1. *Platonism and neoPlatonism*

To begin to understand the origin of and the reasons behind the medieval and Renaissance obsession with symbolism, we have to go back to the thinking of the earliest Western philosophers particularly to Pythagoras and Plato. I shall consider their legacy in some detail since they are the giants whose cosmogony and philosophy were the foundation of much of what came later and much of what I discuss in this book. In a later Chapter, I also review briefly the antecedents of Platonism and its development out of the Greek myths as well as the importance of the latter to the symbolism of the Renaissance.

The debt that Western culture owes to Plato (427-347BC) has largely been forgotten. Nevertheless, according to Alfred North Whitehead, the mathematician and philosopher, "the safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato"[1] and this is confirmed in picturesque terms by Ralph Waldo Emerson "Plato is philosophy, and philosophy, Plato, - at once

[1] Whitehead 1969 53

the glory and the shame of mankind, since neither Saxon nor Roman have availed to add any idea to his categories."[1]

For two thousand years, from about 400 BC to about 1600 AD, Platonism formed the essential core of western philosophy and theology including Christian theology and permeated every aspect of Western thought. Naturally, Plato had drawn on the work of his contemporaries and predecessors,[2] including Pythagoras, Heraclitus,[3] Democritus, Parmenides and Socrates and, as one might expect, his ontology was embellished and extended by many others over those 2,000 years but the fundamentals remained in place. The beauty and the attraction of his system was that it incorporated a description of God and man and of every aspect of the known physical universe into a unified and satisfying whole. What follows is a summary of what would now be called the Standard Cosmological Model in Western Europe for the period from the time of Plato up to about the end of the 16th Century in our era.

The universe was said to be divided into two, the macrocosm and the microcosm. The macrocosm embraced both the higher, real or intelligible world, what we would call heaven and the physical world of the heavens and earth. It is of course no accident that for us heaven and the heavens are the same word. The microcosm[4] consisted of the mind, body and soul of man and these reflected, to a degree, the attributes of the macrocosm. The macrocosm was a series of spheres at the center of which was the Earth. The first seven spheres above the Earth were the known planets and the sun and the moon in their orbits. Around the planets were the spheres of the stars and of the *primum mobile*, the prime mover, the material from which the natural world was created. Above and around the heavenly spheres was the divine world of God.

The relationship between the macrocosm and the microcosm was not just plucked out of the air, so to speak. It derived from the explanation that the Greeks gave to the origin of the phenomenon of motion. To

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[1] Emerson 1850 44

[2] Hermann Diels in his definitive *Fragmente der Vorsokratiker* of 1879 gives extracts from at least 90 Greek writers and thinkers who preceded Plato and Socrates. An English summary of Diels is provided by K. Freeman 1959.

[3] Heraclitus first proposed the idea that the *logos* was the mainspring of ordered but inevitable change in the universe.

[4] The words microcosm and macrocosm was still widely used in the 17th Century. For instance, the first comprehensive treatise on anatomy by an English author was the *Microcosmographia* by Helkiah Crooke. This was published in 1618 by W. Jaggard. Two years later Jaggard published Shakespeare's first Folio. The last great encyclopaedia of the complete physical world by one individual was the *Kosmos* of Humboldt (1769-1859). This was so popular that it sold 80,000 copies in seven years.

them it seemed that there were only two possibilities: the first was that the motion of an object was caused by the application of a force and the other that it was an inherent property of the object itself. The only material known to the Greeks that fell into this latter category was material which was alive[1] so the celestial bodies which revolved apparently without external influence must be as alive as their human analogues on Earth.

· Pythagoras ·

Pythagoras (c570-496 BC) was responsible for the development of the idea of the planetary spheres. We were all taught the geometrical theorem attributed to Pythagoras that the square on the hypotenuse is equal to the sum of the squares on the other two sides of a right-angled triangle[2] but what is not so well known and is much more important is the seminal influence that he had on the history and development of all Western philosophy. Arthur Koestler was enthusiastic about Pythagoras and said, "Pythagoras'.....influence on the ideas, and thereby on the destiny of the human race was probably greater than that of any single man before or after him."[3] It is not known whether Pythagoras himself left any written work but he had many contemporary and later followers and many commentators including Aristotle (384-322BC) who wrote a treatise on Pythagoras which is now lost. Much of the information we now possess on Pythagoras is derived from the biographies written by Porphyry and Iamblichus in the 4th Century AD.[4]

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[1] See, for instance, Aristotle *Metaphysics* 1015a. The theory was perpetuated through the Renaissance. See Ficino's essay *Five Questions concerning the Mind* (reprinted in Cassirer 1948, 193) in which he tries to show how the natural motion of the human mind or soul was towards the divine soul. See also Cornelius Agrippa *De Occulta Philosophia* II, 56. "And since everything which moves is alive, even the Earth through the movement of generation and alteration, it too is alive."

[2] It is ironic that this theory, by which he is chiefly known, essentially predated Pythagoras by 1,500 years. It is an example of what are called 'Pythagorean triples' discovered by the Babylonians. One of the clay tablets describing this theory is contained in the Columbia University rare book library in New York City.

[3] Cited in James 21

[4] Many of Pythagoras' sayings were collected together in classical times and rediscovered in the Renaissance when they were given the name of the *symbola* of Pythagoras. See Laurens 2000 for a philological discussion of the Renaissance and Classical sources of these *symbola*. More than 30 of these simple proverbs are to be found in the *Adages* of Erasmus where he gives extensive commentary on each of them.

Pythagoras' importance lies in at least three areas. First, he founded a school of philosophy. This was more than just a philosophers or mathematicians circle; it would be described today as a cult or sect since membership required high standards of etiquette and moral behavior as well as secrecy in its adherents. His followers practiced vegetarianism and believed in reincarnation, two sides of the same spiritual coin; since they believed in a world soul which could be incarnate and reincarnate in any animal, it was tantamount to cannibalism to eat animal flesh.

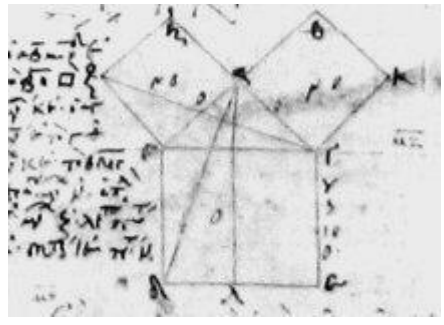

Figure 1 The familiar outline of Pythagoras' theorem from a 9th century manuscript of Euclid's *Elements*.

The immediate predecessors of these elements of Pythagoreanism were the cults of Orpheus and Dionysius, and before them the fertility cults of even earlier Greek peoples. But Pythagoras made a real attempt to combine in a single doctrine both rationalism and mysticism, the two opposing strands of belief on the theological spectrum and, through the ages and to the present day, the attempt to reconcile these two extremes has been amongst the greatest of philosophical and theological challenges.[1] Pythagoras tried to provide a spiritual or mystical basis for the assumptions of his philosophy and also perpetuate his teaching by the example of his lifestyle and that of his followers.

Pythagoras is also credited with the earliest formulation of harmonics and number theory. According to the famous story told by Iamblichus, Pythagoras discovered the nature of harmonics after hearing in a blacksmith's shop the sounds made by cords to which were attached anvils swinging in the wind. Following on from his realization that harmonics was based on a relationship between whole numbers, Pythagoras proposed that all creation and existence was represented by some aspect of number. In his *Metaphysics* Aristotle described the Pythagoreans thus: "since, then, all other things in their whole nature seemed to be modeled after numbers, and numbers seemed to be the first things in the whole of

[1] See Armstrong 1993 for a full discussion of how the thinking of theologians from Judaism, Christianity and Islam has swung between rationalism and mysticism over the ages.

nature, they supposed the elements of numbers to be the elements of all things."[1]

According to Pythagoras, numbers were more than just symbols of the objects they represented, they actually embodied those objects, a phenomenon that we shall come across again when we consider the position of the Church on the worship of images. In Pythagorean theory, all numbers and all creation flowed from the number one or the One. One plus one created the dyad from which flowed the ten dualities into which all things could be categorized.[2] For Pythagoras, three, the Trinity, was the perfect number since it had a beginning, middle and end. Adding the numbers three and four made up the tectractys or pyramid of numbers which was sacred for the Pythagoreans[3] since it comprised ten numbers and which was used by Plato to symbolize the soul.[4]

The theory and symbolism of numbers developed by Pythagoras which endured at least until the time of Kepler (1571-1630) who showed that geometry and not number was the basis of the principles of the universe (page 337), had a huge influence on later thinkers. For Christians, the orthodoxy of number theory was ratified by an extract from the Wisdom of Solomon, which was quoted frequently in the Middle Ages: "you have disposed of all things in measure number and weight."[5] St. Augustine wrote at length on Pythagorean number theory. His great book, *Civitas Dei,* the City of God, was laid out in 22 books because this was the number of books in the Old Testament and the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet.[6] To him, many numbers had spiritual significance. He stressed the Triad, the Holy Trinity, the three cardinal virtues and the six ages of man.[7] Here is a short extract.

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[1] James 30

[2] Limited, unlimited (point and space); odd, even; one, many; right, left; male, female; rest, motion; straight, curved; light, dark; good, bad; square, oblong. This series of dualities was later expanded by Aristotle to include form, matter; natural, unnatural; active, passive, whole, part; unity, variety; before, after; being, non-being.

[3] Other examples of the tectractys were the four ages of man, the four seasons and the four cognitive faculties.

[4] *Timaeus* 6

[5] *Wisdom of Solomon* 11, 21. This book of the Apocrypha was itself most likely the product of Alexandrian Platonists of the first or second century AD. See page 90 for a 16th Century reference by de Tyard.

[6] See Hopper 87. Hopper's book describes fully the extraordinary lengths to which both Christian and secular writers took number symbolism.

[7] Wills 93. The fame of St. Augustine derives not just from the importance and authority of his contribution to Christian theology on almost every major topic in the Church canon nor only from the prodigious scope of his oeuvre which surpassed five million

> There are three classes of numbers -- the more than perfect, the perfect, and the less than perfect, according as the sum of them is greater than, equal to, or less than the original number. Six is the first perfect number: wherefore we must not say that six is a perfect number because God finished all his works in six days, but that God finished all his works in six days because six is a perfect number.

A fundamental question which exercised Christian thinkers throughout the Middle Ages and which demonstrates as much as any the obsession with number and the niceties of the theological thinking of the time was how the ultimate duality, Christ, the God-Man, with his defining character of imperfect materialism could complete the Trinity which, as we have just seen, was deemed the perfect number. Later the Alchemists and the Kabbalists also developed sophisticated mystical number and letter systems and used the tetragrammaton, the four letter Hebrew name of God, a symbol similar to the tectractys, as a representation of God Himself

Following the discovery of the theoretical basis of harmonics, Pythagoras applied his ideas to cosmology and originated the theory of the heavenly spheres. The first primitive notion of cosmological spheres had been introduced by Animaxander but Pythagoras crystallized the system which was to become the standard cosmogony for 2,000 years. Not surprisingly, there were in the Pythagorean cosmos seven spheres which represented the orbits of the known planets, and the sun and the moon; not surprisingly, because this equated to the seven notes of the harmonic scale. As the heavenly spheres moved, they generated a profound heavenly music, 'the music of the spheres.' As the Roman writer Cicero (106-43BC) put it: "hence the uppermost path, bearing the starry sphere of heaven, which rotates at the greatest speed, moves with a high and excited sound, while that of the moon and the nethermost sphere, has the lowest."[1] The number seven deriving from the seven spheres also had a profound influence on Christian symbolism; there were the seven sacraments, the seven gifts of the Holy Ghost, the seven penitential psalms,

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words but also from the extraordinary beauty of his language. His influence on Christian doctrine and practice is immeasurable. For instance, it has been estimated that 80% of the quotations in the works of Aquinas are from St. Augustine and similarly that the works of Calvin, the Protestant leader, contain more than 4,000 of his quotations. See Carter 3.

[1]Cicero in *In Somnium Scipionis,* the Dream of Scipio, from *de Re Publica* trans. Roob 89. This was Cicero's greatest work which was read throughout the Middle Ages in the edition of Macrobius. It contained typical Platonic elements. Scipio is transported in his dream through the spheres to the Milky Way where his future is foretold by his father and grandfather.

the seven joys and sorrows of the Virgin Mary and the seven deadly sins. Muslim teaching also acknowledges that the universe was created in seven concentric layers.[1]

After Pythagoras, musical theory became a branch of Platonism and of orthodox theology. St Augustine who called Plato's system "the most pure and bright in all philosophy"[2] and acknowledged that his acquaintance with neoPlatonism was a turning point in his life, made his first attempt at an all-embracing Christian philosophical system with a treatise on music. Boethius (480-524AD) went a step further and proposed that the music of the spheres was an echo of the music of the angels and in turn, the *musica instrumentalis*, the music we hear with our feeble human sense, was merely a faint echo of the music of the spheres.[3]

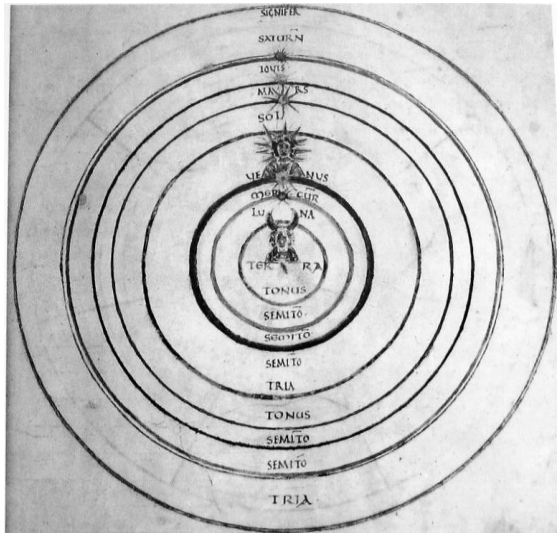

Figure 2 The Heavenly Spheres depicted with their harmonic intervals in a 9th century manuscript.

The precise order of the spheres changed over the years according to the theory then in vogue. Pythagoras had suggested a heliocentric system. Plato put the sun above the moon but Ptolemy[4] writing in the second

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[1] *The Koran* c. ii. v.27

[2] B. Russell 289

[3] The influence of Boethius on the Middle Ages, both in music and philosophy, principally from his *Consolations* which he wrote in prison while awaiting execution, was widespread. His musical treatise remained a standard text book for the musical degree at Oxford University until the 18th Century. Thorndike I, 619

[4] Ptolemy's principal work, *The Almagest*, eclipsed anything produced by his predecessors in the field and remained the accepted authority on astronomy for 1400 years.

centruy AD placed the sun in the fourth sphere above the Earth and this is where it was to stay in orthodox theory for more than 1000 years until Copernicus[1] directed it back to its rightful position in the center of the universe. Above and around the sphere of the primum mobile were the spheres of the nine orders of angels (added by Pseudo-Dionysius c500 AD) and above the spheres of the angels was the divine sphere of God and the world of Ideas or Forms.

· Plato ·

It is the divine Forms, Ideas or Intelligibles, as they are variously described, that were perhaps the principal contribution of Plato to the history of ideas and which were fundamental to the development of theories of symbolism in the West. To understand the origin, meaning and importance of the concept of the divine Ideas we have to go back even earlier in history and consider what was perhaps the basic concern of primitive man. This was change: the changes of climate, of the seasons, of growth and development, of disease and death. To understand and explain the phenomenon of change, would, it was supposed, allow these early people at least a measure of control over the natural forces that surrounded them, dominated their activities and controlled their fate. Semonides of Amorgos, a Greek poet from the 7th century BC, said "we live like beasts, always at the mercy of what the day may bring, knowing nothing of the outcome that God will impose on our acts".[2] When we review the stories of the Greek myths, we shall see how much this idea figured in the minds of early man and how it had even then become an obsession which was expressed in the idea of metamorphosis, the phenomenon in which man was changed into animal, animal into plant and the like. Death was one just form of metamorphosis which in turn reflected Pythagoras' doctrine of reincarnation. Hippocrates, the great physician, wrote, "Nothing perishes, or is created that did not exist before; things are changed by being mixed together or separated."[3] The poetry of the classical period referred again and again to metamorphosis. Perhaps the most popular classical[4]

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[1] He had apparently originally conceived the idea in 1505 and we should also note that Cusanus (Nicholas Cusa) had already proposed it in 1445.

[2] Cited in Dodds 30

[3] *De Regimen* I, 4 cited in Grafton 1991 152

[4] I use the word classics and classical in this study in its meaning of works from the Latin and Greek literary canons with the traditional overtone of the alternative meaning of high quality. The etymology is from the Latin word *classici* which denoted the highest of five levels of Roman property owner and tax payer.

work which survived in many different forms into the late Middle Ages and Renaissance was the epic *Metamorphoses* by the Roman poet Ovid which depicted the history of the world from the creation to his own time in terms of mythical stories and continual metamorphosis.

On a semantic level, the problem was to explain and understand how an object, a man or an animal, the skies or the sea, all nature could be continuously changing and yet at the same time retain its identity and meaning. Said Socrates, "Nor can we reasonably say, Cratylus, that there is knowledge at all, if everything is in a state of transition and there is nothing abiding; for knowledge too cannot continue to be knowledge unless continuing always to abide and exist."[1] An all-embracing solution to the dilemma was proposed and perfected with great sophistication by Plato. According to him, the highest element of the Chain of Being was God, the Creator, the ultimate Good or the One, which existed eternally and unchanging. Within and part of the divine existence of the Good dwelt the universal and eternal Forms of which the changing and evanescent material and earthly examples which we mortals experience were mere reflections or instances.[2] This last thought is for us the critical core of Platonism. Every object in our material world and all things and events experienced in and by the microcosm, is a manifestation, shadow[3] or symbol of the absolute and unchanging Idea of the same object which exists in the higher, divine world. Material objects might change and decay but the Form of an object was eternal and unchanging and thus the only reality.[4] How do we get to grasp the nature of the Form? Plato described how knowledge of it is achieved by gradual comprehension of its three components as we ascend the epistemological ladder: its name, its description or *logos* and its image or *eidolon*.[5]

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[1]Plato *Cratylus* 440d trans. H.N. Fowler

[2] The obsession with the problem of change was not entirely dispelled by Plato's solution and debate on the matter continued right to the end of the period. See for instance Spenser's *Faerie Queen* Book VII 'The Mutabilitie Cantos'.

[3] Shadow was the word still used in the Renaissance to describe the material world in a Platonic context reflecting Plato's parable of the cave from the *Republic*. See for instance Bruno 1582 and 1591.

[4] Plato *Timaeus* 52. This page of Plato, perhaps the most influential page in all western philosophy, states that there is a third element in addition to the Form and the Sensible object. This is Space or the place where the object is to be found. I shall return to this when we review the nature and importance of the Art of Memory in western thought and literature.

[5] Plato *Seventh Letter* 342. Obviously there are resonances here with the tripartite format of the emblem.

Plato extended his worldview to include the Soul, yet another attribute of the One, the transcendent being. Out of the Universal Soul, the individual soul descends through the spheres into the microcosm. However, physical life on Earth is an unsatisfactory and temporary state for the individual soul divorced as it thus is from the harmony of the real, divine world of heaven to which it aspires eventually to return. Nevertheless, through this mechanism, the divine goodness radiates downwards through the spheres until it comes to rest, most of its power being spent, in the material world on Earth.

Further development of the Platonic ideas describing God and the relationship of God to man was undertaken by Plotinus (205-270AD), the great Alexandrine philosopher of the 3rd Century. Plotinus considered himself wholly a disciple of Plato but his contribution, including the element of mysticism from his Egyptian background, was so extensive that thereafter the Standard Model was usually known as neoPlatonism.[1] According to Plotinus, expanding on Plato, God is a triad, comprising in descending order, the One, the Intellect and the Soul.[2] The One is majestic, incomprehensible, transcendent. The One does not create; his goodness overflows or emanates through the Intellect and the Soul and percolates downwards through the spheres. By the time, God's goodness has reached the Earth it is less efficacious. Thus, evil, according to the neoPlatonists, does not exist, only greater or lesser degrees of goodness and furthermore, since the One is not involved in acts of creation, he cannot be held to account for, he is not responsible for, any of the features of the universe or the natural world. The material world is a product of the unconscious emanation or radiation of God. As Plotinus put it in a felicitous phrase "the world is the Poetry of God."[3]

The Intellect, or *Nous*, the second part of the Triad, is the source of all universal Ideas or *logoi* in Greek (*logos* in the singular). As I have already noted, the logos was a central concept in Greek philosophy and beyond the literal translation 'word', it can in different contexts be trans-

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[1] His masterwork is the *The Enneads* or Nine in Greek, named for the fact that the work is divided into six parts with nine treatises in each.

[2] If the Divine Intellect and the Soul do not seem logically connected they are not. They are the product of two separate philosophical traditions which Plato and his predecessors fused into one. I shall examine in greater detail these traditions in the Chapter on Myths below.

[3] A phrase echoed, perhaps unconsciously, by both Boccaccio and Petrarch. Boccaccio in his *Life of Dante* said "theology is nothing more than a poem of God" and Petrarch the same, 'theology is a poetry which proceeds from God." *Le Familiari*, X, 4 cited Curtius 226 and Steiner 1996 17

lated as law, principle, concept, formula, discourse or prayer. According to the neoPlatonist, the Divine Intellect or the Intelligible World in which the logoi are found, is the highest stage of God which is comprehensible by man. Thus again, the objects of the natural and material world including the thoughts, actions and attributes of man are particular instances, reflections, of the universal *logoi.* Cornelius Agrippa in his book on *Natural Magic* published in 1533 put it well: "Platonists … define an Idea to be a form, above bodies, souls, mind, and to be one, simple, pure, immutable, indivisible, incorporeal and eternal; and that the nature of all Ideas in the first place is in very Goodness itself, God."[1]

The universal Soul in its turn is the creator of the natural world. The Soul descends and particularizes in each human being. By contrast, at death, the individual soul reascends through the spheres and is reunited with God since, according to Plato's theory of reminiscence, the human soul is prompted to seek union with the Good by the memory of the divine glory from that earlier time before the soul had particularized and descended into the material world. The importance of Memory, the Goddess *Mnemosyne*,[2] derives from its/her role in this aspect of Plato's system and in turn from the overriding importance of memorization in primitive oral societies as the vehicle for the preservation of the culture of that society.

Plotinus was also responsible for the enduring concept of the Great Chain of Being by which every element of the universe had its place in a hierarchy of objects which accorded to the degree of God's goodness or spirit with which it was endowed. Inanimate objects were at the bottom of the chain since they incorporated the most materiality. Montaigne, with his characteristic vigor, put it that as part of the Great Chain, the Earth was "the filth and mire of the world, the most lifeless part of the universe, the bottom story of the house."[3] Man himself was part spirit and part materiality and the conflict arising out of this mix was the source of many of the moral problems of humanity. Furthermore, as well as this notion of hierarchy, there was what was called the correspondence between the members of the hierarchy. God's plenitude or the completeness of His Being necessitated that He would create an infinity of existence and each element of this infinite hierarchy was joined to the

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[1] Agrippa 1531, 1, Chapter XI trans. Morley 62

[2] Mnemosyne was also the mother of the Muses who were originally shadowy figures inhabiting the higher circles of the macrocosm. There was a close connection between the divine nature of the Muses and their role as a source of inspiration for artists and poets.

[3] Montaigne's *Essais – Raymond Sebond* II, 12 trans. Donald Frame

next. And again, each participant in the hierarchy reflected to some degree the characteristics of the others; as we have already noted, the microcosm contained all the elements of the macrocosm. In a metaphor frequently quoted in the Middle Ages, Macrobius writing in the 5th Century, described God's act of creation thus:

> since, from the Supreme God Mind arises, and from the Mind, Soul and since this in turn creates all subsequent things and fills them all with life, and since this single radiance illumines and is reflected in each, as a single face might be reflected in many mirrors placed in a series…[1]

We shall see how the metaphor of a mirror as a means to the understanding of both the nature of Man and the nature of God through His reflections in the natural world was emphasized again and again in book titles from the Middle Ages and and from the Renaissance.[2] The Bible itself was frequently referred to as the *Speculum Mundi*, the Mirror of the World. Henri Estienne writing in his treatise on the device said that "it is in these devises, as in a Mirrour.. we may in a short tract of time…imprint on our minds all the rules both of Morall and Civill life."[3]

The idea of an universal hierarchy of beings reflected and reinforced an order and rigidity in society and in culture that was encouraged for obvious political reasons by the establishment, both secular and religious. It endured as a philosophical talking point up to modern times playing a part in the thought of the seventeenth and eighteenth century philosophers, Descartes, Leibniz, and Spinoza and it appears in Alexander Pope's philosophical epic poem, *Essay on Man*[4] of 1732-1744.

One reason for this persistence was the inconsistencies revealed when some details of Plato's concept were more carefully considered. If God in his plenitude had created all possible creatures in the hierarchy, how could He preserve His freedom of choice or His divine Will? Put another way, if the natural world or the physical universe was capable of any improvement, then God had not originally exercised his plenitude at the moment of Creation since he would then have created all possible varieties of the universe. Again, if God was capable of creating the variety of objects seen in the physical universe, all the elements of which were to some degree contained within Him, how could He also be the One, the Good, to which the individual soul aspires to approach after death, as

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[1] *Commentarius in Somnium Scipionis (Macrobius Edition)* I 14, 15 cited Lovejoy 63.
[2] For instance Jan David's *Duodecima Specula*…, Twelve Mirrors with which to see God, of 1610.
[3] Estienne 1645 trans. Blount 1646 13
[4] Pope 1733 *The Universe* VIII

seeking simplicity and wholeness away from the multiplicity of the material world. The great Christian thinkers, to whom I refer later, St. Augustine, Pseudo-Dionysius, Aquinas, Cusanus and many others wrestled with this problem mostly without success although these dilemmas did not shake their faith in the original concept.

I shall discuss later in the Chapter on the Greek myths, the origins of the idea of the natural order of society and I also look at the close relationship of the hierarchical order of being to concepts of beauty, art and decoration during the age of symbolism. In the meantime, we can summarize the contrast between Plato and Plotinus. We can say simplistically that Plato was attempting to describe man and his experience on Earth in terms of the characteristics of God or the Good while Plotinus grappled with the understanding of the nature of God through His manifestations on Earth.

· Symbolism and Mysticism ·

From the foregoing we can see that there are two areas suggested by the Platonists in which we can hope to explore the nature of God. We can interpret the clues about His nature that abound in the material world, clues arising from the overflow of his essence from heaven to earth and we can also approach Him and experience Him through mystical means in this life or in the next as the soul ascends back into the Divine world.

As for the former, countless examples exist from writers in our period, the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, demonstrating that they saw nature as a direct illustration of God. A modern writer sums up it up. "Nature in all its facets was seen as a kind of secret writing, a huge cryptogram of God which the wise man could interpret with the help of certain techniques."[1] Again and again, contemporary thinkers visualized nature in the context of the Platonic universe as a symbol of aspects of God. Plato had ended the *Timaeus* with the following words. "For our world …..is a visible living creature…and is an image of the intelligible; and has thus become a living god."[2] Plutarch (c45-120AD) said the same. "Nature herself has put before us sensible images and visible representations."[3] John Scotus Eriugena (810-877), the Christian theologian, wrote, and here again, intelligible refers to the Platonic divine world of absolute forms, "there is nothing among visible and corporeal things which does

[1] Roob 580
[2] Timaeus 92 trans. Lee and see Eco 1986 17
[3] Praz 18

not signify something incorporeal and intelligible."[1] Hugh of St. Victor said the same. "All nature is pregnant with sense, and nothing in all of the universe is sterile."[2] Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) advised that it is advantageous "to transmit the things of God and spirit by means of corporeal similitudes."[3]

The seventeenth century was the beginning of the end for Platonism but such was the power of the traditional dogma that its tenets persisted into the eighteenth century and beyond. For instance, Bishop Berkeley (1685-1753), the philosopher who attempted to refute Newton's theory of calculus and to deny the reality of material things, wrote that "the whole universe is a system of signs"[4] and Huizinga again summed it up: "symbolism was very nearly the life's breath of medieval thought."[5]

It is hard for us surrounded as we are by the fruits of the scientific revolution to conceive of the mindset of the medieval and Renaissance world where everything in nature was to be explained not in terms of the unfolding and evolution of the physical universe but as expressions of the attributes of God, a level of expression suited to the feeble grasp of the mind and senses of man. Possibly St. Bonaventure (1221-1274) expressed best of all the dual nature of symbolism. "Like through a mirror, we can contemplate God with the sensible things, not only since they are signs but by themselves as his essence, presence and power."[6] At the same time, the separate aspects of nature were instances of the ideal forms that emanated from the Divine Intellect, the *Logos*.

Nature as a symbol of God was frequently represented in the later Middle Ages as the Book of Nature in which His essence was revealed and it was not unnatural that this Book[7] should compete with the books of the scriptural canon as the undisputed authority. Nevertheless, when we discuss later (page 45) images of God and the controversy over the spiritual acceptability of icons, we shall see that this view of nature contained seeds of theological danger. If we attempt to worship nature as a representation of God, we are in danger of submitting to pantheism or

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[1] Eco 1986 56

[2] Hugh of St.Victor *Didascalicon* trans. I. Ilich 1993

[3] Eco 1986 63

[4] Praz 18

[5] Huizinga 249

[6] *The Works of St. Bonaventure* 1960 cited in Lynette C. Black *Emblematica* 9, 1, 1995 18

[7] The earliest reference to the Book of Nature was probably by Alain of Lille in the 12th Century when he writes 'all the creatures of the world are almost a book, a picture and a mirror for us.' Subsequently, in 1350 the encylopaedia of Thomas of Cantimpré, *De naturis rerum*, On the Nature of Things was translated into German by Conrad of Megenburg as *Buch der Natur*, Book of Nature. See Curtius 321

even worse we can persuade ourselves of the existence of God merely by our very search for Him, a logical fallacy called the ontological proof of God. Maximius of Tyre writing in the second century AD saw this danger. "We, being unable to apprehend His essence, use the help of sounds and names and pictures, of beaten gold and ivory and silver, of plants and rivers, mountain-peaks and torrents, yearning for knowledge of Him."[1]

I referred earlier to the dichotomy between rationalism and mysticism which has exercised theologians over the ages. On the one hand, some thinkers have only been satisfied if they could prove the existence of God by means of logical deduction; others have assumed that this is impossible and turned to more esoteric means of demonstrating His existence. On the face of it, the rationalists appear to have to yield to the mystics by the following argument: reasoning proceeds by logical steps and if these steps are analyzed backwards from a conclusion, eventually you arrive at a first step, a premise from which the logic flows. How do you prove the premise? If the premise is not self-evident and there is no other way of getting agreement as to the validity of the premise then there is no validity in the logical conclusion. As Montaigne put it, referring to the rationalist: "if his foundation is lacking, then his argument is flat on the ground."[2] An equally colorful warning was given by the English philosopher and playwright, Oliver Goldsmith, who famously said: "it is finely remarked by Bacon that the investigation of final causes is a barren study and like a virgin dedicated to the deity brings forth nothing."[3]

Aristotle outlines the problem in the opening words of his *Topica.*

> Things are 'true' and 'primary' which are believed on the strength not of anything else but of themselves: for in regard to the first principles of science it is improper to ask any further for the why and wherefore of them; each of the first principles should command belief in and by itself.[4] On the other hand, those opinions are 'generally accepted' which are accepted by every one or by the majority or by the philosophers - i.e. by all, or by the majority, or by the most notable and illustrious of them.

This statement forms the origin of two important threads of classical and medieval culture. The Greek for opinion is *doxon* and since *doxa* were legitimized as the basis of argument, it was deemed essential to make

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[1] *Philosophumena II,10* quoted at Wind 220

[2] Montaigne's *Essays* trans. Frame 1998 II, 12

[3] Goldsmith 1795

[4] Aristotle's work on logic showed that there were at least some self-evident premises such as 'the whole is greater than the parts'.

collections of these opinions. We shall see later that doxographies, as the collections were called, and subsequently florilegia or anthologies and commonplace books, were essential tools of contemporary education and were literary genres in their own right. The *doxa* were given status as authorities which could not be gainsaid. Secondly, since Rhetoric was instrumental in the formation of opinions and opinion was the basis of argument, the Art of Rhetoric was validated both as a teaching tool and as a basic element in the epistemological system. This still left plenty of scope for discussion on the nature of first principles and after two thousand years the problem still existed. Leibniz, for example, considered the matter and for him the solution was simple, indeed we might say facile; there were *vérités éternelles et vérités de fait,* eternal or factual truths, which had no need of rational proof. But for many Plato had already solved the problem. The beauty of Plato's metaphysical theory was that the validity of the premise for the existence of God was based on contemplation and intuition and was thus a coherent whole. Plotinus himself put it: "it must not be thought that in the Intelligible World [the Heavenly Intellect], the Gods and the Blessed see propositions; everything expressed there, is a beautiful image, such as one imagines to be in the soul of a wise man, images not drawn, but real."[1]

The mystical element in Platonism had a long ancestry. It can be traced back through Pythagoras and the Orphic sect, the worshippers of Orpheus, and through the god Dionysius. The Orphics in their rites attempted to achieve 'enthusiasm[2]', a metaphor in Greek for union with God, this being the origin of the 'rapture' which describes the progress of the Platonic soul. These ritual practices were widespread and endured for hundreds of years. St. Augustine relates that "when I was a young man, I sometimes went to these sacrilegious spectacles. I heard the choristers and watched the priests raging in religious ecstasy."[3]

Beyond this, Orphism and later 'mystery' religions in the West reflected the need for less rational and more emotional spiritual expression. As Aristotle pointed out, there is a human need to experience the divine as well as to learn about it and the polemic between rationalism and mysticism was an ongoing feature of Western philosophy throughout the whole period. Plato contrasted rationalist philosophy and mythical teaching and proposed that the former could only be properly appreciated through *theoria* or contemplation. He believed that language was a proper

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[1] Boas 8

[2] *En theos* = in God

[3] Augustine *De Civitate* II, 4 trans. and cited Allen 10

expression of the *logos*, but nevertheless he recognized the limitations of language as a medium to express ultimate truths. Plotinus expressed it for him. "He that would speak exactly, must not name [the One] by this name or that; we can but circle, as it were, about its circumference, seeking to interpret in speech our experience of it."[1] Even the early Christian fathers distinguished between *kerygma* and *dogma,* the former being the literal interpretation of the scriptures and the latter the deeper interpretation of religious truth which could only be expressed in symbols.[2] These separate approaches, at opposite ends of the theological spectrum, also differentiated the Greek and the Western churches. The Eastern Orthodox Churches naturally shared a more mystical sense common to the oriental religions. Buddhism and Hinduism also believe that language is not equipped to deal with the ultimate reality. "God comes to the thought of those who know It beyond thought not to those who imagine It can be attained by thought."[3]

From St. Paul onwards there have been many accounts of personal revelations, epiphanies and mystical experiences. Plotinus tells us that he achieved such an experience five times during his life and his pupil Porphyry once. Plotinus said, "raised up out of the body into myself, apart from all other things but self encentered, I have seen a marvelous and immense beauty. Then truly I realized that I am a part of all that is most sublime." Here is a description of another such experience by a modern author,

> All at once, without warning of any kind, I found myself wrapped in a flame coloured cloud. For a moment, I thought of fire ...., the next, I knew the fire was within myself. Directly afterwards there came a sense of exultation, of immense joyousness accompanied by or immediately followed by an intellectual illumination impossible to describe. ... I saw that the universe is a living Presence. I became conscious in myself of eternal life.[4]

The common characteristic of such phenomena, reported by those who have experienced them, is the feeling that union with God has been achieved.

God, Heaven and the divine world were and are realities very close to the experience of the neoPlatonist even during his material existence on Earth. For him, reason and logic was an attribute only of the feeble and earthbound human; they were inferior means of acquiring understanding.

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[1] Enneads VI, ix, 3 quoted at Wind 9
[2] See Armstrong 114 for a full discussion.
[3] Chandogya Upanishad I cited at Armstrong 31
[4] Bucke 7

As the soul ascended back toward God reason became unnecessary and enlightenment was increasingly achieved through mystical intuition. The process of enlightenment is characterized in Platonic theory as a triad: *'emanatio, vivicatio, remeatio'* or emanation, vivication and reunification. In some contexts, vivication was replaced by the word *raptio* or rapture[1] so that an alternative interpretation of the triad was as the three aspects of Love, also symbolizing the upward progress of the soul and its desire for unity with God. Plato, in the *Symposium*, defined love as "Desire aroused by Beauty", and by this view, Desire or Joy was the supreme good to which the Soul aspired, an even higher aim than the Intellect. Ficino in his commentary on the *Symposium* largely based on Plotinus and written in 1468 describes the Platonic Desire as *Furor* of which he was able to distinguish four levels. The poetic and musical furor which was the gift of the Muses, the religious furor of Dionysius, the prophetic furor of Apollo and the highest and nearest to God, the erotic furor of Venus.

Figure 3 Alciato's emblem de Morte et Amore from the first edition of his *Emblemata* (1531).

Thus as the soul rises back to unity with God,[2] reason becomes increasingly unimportant and the Divine world is only experienced in a mystical or rapturous fashion. The poet Sappho said "love is called by Plato bitter and not unjustly, because death is inseparable from love."[3]

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[1] This triad was symbolized in antiquity and in Renaissance art by the three Graces who represented giving, receiving and returning. Platonic thought abounded in triads deriving from the Pythagorean number systems. The soul itself was thought to consist of three elements: mind, courage and desire. See for instance, Raphael's painting, *The Dream of Scipio*, where Scipio is offered three gifts, a book, a sword and a flower representing the three parts of the soul. Wind 85

[2] The Greek word for soul was Psyche and the same word also meant butterfly. Naturally, in classical times the soul was often depicted as a butterfly leaving the body at the time of death.

[3] Wind 161. The phrase is quoted from Ficino *De Amore* II, viii. Ficino is apparently unaware that the phrase actually came from Sappho.

Naturally, this element of Platonism fitted neatly with the Christian view that love of God was a prerequisite of personal salvation.[1] Pseudo-Dionysius acknowledged love as the moving force of the celestial spheres and Dante confirmed that it was '*amore che tutte muove*', love that moves all things. A modern writer has expressed his view of this aspect of Platonism thus; the progress of the soul is shown by,

> a gradual elevation in the nature of the human being from the signs of beauty apparent in the physical world to the ideal forms whence these signs derived, the intellectual cosmos, which as the unique and indivisible source of the True, Good and the Beautiful, also represent the ultimate goal to which he aspires.[2]

The origin of these ideas is of course Plato's brilliant dialogue, the *Symposium,* which explores the nature of love in all its facets. First of all, love is attraction and attraction is a force, the force which drives both microcosm and macrocosm. Secondly, it is love or attraction which not only moves us in our earthly material desires but more importantly, in our intellectual and mystical existence, draws us to the ultimate Good, the Form of Beauty.

Figure 4 Poliphilo abandons Logistike (Logic) and proceeds only with Thelemia (Desire). From the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* (1499).

At the climax of the celebrated Renaissance fantasy, the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*,[3] the hero Poliphilo is lead to the gate of the ultimate mystery by two assistants, *Logistike* and *Thelemia,* Logic and Desire, but at the last moment he abandons the

[1] For a post Renaissance example, see Margit Thøfner, *Emblematica* 12, 83 where she shows how Van Veen's archetypical meditational emblem book *Amoris Divini Emblemata*, Emblems of Divine Love of 1615 is inspired by the writing of St. Teresa of Avila. St. Teresa defines the highest mystical state "as a spiritual marriage in which the mystic remains distinct from Godhead yet also entirely united with him in love."

[2] Couliano 3

[3] See page 224 for a fuller discussion of this book. A similar event occurs in Alain de Lille's 12th century allegorical poem *Anticlaudianus*. Wisdom and Reason journey to Heaven to ask God to provide Man with a soul but only Wisdom is allowed to enter.

former and proceeds only with Desire. Discourse and reasoning alone could not hope to grasp the truth of the heavenly spheres; man, the microcosm, had to rely on the clues given by the symbolism of the material world revealed by the senses. Inge confirms: "rationalism cannot conduct us to the essence of things; we therefore need intellectual vision."[1] During this journey towards enlightenment, the senses became increasingly of more importance than reason, and vision was conceived of as the highest of the senses.

Pico della Mirandola,[2] the Renaissance humanist who more than any other attempted to synthesize all the metaphysical theories of his pagan and Christian predecessors, describes both the mystical ascent of the soul through the spheres after death and a trance he experienced in which his soul was separated from his body and communicated with God. He summed up his views on the superiority of the senses with "what the eye is in corporeal things, that very thing is the mind in the realm of the spirit." Contemplation was a higher mode of comprehension than discourse and imagery as the object of contemplation provided a superior source of understanding. A famous phrase of Aquinas based on Aristotle and quoted with approval with Leonardo da Vinci, Leibniz, John Locke and most recently by no less an authority than Pope John Paul II[3] confirms the position that "nothing is in the intellect that was not first in the senses."[4]

According to Pseudo-Dionysius, the 6th Century Christian writer, the *Logoi* can ultimately only be grasped by intuition:

> the higher we rise, the more concise our language becomes, for the Intelligibles present themselves in an increasingly condensed fashion. When we advance into the darkness beyond the Intelligible, it will no longer be a matter of conciseness, for the words and thoughts cease altogether.[5]

Galileo, at a later date, put it in the same way, stating that even the precision and logic of mathematics, man's highest achievement, did not approach the understanding of God since "God's infinite awareness of all propositions is based on pure intuition."[6]

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[1] Inge 1947 (appendix). See Ariel 1988 8

[2] Pico *Cabalist Conclusions* from the Nine Hundred Theses of 1486.

[3] Pope John Paul II 33

[4] The phrase was also the epigraph of Comenius in his famous picture book, *Orbis Sensualium Pictus*, Picture of the Sensual World of 1657 reputed to be the first book written specifically for children.

[5] *Oeuvres Complètes du Pseudo Denys L'Areopagite* trans. de Gandillac Paris 1943 See also Gombrich 168

[6] Galileo Galilei *The Two Main Systems* trans. Gombrich 180

The mystical approach to the understanding of God thus involves a loosening of the bonds of logic and reason and an ascent up the ladder of the senses, the top rung of which is the sense of sight through which we can catch a glimpse of the images, names and symbols of the divine nature. Mystical symbolism was more that just an alternative to the rational, logical presentation of abstract ideas; it was a step on the path to God, a vision of the embodiment of the divine,[1] an expression of the multiplicity, the infinity of characteristics which are instances of the oneness of God Himself. We get here to the heart of the matter, the reason why symbolism was the central characteristic of Renaissance culture, why the collections of Allegories, the Personifications of abstract qualities, by Ripa, Valeriano, Giarda and the like published in the 16th and 17th centuries (page 202) were compiled with such care and precision and why these publications and the books of emblems and devices were universally popular. They were attempts at expressing the inexpressible, the abstract concepts of the realm of Ideas and ultimately the divinity of God and the essence of His being. As Cristoforo Giarda said in the introduction to his collection of allegorical figures, the *Icones Symbolicae* of 1628, through his visualization "the most noble Arts and Disciplines ….made concrete by some medium, accommodated to our minds…can be grasped more easily."[2]

We can again sum up the medieval viewpoint with the words of Huizinga:

> Through symbolism it becomes possible both to honor and enjoy the world, which by itself is damnable, and to ennoble the earthly enterprise since every profession has its relationship to the highest and the holiest. The labor of the craftsman is the eternal generation and incarnation of the word and the alliance between God and the soul. Even between earthly and divine love the threads of symbolic contact run to and fro.[3]

Much of the theological and philosophical endeavor of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance was devoted to the examination of details of this relationship between the microcosm and the macrocosm; above all how man, the microcosm, might know and approach God. And beyond the mainstream, there were other strands of Platonism which explored the channels of communication between microcosm and macrocosm including the influence that the celestial spheres might have on the soul both as it descended from the One and during life in the microcosm (astrology),

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[1] The Christian examples of this embodiment are the elements of the Eucharist.

[2] Giarda 2 cited and trans. Gombrich 153

[3] Huizinga 240

how to rekindle the divine spark which remained in mankind after the fall (Gnosticism), how to purify body and soul so they might be fit to rejoin the divine harmony (alchemy), how to manipulate another individual through the channels of the universal soul (magic). These further aspects of Platonism, which were a vital and continuing part of medieval culture, I shall discuss in later Chapters. First we must review the contributions of Christian theology, the second major influence on the culture of symbolism in the West, and see how Platonism and Christian theology coalesced to form the received western tradition of symbolism.