly the dominating trend in eastern cultures, where it stood distinctly apart from other kinds of cognition, especially rational (such leanings were also visible in some forms of European irrationalism, e.g. Schopenhauer). The West, on the other hand, rather opted for rationality, which it avidly pursued and developed, and which was often accompanied by criticism of mystic intuition as immature, opaque, unphilosophical and outright unscientific. Regardless of inspiration or intention, a prime example of rationalistic philosophy will be the Ionians and their immediate successors, Aristotle, medieval scholastics, modern-era philosophies and (despite some reservations) contemporary schools like positivism, language philosophy, analytical philosophy, structuralism or post-modernism.

However, the history of European philosophy carries evident record of strivings to resolve or abandon the rationalism-mysticism conflict. Free from it was probably Parmenides, most certainly Heraclitus – but most of all and most

awarely Plato, for whom the Absolute was on the one hand attainable through mystical channels, but on the other rationally reconstructed and described when it came to its diversity and relation to the phenomenal world. One should note, however, that the rational was gaining the evident upper hand in Plato's philosophy until Plotinus restored its mystical and rational elements to a relative balance. Further continuers of this tradition are Pseudo-Dionysius, Eriugena, the late-medieval German mystics, Nicholas of Kues, Jacob Boehme, and, finally, classical German philosophy – especially its final fruit like the theories of Hegel and Schelling. It is perhaps most fitting to call this entire centuries-old tradition neo-Platonic, which would make it mystical-rational – or one where mysticism does not confuse „divinity experienced in ecstatic inclusion with falling into aprioric irrationality” nor is merely „dull, hazy and in fact cognition-hostile”<sup>3</sup>, but where simultaneously (and contrary to popular and superficial belief) Hegel's philosophy is not so much the apogee of European rationalism as living, breathing thought founded on deep mystical experience and as much the crowning of philosophy's history as an inspiration for its future<sup>4</sup>. Putting it differently, this would be a tradition based on mystical realism and the simultaneous epistemologization of mysticism.

However, the mystical-rational, or neo-Platonic tradition was to a degree discredited and degraded by a “back to Kant” wave starting from the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This comeback to Kant led to the evolution of

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<sup>3</sup> W. Beierwaltes, *Platonizm w chrześcijaństwie* (Platonism in Christianity), transl. by P. Domański, Kety 2003, pp. 55, 48.

<sup>4</sup> Worth recalling here are two fragments from a remarkable book about Hegel by Ivan Iliyn: Hegel „appears to imbue all content with a «certain kind of madness»; he speaks about everything, even the most commonplace, in a way that makes it show to the observer a new, unusual, as if internally contradictory and hardly comprehensible side: here the extraordinary accompanies the known, simplicity reveals complexity, motionless order is marked by turbulence and chaos and accessibility by insurmountable difficulty; all common concepts begin to move in surprising ways; thought appears transferred to a different dimension, taken aback and mistrustful of itself and its content”; Hegel, Iliyn writes further, – „was one of the greatest intuitionists in philosophy, and as such insisted on contemplative immersion in a subject not only to total self-oblivion, but also to the point of forgetting about having forgotten about oneself. Accounts from such immersions will not be external descriptions anymore, but in a sense the contemplated object itself speaking about itself, for itself and from itself. Given such a concentration on energy, attention and insight, Hegel knew of no issue that in his eyes would not remain in the most active and direct relation to final issues” (I. Iliyn, *Filozofia Hegla jako nauka o konkretności Boga i człowieka. Przedmowa* (Hegelian Philosophy as the Science of Human and Divine Concreteness. Foreword), transl. by P. Rojek, „Pismo filozoficzno-literackie” No. 1, 2004).

neo-Kantianism, phenomenology, neo-Positivism and analytical philosophy, all rather distanced from metaphysics and its possibilities, critical of philosophical systems and contemptuous of the Absolute concept. According to these schools the philosophy represented by Hegel and his predecessors was not only irrevocably passé but also dangerous to modern philosophy. After that references to Hegel were somewhat embarrassing and were either restricted to specific aspects of Hegelianism or of a strictly educational and historical character. In fact, one can even say that contemporary European philosophy “orphaned” the neo-Platonic tradition.

Let us now turn to the general characteristics of Russian philosophy. Although some seek its beginnings in the late Middle Ages, and despite the unquestionable fact that literature devoted to philosophical and ideological issues did exist in 18<sup>th</sup>-century Russia, the emergence of Russian philosophy is generally associated with the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the strong and inspiring influence of classical German thinkers, as well as the appearance of Pyotr Chaadaev and the Slavophile-Westernizer conflict (so systematically and professionally carried on by Vladimir Solovyov). From then on Russian philosophy developed (and still develops) as much intensively and turbulently as continuously and relatively uniformly, and never far away from the Hegel-Schelling context, which it honed and enriched intellectually, even pursuing its historical roots – Pseudo-Dionysius, the Gnostics and Nicholas of Kues.

The turn to neo-Kantianism and the resulting thought trends did not play a major part in Russian philosophy<sup>5</sup>, this, however, did not mean it was uncontemporary. Russian thought not only follows an important and

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Т. П. Короткая, *В поисках новой рациональности. Религиозная философия в России конца XIX - начала XX в.*, Минск, 1994, pp. 7, 12 (the autor even claims that denial of Kantianism is a basic feature of Russian philosophy). See also: S. Frank, *Istota i wodzące motywy filozofii rosyjskiej* (The Essence and Leading Themes of Russian Philosophy), transl. by E. Matuszczyk, in: *Niemarksistowska filozofia rosyjska. Antologia tekstów filozoficznych XIX i pierwszej połowy XX w.* (Non-Marxian Russian Philosophy. A Collection of Philosophical Texts from the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries), Part 1, L. Kiejzik (Ed.), Łódź 2001, p. 39 (“Russian philosophy is at constant war with Kantianism and all forms of subjective idealism”).



centuries-old general philosophical tradition, but also fits in quite well with contemporary European anti-positivist and neo-metaphysical trends represented by Nietzsche, Bergson or Heidegger.

Scholars who pursue the specifics of Russian philosophy usually single out the following as its basic features:

- philosophy of the Absolute,
- maximalism, comprehensiveness, integrity,
- unclear boundaries between philosophy and religion,
- ontologism (focus on existence, considered superior to cognition),
- intuitionism (mysticism) with a strong (practically equally strong) but non-autonomous rationalistic aspect,
- dialectism, antinomy,
- dynamism (focus on relations between the Absolute and the world),
- religious materialism (sacred matter),
- historiosophy,
- anthropologism centred on the communal aspect of human existence.

This characteristic aptly reflects the nature, essence and sense of the neo-Platonic trend in philosophy – a trend, we may add, whose leading protagonists not only form a distinct tradition, but can also with good reason be regarded as prime philosophical representatives of their respective eras: Plotinus in the Antique, Nicholas of Kues in the Middle Ages, Hegel in the modern era. This makes Russian philosophy not only part of a lasting tradition in universal philosophy<sup>6</sup>, and not only a continuer of thought trends abandoned by modern European schools – but also heir to a general-philosophical tradition of especial quality and value. Consequently, one may quite justifiably say that Russian philosophy is a relatively autonomous philosophical universe which simultaneously reflects its own entirety, similarly (in form, of course, not

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<sup>6</sup> An alternative development path would be marked by the following “key” personages: Aristotle in the Antique, Scholastics in the Middle Ages, Descartes and Kant in the modern era.

content) to such past thought schools as Greek and Jewish philosophy, Patrology, French Enlightenment philosophy or classical German philosophy<sup>7</sup>.

One objection against this comprehensive and integral picture of Russian philosophy could be that it makes no allowance either for materialistic, enlightening or nihilistic thought as represented by Chernyshevsky, Dobrolyubov or Pisaryev, or for Marxism. However, when we recall that the materialistic-nihilistic trend was convincingly interpreted (for instance by Zhenkovsky or Berdayev<sup>8</sup>) as a philosophy founded on religious immanentism, a project based on the ethic of ascetism and Christian sacrifice and the dialectical moment in which the Divine idea is reborn, and that the same Berdayev, as well as Bulghakov and Frank, pointed to the religious foundations, dynamic and goals of socialism and Marxism (regardless of their complications and deviations)<sup>9</sup>, and, finally, when we refer to the introductory chapter to Leszek Kołakowski's *Main Trends in Marxism* – where of course Hegel, but also Plotinus, Pseudo-Dionysius, Eriugena, Meister Eckhart, Nicholas of Kues and Jacob Boehme are named and extensively described as philosophical sources of Marxism, then we must agree that there is some justification in placing enlightenment and Marxian thought within the relatively integral neo-Platonic tradition of Russian philosophy as a whole. More still, contrary to this essay's title we will then be able to speak not only about neo-Platonic tendencies but also *the* neo-Platonic tendency in Russian philosophy.

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. S. Mazurek, *Filantrop, czyli nieprzyjacieli i inne szkice o rosyjskim renesansie religijno-filozoficznym* (The Philanthropist or the Enemy and other Essays on the Russian Religious-Philosophical Renaissance), Warsaw 2004, pp. 9-10.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. В. В. Зеньковский, *История русской философии*, Москва 1999, т. 1, pp. 385-388; N. Berdayev, *Rosyjska idea* (The Russian Idea), transl. by J. C. – S. W., Warsaw 1999, p. 117

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Н. А. Бердяев, *Истоки и смысл русского коммунизма*, Москва 1990; S. Bulghakov, *Karol Marks jako typ religijny* (Karl Marx as a Religious Type), transl. by R. Papiieski, „Przegląd filozoficzno-literacki” (Philosophical and Literary Review), No. 3, 2004; S. Frank, *Istota i wiodące motywy filozofii rosyjskiej* (The Essence and Leading Themes of Russian Philosophy), op. cit., p. 38.