CHAPTER 11

The Heideggerian Origins of a Post-Platonist Plato

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A new Plato has emerged in the last hundred years, and Platonism has paid the price for the disillusionment that followed the Great War; this essay considers this transformation in the context of Martin Heidegger. Largely because the lives of so many millions were squandered for no good reason in the First World War, the twentieth-century has not proved hospitable to what were once called “high ideals,” and even when post-War European thinkers like Camus, Sartre, and Heidegger himself embraced a scarcely un-heroic willingness to accept or even embrace death, it was in a manner that very few of those who were killed between 1914 and 1918 would have recognized. The Romantics, Christians, and ancient Greeks had offered the First World Warriors more relevant models, and among the latter, Plato in particular had done so for the well educated. When Socrates compared himself to Achilles during his trial, drowned out the self-preserving counsel of his best friend with the speech of the Athenian laws in *Crito*, and explained immortality in relation to our recollection of a pre-embodied existence in *Phaedo*, he had provided a comprehensive and widely disseminated vision that had made modern war more bearable for those who actually endured its horrors, one that was shared by soldiers on both sides of No-Man’s-Land. But in the aftermath of this otherwise senseless waste of human excellence, the high and often Platonic ideals that had made it possible came under attack for a second time, almost as if they had been responsible for Ypres, Verdun, and Gallipoli. To take but one example: no scholar had ever doubted that Socrates – himself a veteran of foreign wars – was anything less than sincere in *Crito* about his duty to Athens before “the war to end war” created its fraudulent twenty-year armistice.

In order to assess Heidegger’s place in this development, it is necessary to begin with Aristotle. Although Werner Jaeger’s path-breaking study of Aristotle’s development (1923) made a powerful case for the view that the young Aristotle had originally been a Platonist,¹ a certain circularity could be perceived in his argument: the case depended on a vision of Plato’s own development that

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¹ The original appeared as Aristoteles; *Grundlegung einer Geschichte seiner Entwicklung* (Berlin: Weidmann, 1923).
Aristotle's own testimony had made possible. While Jaeger's investigation of the fragmentary remains of Aristotle's dialogues revealed numerous links to Plato, it was not because the young Aristotle had ever embraced the transcendent and unchanging Idea of the Good in the Cave Allegory, for example, that Jaeger could justify his claims about Aristotle's early Platonism. Jaeger's case rested instead on the young Aristotle's embrace of a set of doctrines that – while leaving traces in Plato's late dialogues – were made fully explicit only in Aristotle's own accounts of Plato's views. While it is well known that Aristotle attributed to Plato views that are not stated in the dialogues themselves, the embrace of "Plato's Development" has been so pervasive in the reception of Plato since the nineteenth century that Aristotle's originating role in the creation of "the late Plato" has not been sufficiently emphasized. In any case, I will use the term "developmentalism" to describe the view that Plato's thought had not only "developed" but had more specifically moved way from the unchanging and transcendent Ideas of traditional Platonism, the ultimate basis of the "high ideals" with which this essay began.

It is important to begin with the Aristotelian basis of developmentalism because it is certainly not because of Heidegger's influence that an attack on traditional Platonism emerged triumphant in the twentieth century as far as the Anglophone reception of Plato is concerned. The "likely story" of Plato's abandonment of "the two-world ontology of the middle period" (or some similar phraseology) predates Heidegger's birth in 1889, and it is therefore not Heidegger who is primarily responsible for the emergence of a post-Platonist Plato in the twentieth-century: Aristotle is. The principal merit of emphasizing Aristotle's role in the development of developmentalism from the start is that it suggests a basis for detecting some continuity between the Anglo-American and Continental receptions of Plato, two different streams that converge in a

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2 The fons et origo is *Metaphysics M4* 1078b9–12 (translation by W. D. Ross): "Now, regarding the Ideas, we must first examine the ideal theory by itself, not connecting it in any way with the nature of numbers, but treating it in the form in which it was originally understood by those who first maintained the existence of Ideas."

3 See Jaeger (1948), 81–2.

4 Cf. Sayre (2004), 218: "I am convinced that this assumption [sc. 'the undefended assumption that the views attributed to Plato in the *Metaphysics* are nowhere present in Plato's dialogues'] is incorrect."


7 With the foundation laid in Campbell (1867), the most significant early documents are Jackson (1881) 253–98, (1882) 287–331, (1884) 1–40 and (1885) 242–72, (1886) 172–230, 15: 280–305.