

The place of modern science in the evolution of mankind, a Theosophical view¹

Wim Leys



*Plato and Aristotle, details of Raphaels fresco
"The school of athens"*

During the evolution of mankind there are three stages of consciousness:

First, man lives in paradise, among the gods. Man is *unconsciously* omniscient, because his mind is not yet separated from the cosmic mind. It is as though it were asleep. In the second stage the soul enters *the cycles of necessity* as we call it in Theosophy, and mankind descends into the material world and develops *selfconsciousness*. Thirdly, for us still in the future, when man will have completed his journey, he will be omniscient again, but now consciously. He will be among the gods again as in the first stage, but now as a co-operator, fully awake.

In the second stage, in which we are now, we find ourselves on our own, and we have to develop our own individual minds, and learn to experience reality as it is divided into subject and object. A long road through the opposites now starts, where thinking in dualities is developed. It is not only the body which falls into matter, but also the mind, or as Blavatsky

puts it in the *Secret Doctrine* vol. 1 on 'Spirit falling into matter': "The three middle principles in man become with every step more material; the Soul stepping back to make room for the physical intellect".

In Western European culture, which is the 5th period in the Post Atlantean Era, starting with the fruit of the 4th period, the Ancient Greek culture, we can observe the following in history:

Looking at man's spiritual and mental life we first find mythology. The origin of the world is experienced as follows: First there was Chaos, which was boundless space, without measure, beginning or end. Out of this vast void originated Gaia, Earth. Gaia brought forth the boundless sea and infinite heaven, Pontos and Uranos. They had offspring but Uranos felt his dominance threatened and killed many of his offspring. Of the remaining only Kronos was brave enough to avenge this gruesome act. Kronos maimed Uranos and took over power, but was in his turn overthrown by Zeus. This can be interpreted as follows: eternity (Uranos) was followed by time

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(Kronos/Saturn), and time was followed by space (Zeus/Jupiter). So it was seen by man who was still in touch with the creative powers as he was about to enter the second stage.

Then Philosophy emerged in ancient Greece. Man starts bringing about his own thinking and he moves from the mythological into the logical. After Greek culture science emerged, as an outcome of Greek philosophy; being man's own contribution during the second stage, the work of physical intellect in the physical world, man's descent into space and matter. How this transition took off is nicely depicted by the Renaissance painter Rafaël in the Vatican fresco 'The school of Athens' where in the centre Plato and Aristotle are shown in a pose typical for their philosophical approach. Plato pointing upwards to eternity, the world of Ideas, the first stage where we come from, so as not to forget our origin in the *other world*, and Aristotle, seen as the father of science, stretching his hand out forward with the palm down, as if saying 'time has come for the mind to turn it's attention to *this world, existing in space and matter*': with his *physical intellect*, as Blavatsky puts it in the previously quoted statement.

In Roman times Christian philosophy developed along Platonic lines, and this was carried on in Western Europe all through the Middle Ages. In the Arabic world however, Aristotle's philosophy was eagerly absorbed. And through contact with this Arabic culture in the late Middle Ages Western Europe discovered Aristotle, and learned about the scientific discoveries that were made in this part of the world. This triggered philosophy to free itself from theology, to which it had been the servant in the previous centuries. But about four centuries later Aristotle would be rejected and the emancipation of physics from philosophy came about. I assume you all know the names of Francis Bacon, Galileo, Descartes and Newton. The Western mind descended deeper into matter and started employing mathematics as a tool in the development of physics.

The quantitative approach became more important than the regard for the qualitative, and the trinity "number, measure, weight" became the ruling principle, as a triangle pointing downwards, whereas the upward pointing qualitative (or ethical) triangle "goodness, truth, beauty" of the Platonic tradition played no part in physics anymore. Separation of subject and object was necessary in science, not the union of them like the spiritual life requires.

In the seventeenth century empirical science took great strides forward, the scientific method was developed with it's rules to arrive at the unquestionable laws of the physical world through experimentation and verification. The Western mind was now firmly anchored to the material world by the dominance of science. Philosophy and religion played a secondary part. The danger of this road was of course that in man's perception matter would become so powerful that spirit would be forgotten, and in the course of the nineteenth century spirit was by many thought to be a mere product of matter; and to this day this strange idea is still predominant in many of the scientifically oriented circles. As theosophists we know that it was precisely to counterpoise this danger that in 1875 the Theosophical Society was established.

In the 20th century we saw what could be a turning point in science with the emergence of the theory of relativity and quantum physics. But can this mean science is entering the spiritual realm? At least it does show that the Western mind is knocking at heaven's door. Physics is still confined to the physical and mental planes, and has not discovered the ethereal and astral planes as such yet, but for biologists like Rupert Sheldrake, who look for causes in *life*, not just in matter. (By the way: As for philosophy the Western mind is gradually approaching the buddhic plane).

Now has this 'turning upward' already reached a degree that we can say that we have definitely entered the path to the third stage? I think not, and I don't want to speculate in centuries as to when this will occur, although theosophy does provide some insight into this, but going into this now would move us too far from our subject and take too much time.

Has science then contributed anything to spirituality? Not directly I think, but I do assume that the spiritually inclined can learn something from the scientists. For among the esotericists we see a tendency to speculate rather carelessly, to arrive at only those conclusions that confirm their already accepted opinions, so their philosophies satisfy their egos instead of looking for the truth unconditionally and selflessly. In my opinion esotericism could benefit a lot by heeding the so-called “Scientific Method”, although moving in opposite direction. So, not by relying on perception by the senses, experimentation and mechanisation, but by gaining insight from the practicing of minute observation of one’s own reasoning, clear logical and truthful thinking could esotericism benefit. With patience, by deduction and induction, repeatedly testing the outcome of their thinking, as the scientific method demands. A lot of useless by-ways could thus be avoided.

I’d like to end with a metaphore given to us in the fairy tale of Hansel and Gretel, a small esoteric masterpiece, like many fairy tales.

When Hansel and Gretel – the monad – had to leave their father’s house, they could first find their way back with help of the opaque white pebbles which Hansel had put into his pocket before leaving their father’s house, meaning the purely spiritual Ideas. But the second attempt to find the way back, with the bread crumbs, meaning the man made thoughts, was not successful. So the monad (Atma-Buddhi, Hansel-Gretel) had to move on, deeper into the woods. You all know the part with the edible cottage and the witch, so I’ll skip that, though it also has a number of esoteric meanings of course. When they had killed the witch they found precious faceted gemstones in the cottage, some even translucent, allowing light to pass through them. Contrary to the beginning of the story, when the naturally formed pebbles, the ideas from their father’s house, could only take them backwards, now, however, the children took and carried home *these* faceted gemstones, thoughts and ideas created out of their many experiences and suffering during their exile, the second stage; they brought back as a gift to their father’s house: *philosophy and science*.