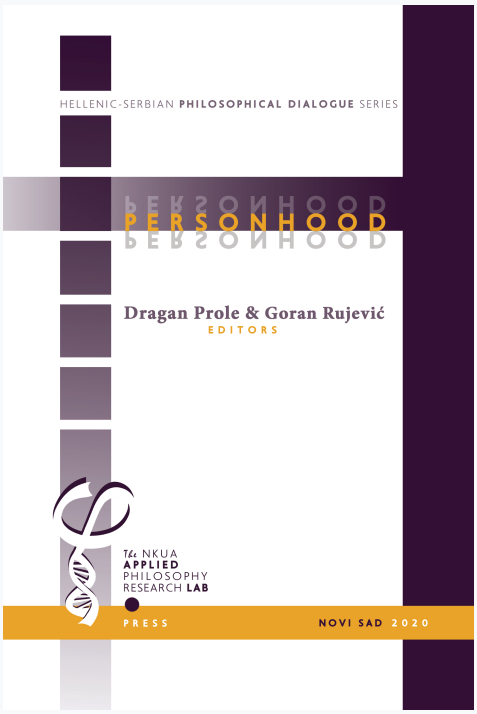
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Chapter

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Personhood

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Byzantine Philosophy, Personhood, and Philosophical Language

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Abstract: The article begins with a brief consideration of the preconditions of the modern scientific study of Byzantine philosophy and within it, is given the presentation of some major trends, starting with the examination of Platonic metaphysicism that has been the subject of Nietzsche's strong criticism. Philosophical language, on the limits of this metaphysicism, is an operation of substantiation together with a similar effort for the fragmentation of philosophical disciplines. One is left with the crucial question of the place of realism in the above process, together with the need for an axiological epistemology that in fact develops around the idea of the person, appearing as the constitutive element of a progress toward the light of knowledge.
Keywords: Byzantine philosophy; Platonism; person; language; realism; axiology; epistemology.

I. Position of the problem

Modern research and interest for the study of Byzantine philosophy began only in 1949 (1951) with *La philosophie byzantine* by B. N. Tatakis, published in the series on history of philosophy supervised by the French historian of philosophy Émile Bréhier.[1] Here, one cannot help noticing an issue relevant to modern thought: in short, the modern study of Byzantine philosophy is contemporary to some strikingly modern trends

[1] By P.U.F., Paris.

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in philosophy like existentialism or deconstruction. At the same time, Byzantine philosophy in its academic form remained close to the research on sources, *Quellenforschung*, which often is not especially demanding on the philosophical level.

Byzantine philosophy as the culture of Orthodox spirituality and as a reflexive process was strongly related to the movement of existentialism. Its mysticism was thought by some notable Greek thinkers to have much in common with the existentialist precedence of existence over essence.[2] The Orthodox anti-doctrinal mystical spirituality contributed strongly to the establishment of this affiliation. Orthodox personalism that was extended to the content of Byzantine philosophy is strongly related to some forms of existential philosophy. Yet, modern scholarship reconsiders these issues and the existentialism is put under critical test.

II. Platonism

The problem of the philosophical contribution of pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita to the Byzantine thinking arises at this point. The issue became even more crucial after the discovery of the strong ties that connect Dionysius to the Proclusian text. One should ask here: how can a Christian thinker relate to Neoplatonic metaphysics? Dionysius appears distanced from the idea of Christianity as a personal and personalist religion. In his case, one gets the feeling of an "abstract Christianity." Here, henology (the discourse about the One) is an apophatic theology and a negative ontology, a refusal of categorization, a process of purification and, finally, an appeal to God. Is the Good in Dionysius the Christian love or the mystical Eros? Dionysius may have reclaimed Plotinus' school in favor of Christianity. If Dionysius is largely based on Plotinus' school of Neoplatonism, one must de-ontologize Plotinus.

In the above sense, the ontologization refers to cases where the Being is considered a concept covering God and the

[2] See Νίκος Νησιώτης, *Υπαρξισμός και Χριστιανική Πίστη* (Αθήνα: Αρμός, 2019).

beings alike. Above all, God and the beings are founded on a common Axiomatics. To de-ontologize, one must search for the transcendent in the immanent, beyond consciousness, and the relation to the divine must not be limited by the structures of subjectivity. The body must be included in the research and the world must be seen phenomenologically as a donation. Thus one may clarify what being is since immanence as apocalyptic donation seems quite close to the phenomenological reduction. God is at the same time far from representation and the warrant of every representation.[3]

Nietzsche has undertaken the philosophical inversion of Platonism and by that the latter appears not as a disclosure of the Logos but as a historical phenomenon; for Nietzsche, Kant is not in the position to subvert Platonism. The Platonic distinction of the sensible world from Reality is nothing else than the story of a long-running error. Reality is what the philosopher claims to occupy but reality disguised as the world of ideas is, in fact, Plato's private world; Christianity for Nietzsche is this last world in confusion. Kantianism turns the same world into a (moral) imperative and practical spirit. The ideas are thus only suppositions and Axioms and that is what survives from the original Platonic world of ideas. Nietzsche questions the whole axiological process: every new truth is truer than truth in its essence. One should think like an artist and prove the non-truth as truth, the fictional as true. Truth is here only a possible form of truth.[4]

What makes the poverty of axiology is that values are opposed to simple facts, which are thus not values; so facts are non-beings in face of the deontic being of values; yet, the deontic is in fact a will to power and consequently a fiction; this is also relevant for Platonism, which has mythology at the heart of its argument but in a covert manner; here, true science is the Platonist's will to truth, i.e. to power; it is the

[3] The opposite direction may be observed in Lloyd Gerson; see his *Plotinus* (London: Routledge, 1994).

[4] See Sarah Koffman, *Nietzsche and Metaphor*, trans. D. Large (Bloomington, IN: Stanford University Press, 1994).

mysticism and not science that makes Platonism possible; Kantian pure reason is equally a fiction. In view of the above, science is axiological and no thing may be a thing proper; it is not empiricism but the criticism of axiology in comparison to the appearance of things that makes the apprehension of the things possible. Nietzschean criticisms of Kantianism and Platonism converges into the critique of axiology. When ideas turn into values, Platonism falls into crisis, since values are not of the thing but of the judging subject; values are then nothing other than subjective *a prioris*. An idea is, by the same measure, nothing but the condition of the representation of a thing inside General Representationalism. Yet, for Plato, ideas are not only the condition of knowing but also that which permits the things to be what they are; not *a prioris* but real beings. An idea for Plato is not a value but the cause of the things related to it.[5] To be, at the same time, a value and a distinct reality constitutes a mystery, a negative theology. If Plato spoke as a poet then a thing would be a linguistic objectivity, something that allows the thing to become an object. If Plato speaks historically, i.e. on the cultural limits of his time, then he speaks metaphorically and provides his intellectual interpretation as a metaphor.

III. Philosophical language

Philosophy manifests itself in the present tense always as interrogation, project, care, survival or happiness. Academic philosophy promotes a kind of original a-topism through a pretense of ignoring the consequences of thinking beyond pure reflection. No one can entertain the idea of the knowledge of states of things without acknowledging, purely and simply, the reality of fragmented and opposing cultures. This state of fragmentation at its origins cannot be rendered without an expansion of the philosophical language, which is tied to the common speech but desires to extend beyond it, surpassing philosophical academism. The expansive language can thus corroborate a "politics of difference" undertaken under

[5] See *Phaedo* 96a-103a.

various circumstances and, in its richness, would assume the continued communication between fragmented cultures and differentiated philosophical statements.

Henceforth, what is of importance here is the relation between this expansive philosophical language and the question of style. The expansion in itself demands a precise style, renewed for every expansive effort. This is a problem already put forth in Plato's *Ion* and *Phaedrus*, if one tries to understand poetic *mania* as experimentation in style. The problem that appears accordingly is that of aestheticism in philosophy and its subsequent evil, i.e. eclecticism. This would mean a partial abandonment of the Platonic perfectionist model and imply the supplanting of the figure of the philosopher by another intellectual.

Debating philosophical style is thus an equally perfectionist model of a different kind. The renewed style welcomes imitation without compromise and endorses the notion of the plurality of styles, re-inscribing itself in the adventures of *peithô*/persuasion that inaugurated the Sophistic movement and the Aristotelian rhetoric;[6] here, the weak discourse can become strong not by some cunning of reason but as an openness to becoming. The movement is paradoxical, distancing itself from public sensitivity towards a renewed relation to the common through style.

The public today, with its inertia and detachment, excites the philosophical writer not as a demiurge but as a transporter, a *metaphoreas*, hermetical without keyed interpretations, messenger without prophetism. Philosophical language, as the Byzantine philosopher Michael Psellos would have it, conforms to a consequential strategy of the intellectual, to study simultaneously *pantodapôs*, i.e. willing to know in a plurality of modes, and *polymathes*, i.e. willing to learn a plurality of subjects.[7] This is the order of the actuality of thinking in

[6] See Barbara Cassin, *L'effet sophistique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1995).

[7] John Duffy, "Hellenic Philosophy in Byzantium and the Lonely Mission of Michael Psellos," in *Byzantine Philosophy and its Ancient Sources*, ed. K. Ierodiakonou, 139-156 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002, 150).

action. The sociological determinants are not ignored but are listed together with a desire for the new, the *novum*, the avant-garde in the proper sense, i.e. to get one in front of the *faits accomplis*.

The expansive philosophical language is also strongly critical. It is not a mysticism of creative subjectivity, it is not some divine inspiration; it is closely connected and critically related to aesthetics. It is assuming a culture, it attests its various uses, it questions the desire to planify, is actual in pure form without transposing its activity to an objective exteriority.

IV. Philosophical sciences

There is actually a kind of heterotopy in the house of philosophy and in the relations between the different philosophical sciences (i.e. metaphysics, ontology, ethics, aesthetics, political philosophy, logic etc.). The philosophical sciences are facing the deconstruction that is not related to the scientific tradition but to the art and politics of difference. The divisions of philosophical language echo the problem of the violence of categorization and its subsequent confusion. One cannot escape the idea that the division of philosophical sciences stems equally from common sense and speculative mysticism. Each philosophical science is a neutral space between conflicts that is value-neutral and attempts to ignore cultural mediation. Yet, the academic generalizations of the philosophical sciences are also generalizations of philosophical antinomies as Hegel predicted.[8]

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[8] Hegel writes: "The Antinomies arise, not only in the four objects taken from traditional Cosmology, but in all objects of all genera, in all representations, concepts and ideas. To know this and to seize the objects in the light of this property belongs to the essential part of philosophical study; this property constitutes what will later on be called the dialectical moment of the logical process." Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Encyclopädie der Philosophischen Wissenschaften im Grundrisse*, 3rd Edition (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1959), 72, as quoted (and translated) by J. Donaldson, "The Origin of Hegel's Dialectics," *Laval théologique et philosophique* 25, no. 1 (1969):

Philosophical sciences are founded on perception and at the same time distort perception. The actuality of the philosophical discourse is problematized in the paradigm of vision (Platonism) where the present is relativized before the overestimated eternal. The Platonic metaphor of vision equals truth but the value-neutrality of philosophical sciences does not quite match the discerning visibility of things.

According to Richard Rorty, one of the latent goals of higher education after World War II was to repel social sadism.[9] One cannot avoid here the comparison with the "towers of surveillance" put forth by Michel Foucault in his famous *panopticon* example.[10] A critical perspective on philosophical sciences is struggling against two waves of decline in science and in society. This kind of criticism needs something more than common sense and good faith. It requires a critical attention that must surpass the linguistic localizations of common sense.

In any case, the politics of the eternal linear development of philosophical sciences opens a series of questions. One cannot avoid the sentiment that philosophical language is rather formalized. The mapping of the different disciplines obscures its own strategic and tactical orientation. The Heideggerian promotion of the terrestrial element is destined to manifest these territorial confrontations. The quarreling about territory leads to an ever-growing complexity and to rhetoricism. Thus, an effort of deconstruction of the jargon of vision and light has been undertaken. In lieu of the jargon, the reference to the slicing of scientific territories and to some linguistic games such as "orientalism" and "project" become now increasingly crucial.

115-129, 115.

[9] See Richard Rorty, *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

[10] See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Middlesex: Penguin, 1977), 195-228; pages refer to Chapter 3.3, "Panopticism."

V. Provisional Remark

In this complex setting, the critique of geopolitics of philosophical authorship and the search for an actuality of the philosophical style are at the avant-garde of post-modernity. Para-thetic philosophies, in the Kojèvian sense of anti-rupture philosophies of long running - and one could consider the Byzantine Philosophy to be one[11] – are a clear indicator of this philosophical demand.

One cannot but have the notion of a latent relation between the dialectics of territory and power and the geopolitics of philosophical writing, where the surface of the world matches and/or struggles with the reflexive language beyond the Manichaean splitting between science and ideology. The questioning of the geopolitical rhetoric in the sense given above, through the paradigm of Byzantine philosophy, demonstrates the weak points of the General Philosophical Representationalism initiated by Descartes that Alvin Plantiga thinks is tending toward an epistemic deontology (the search for clear and distinct ideas).[12]

VI. Realism

Until now Byzantine philosophy has been mainly studied in the light of the search for sources (*Quellenforschung*) and in relation to apophatic or mystical theology. One could name both approaches as scientifically esoteric. They are principally interested in conforming to a model of spiritual (in the sense of an interiority in thinking) research. Yet, what would be the chances of reaching towards states of things or "reality" via Byzantine philosophy? In such a search, Byzantine philosophy should relate either to the world of natural kinds and/or to other possible worlds. Yet, the apophaticism, which is the

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[11] See G. Arabatzis, "Hegel and Byzantium (With a Notice on Alexandre Kojève and Scepticism)," *Philosophical Inquiry* XXV, nos. 1-2 (2003): 31-39.
[12] See Alvin Plantiga, *Warrant and Proper Function* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), vi.

major philosophical theory concerning Byzantine philosophy (in view of the fact that *Quellenforschungen* are in contrast mainly oriented to instrumentality in research), doesn't entail in itself the denunciation of any kind of access to the states of things? Realism in its naïve form means some kind of adequacy between the mind and the things of the world; this cannot be the subject of the history of philosophy alone but implicates the evolution of human knowledge in general. At this point, the relation of metaphysics to realism becomes problematic. As for the Byzantine philosophical tradition, the question is how could one reconcile a warrant epistemology (that for some converges to fideism) with analysis. Here one should look at the relations between epistemology and axiology and the relatively recent rise of the notion of 'true belief' in the analysis of knowledge.[13] Undermining Platonism in favor of knowledge, true belief acquires a position of its own regarding the limits of a pragmatic epistemology, which means that even that which is not valid may still lead to truth. This creates a challenge, for Platonism and beyond, to Cartesian Representationalism and its search for clear and distinct ideas.

Axiology refers to a certain instrumentalism (even in the sense of deontology) that could limit epistemology's ontological aspirations; a belief is by definition of lesser validity claim. In the case of authority, validity and the value of the subject that claims to possess validity are interconnected. Thus subjects may be ivested with authority through their valued claim to validity and by no means thanks to the self-sufficiency of the ideas and notions that they use. All the same, authority is not restrictive of action or, in other terms, is permissive of certain forms of action. After all, a belief may be true and authoritatively valued or true for the sole reason that it is authoritatively valued. Thus, it cannot be untrue for the sole reason that it is authoritatively valued.[14]

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[13] Edmund L. Gettier, "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?" *Analysis* 23, no. 6 (1963): 121-123.

[14] In Byzantine tradition, the epistemonarches is a title referring to author-

Pragmatic epistemology referring to the idea that a wrong position may still lead to truth is undoubtedly placed on the terrain of social ontology. Social ontology and the affirmation that the substances do exist are co-extensive. The term substance refers to the Greek notion of *hypostasis*. Thus, Plotinus names the three levels of reality (One, Intellect, and Soul) as *hypostaseis*. Among the Greek Fathers of the Church, the term *hypostasis* is used in contrast to the term essence (*ousia*)[15] in order to present the reality of the Holy Trinity - God being an *ousia* and the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit being the three *hypostaseis*. Among the same writers, the term *hypostasis* and the term "person" (*prosopon*) are interchangeable.[16] In the above sense, any effort to bring the *hypostaseis* closer to the *ousiai* is placed clearly in the general project of philosophical essentialism. It is equally evident that the understanding of *hypostasis* as *prosopon* is rather indicative of a social ontology since the latter term

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ity knowledge value. The title that Anna attributes to her father the Emperor Alexios is to be distinguished from the traditional term ἀρχιτέκτων which characterizes political mastery. The term belongs to the technical vocabulary of Byzantine monasticism and it means the officer responsible for the discipline. It was used for the first time in a semi-political context a propos the Emperor Manuel I and with regard to his effort to regulate the ecclesiastical affairs; thus, though it was first used in 1157 as an adjective, ten years earlier it referred to Manuel (i.e. about the year 1147). So it is a modern term with regard to the Emperor Alexios. Episteme in its Patristic use goes together with hierarchy. In Michael Italikos, the Art of Royalty, as Episteme, appears as more architectural but in Anna Komnena, the epistemonarches takes the place of the political architect. See Paul Magdalino, "The Pen of the Aunt: Echoes of of the Mid-Twelfth Century in the Alexiad," in *Anna Komnene and Her Times*, ed. Thalia Gouma-Peterson, 15-43 (New York: Garland, 2000), 32.

[15] St. Basil of Caesarea, "Epistula," 236. 6, in Jacques Paul Migne, *Patrologia Graeca* 32, col. 884.

[16] Gregory of Nyssa, "Letter to Peter," in John Behr, *Formation of Christian Theology: The Nicene Faith*, vol. 2 (New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2004), 419.

in its etymology refers to a face-to-face relation (*prosopon: pros-opsin*). The overlapping or the contradiction of *hypostasis* and *ousia* is responsible, in part, for the quarrel between nominalists and realists during the (mainly Western) Middle Ages. As for Byzantium, Linos Benakis spoke of the conceptual realism of the Byzantines which for him corresponds to that of the Neoplatonists who are the usual source of the former.[17]

In order to be real or effective, the *hypostaseis* must reflect the structure of the world and permit the identification of the individual with the simple; likewise, they ought to be paradigmatized in the worldly things. But, as for the face-to-face relations of the *prosopa*/persons, these must be by definition supra-individualistic. The form of paradigmatization of the *prosopa* as *hypostaseis* may have been the critical question that led to the conception and formation of the "archetypes" in Byzantine iconological thought.

Furthermore, the *prosopon* is manifest as both a relation face-to-face and as a structure of the world. The *prosopon* as pattern may lead one to call the world a "second world" parallel somehow to the sensible world in comparison to the world of ideas of the Platonic project. The notion of the "open structure" is better adapted to the idea of the person in a face-to-face relation; the person may thus be constituent of the real world. On the other hand, the person may be seen through the idea of modern structuralism according to which a structure is basically a difference; the person in this latter case is not a part of the constitutional view of the world but rather inserted in a constructivist philosophy since it would never be equal to itself but always defined by its relation to a limited number of other *prosopa*. Consequently, a person may never be individual or simple as the above prerequisite of the theory of *hypostaseis* posits; but this view of the person is highly counterintuitive at least from the individualistic standpoint.

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[17] L. Benakis, "The Problem of the Universals and the Conceptual Realism of the Byzantines," in his *Texts and Studies on Byzantine Philosophy*, 107-136 (Athens: Parousia, 2002).

The non-simplicity of the person can be accounted for in a kind of a sociological reminiscence, i.e. the passage from magic to religion. Since the person cannot be totally part of any logical syntax, magic allows for an apprehension of the structural possibilities of it. In magic, a person may be individual but never simple, i.e. it must always be a synthesis individualized and paradigmatized in a topical way, i.e. as a mode of facticity. Its paradigmatic appearance takes place amidst an absolute, supernatural necessity, in the same way that a concrete individual emerges in reality, as such and such and none other. The individual substance appears in a rude, violent way, being what it can be.

In contrast to magic, the religious iconology points to the images of the world. An image is built through the assembly of its parts, which is analogous to the crucial segments of a person/face.[18] The hypostasis as an image clearly facilitates its understanding as individuation; the person thus is not a syntactic unit but an image. What constitutes the logical cohesion of the hypostatic image can be an abstraction. If it is such an abstraction then it could be difficult for one to see how it differs from a rigid structure that would refer to a nominalist state of things. A person can otherwise escape immanence by pointing to an archetype and it can safeguard its validity by insisting on a strict reproduction of the original imprint of an archetype in the world of natural kinds.

The passage from magic to religion, from the supernatural state of affairs to the imagist possibility looks somehow similar to the two ways that Plato proposed in order to explain the causal relation of ideas to things: the method of participation and the method of reflection. This duality cannot become real for Byzantine personhood together with the theory of the separated world of ideas, which are eternal and thus exist prior to the Creator; this cannot be done for obvious reasons. One should speak here of a model-Platonism that makes a cultural structure of long duration

[18] See Plato, *Protagoras* 329 d.

without being absorbed by what Nietzsche calls "Christian Platonism."

If one is to link Byzantine personhood to the apophatic theology, the possibility of an open structure of *hypostaseis* would then be real and effective. In order to do so, one has to escape the Heideggerian onto-theological *Bildungsroman* of the Being. One must resist the Aristotelian legacy of scholasticism and the Neoplatonists' speculative philosophy. Byzantine apophaticism seems to have always rejected the core idea of Western scholasticism as well as the philosophical speculation. There is a Byzantine distrust of dogmatic argument, a discussion that for the Byzantines has been exhausted by the Greek Fathers of the Church, as they genuinely seem to have believed, together with the idea of an unbridgeable difference between contemplation and speculative philosophy. The apophatic theology, nevertheless, is still a theology and not some simple mysticism. The apophatic theology seems to constitute a criticism of the ontological argument for the existence of God and a reference to the Mystery of the Eucharist in the Orthodox liturgy.

The Byzantine personhood would insist that the good and more specifically the person-to-person good is more important than essence; also doing what is good is more important than philosophical foundationalism. Yet, this is not just another forgetting of the Being, as Heidegger would assume, but a means to clarify the relations between beings. Byzantine personhood seems to criticize voluntarism, subjectivism and the vanity of religious sentimentalism. In this sense, the Byzantine personhood finds refuge in the category of the ethico-aesthetic sphere that would inspire the western theologico-philosophical sphere, especially post Kierkegaard.[19]

The ethico-aesthetic sphere seems to contradict the ethico-political approach where the religious element is proto-ethical in the sense that it instructs people the primary moral obligation of obeisance, which is also a *prima facie* political virtue.

[19] Γ. Αραμπατζής, "Το Ηθικο-αισθητικό στη Βυζαντινή Σκέψη και τον Κίρκεγκαρντ," *Εκκλησιαστικός Φάρος* 91 (2010): 231-265.

What is rejected here by the ethico-aesthetic element is the reductionism of the idea that religion is useful for something, i.e. natural theology. The ethico-aesthetic element grants one the possibility to escape the above reductionism by privileging the consideration of the institutional aspect of the question since apophatic theology was and still is part of the institutional discourse. The institutional aspect of the matter also allows one to escape the latent moralism that often lurks in every axiology. The Aristotelian idea that the production of images is important for the cognition-process, stated in *De anima*, III, 3, is a way to relate the classic to modern epistemology. By the same, it facilitates the idea of the *prosopon* as an ontological unit beyond empiricism and divine command theories.

For the purposes stated above, one should consider the apprehension of the world of passion beyond moralism and apart from Aretaic discourse; besides the idea of passion as a moral wrong, one should perceive it also as an intellectual error. The silence produced by any cognitive weakness does not forbid one from the understanding of the emotions as the battlefield of passions. Clearly the personhood cannot be emptied from emotions and the conflicting passions are a way to understand the emotional reality. Also, personhood cannot detach itself from the conscience of a corrupted social world and the harmonious linguistic expression of *Atticism* (as it was practiced in the Byzantine court) may point to sheer and simple hypocrisy. The personhood, in courtly Byzantium, had to express itself as a minor ethics and through an experiential cognition of the passions. This is an ethics of moral nuance and comparison and the basic observation on which it is grounded, seen through self-observation, focuses on the human love for pleasure and the envy; this is an ethics remote from poetical lyricism and based on abstraction and rationality. The moral progress towards the light may have been borrowed from Platonism but is equally a Byzantinist *topos*; what is scrutinized here is the parity of individual conduct. The ethical truth is fundamentally individualistic, moving between two poles, passion and serenity.

The observation of the individual conduct leads to supposition and the elimination process of conjecture after this conjecture guides one to the real causes of the passionate conduct. In the end, the constant observation of behavior in the courtly setting of Constantinople and other major centers of the empire leaves no other actual issue than the retreat from the life of passions, i.e. toward a gentle seclusion into one's self, which does not deny every mundane behavior. The lucidity acquired through the observation of passions does not leave room for any illusion about society: the resistance to passion is the only criterion of any moral stand and it deals mainly with passionate life. Thus, from some universal morality one passes to a strict individual one. The general world of passions that engender imitation leads to the morality of non-imitation directed toward intellectual admiration and philosophical dialogue. This is an additional image of personhood in classical Byzantium following Iconoclasm and the embracing of the axiological/epistemological weight of the images.

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