
Platonic Ideas and “Hussite” Philosophy¹⁾

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The rather unusual term of “Hussite” philosophy requires a certain delimitation within the wider current of the Reformist thought which begins in the Czech Lands with the precursors of Hus, and continues in the period of the Hussite revolution and in its aftermath. That wide stream of ethical, theological, and ecclesiological views, and of social criticism, sometimes also called “Hussite ideology”, often tends to be misidentified as, or confused with, the philosophy of the Hussite period.

This article seeks to determine whether and to what extent it is legitimate to identify as “Hussite” academic philosophy (or philosophy proper) as it developed at the University of Prague toward the end of the fourteenth and during the first two decades of the fifteenth centuries. For this purpose it is necessary to examine this philosophy for its relative independence *vis-à-vis* standard scholasticism and the common thought processes in the Late Middle Ages. Then one can consider its possible input in the formation of the Hussite movement and its ideals.

A suitable model to focus the investigation is offered by the teaching about the Platonic Ideas, particularly because it is a basic and substantial component of the philosophical interests of the Prague University masters which can be documented from recent scholarship. It was, of course, a matter of the mediæval configuration of this teaching which, except for the dialogue **Timaeus**, virtually lacked any knowledge of Plato’s authentic texts, and hence relied mainly on the interpretations found in St. Augustine, Pseudo-Dionysius, and elsewhere in the Neoplatonic Christian tradition. In Prague the extraordinary attention paid to this teaching was undoubtedly aroused toward the end of the 1390s by the impact of Wyclif’s philosophical writings.

1) The complete text of this study, including notes, will appear under the title “Die Philosophie des Hussitismus: Zur Rolle der Ideenlehre Platons”, in **Verdrängter Humanismus, Verzögerte Aufklärung**, v. I: **Vom Konstanzer Konzil zum Auftreten Luthers**, ed. Michael Benedikt. Vienna, 1996.

Wyclif's treatise *De ideis* stimulated an unprecedented interest at the University of Prague. Master Jan Hus made his own copy in 1398, and of the total of fifteen mediæval witnesses to this hitherto unpublished work, twelve originate in Bohemia, while only a single manuscript has survived in Wyclif's own homeland. The early interest in this treatise at the University of Prague resulted in a brief commentary, *glossa marginalis*, as well as two subject indexes, one prepared by Hus himself. When the Archbishop of Prague ordered the burning of Wyclif's books in Prague in 1410, *De ideis* was included among the works specifically defended on Hus' initiative by the University of Prague.

Very early the university masters of Prague, particularly among the teachers, friends and adherents of Hus, began to compose original texts, devoted to the concepts of the Ideas. These texts were mainly embodied in the written debating themes or *quæstiones* (in Czech *kvestie*), which enjoyed a considerable popularity especially at the formal *quodlibet* disputations at the university. The authors of such *quæstiones* and of their drafts were, among others, Jan Hus, Jerome of Prague, Matěj of Knín, Pavel of Prague, Prokop of Plzeň, Stanislav of Znojmo, and Štěpán Páleč. Because these university masters, together with Wyclif, considered the Ideas as the highest forms of the universals, it is possible to view the Prague discussions of the Ideas as also a part of the late mediæval controversy on the universals, which in Prague set the masters of the Czech "nation" against the masters of the three foreign (essentially German) "nations" who represented different intellectual orientations. Issues concerning the Ideas are therefore also covered by the writings about the universals which emanated from the Prague university circles at the end of the fourteenth and the beginning of the fifteenth centuries. A register by František Šmahel documents their enormous number.

Wyclif's influence on the Prague "Hussite" teachings about the Ideas is undeniable, yet it is possible to demonstrate clearly that Wyclif was by far not the sole source for the study of this question in Bohemia. The scholars at the University of Prague definitely knew writings that had informed the mediæval understanding of the Platonic Ideas, and not only those quoted by Wyclif, but also those which the Oxford doctor does not mention and presumably, at least in some cases, did not know. For instance, Wyclif never cites Plato directly, although, of course, he is aware of him as the actual originator of the teaching about the Ideas. Jerome of Prague, on the contrary, not only includes a quotation from Plato's *Timæus*, but – as the researches of Z. Kaluza have shown – he apparently actually read this work, at least in Calcidius's Latin translation. Similarly other Prague texts about the Ideas

reveal a direct knowledge of the writings of the School of Chartres, particularly the *Glossæ super Platonem* by Guillaume de Conches. Of relevant interest also is the lengthy passage from Duns Scotus Erigena's *De divisione naturæ*, cited anonymously by Jerome of Prague during the time of his stay in Paris. It appears that the various mediæval heterodox disquisitions about the Ideas are used more profusely in the pre-Hussite period by the Czech university masters than by Wyclif himself.

Wyclif's treatise *De ideis* is included in his collection *Summa de ente* as the fifth part of Book Two which covers mainly theological issues. The teaching about the Ideas, however, is not a part of his *summa theologie*, into which it was usually inserted by the scholastics of both the High and Late Middle Ages. Yet, this fact cannot serve as proof that the Oxford doctor wished to treat the Ideas simply as a philosophical topic, if for no other reason than his evident striving for a certain unity between philosophy and theology. Furthermore, he also viewed the tenets concerning the Ideas as the culmination of the teaching about the universals. This fact is attested by his inclusion of the summary interpretation of the Ideas in the final chapter of the large treatise *De universalibus*.

The Prague scholars also clearly accept this linkage. Thus Stanislav of Znojmo devotes three introductory chapters of his extensive work *De universalibus realibus* to a discussion of the Ideas. Jerome of Prague, moreover, very distinctly stresses the philosophers' right to study the divine Ideas, and explicitly denies the theologians – with an appeal to St. Augustine – a monopoly in this domain. Inasmuch as Augustine states that nobody can be wise without the knowledge of the Ideas, Jerome argues that a philosopher, who from his Greek name is the lover of wisdom, cannot function without such knowledge. According to Jerome this is particularly true for a subtle and realistic metaphysician who is concerned with real things and not merely names (*i. e.*, who is not a nominalist). This sharpening of the issue indicates a distinct difference from Wyclif's attitude.

When, in 1416, Jean Gerson complained at the Council of Constance that Jerome had, as early as 1406 during his time in Paris, deduced many faulty conclusions particularly from teachings about the universals and the Ideas, Jerome responded that the assertions in those regards at the university were made by him in a philosophical context, and as a philosopher and a master of that university. Such an answer could not satisfy the Chancellor of the University of Paris, now also one of Jerome's judges, who was convinced that only the *stylus theologicus* or *logica theologica* provided a key to an understanding of the nature of the Ideas.

In addition, Gerson's attitude is marked by a distinctly Anti-Platonic tendency precisely in his concept of the Ideas. He maintains that Plato assumes an eternal existence of the Ideas (for instance, of the Idea of man), and that some contemporary theologians commit the same error which contradicts not only Aristotelian philosophy, but also the faith of the Roman Church. Thus he sees an erroneous attitude not only in Plato, but also in other philosophers, and even theologians, who assume the eternity of real universals.

Wyclif shows an exactly opposite – a sharply Anti-Aristotelian and anti-nominalist – tendency in his treatise *De ideis*. He condemns Aristotle's criticism of Plato's Ideas, as well as Ockham's late mediæval epistemological views. Hus and his associates at the Prague University agree fully with Wyclif in their writings about the Ideas. For Jerome, Plato is *rex philosophorum*, for Hus *divinissimus philosophorum*. Hus, moreover, explicitly states that Aristotle *noluit repetere* Plato's teaching about the Ideas, and comments with satisfaction at the start of the third chapter of his own copy of Wyclif's *De ideis* that the author successfully refutes the Stagirite's objections against the concept of the Ideas.

To this extent, it is also possible to speak about a "Hussite" philosophy in the proper sense. It remains to deal with but one more question concerning this philosophy cultivated at the *alma mater* of Prague in which the concepts of the universals and of the Ideas played such an important rôle. How and to what extent could this philosophy influence the development leading to the Hussite revolution? Wyclif's concept of the universals (and of the Ideas) has a strong ethical, even sociopolitical aspect. Wyclif maintains that the total sinfulness of his times originated in a lack of respect for, and understanding of, the universals. The spirit of the age prefers what is less good to what is better, and hereby Wyclif evidently juxtaposes the less good of *bonum unius* to the better of *bonum commune*. As both Gordon Leff and Anthony Kenny point out, this antinominalist orientation of the treatise *De universalibus* may well provide a moral ground for the need of betterment in society and in the church.

Wyclif's implicit social moralism evoked a ready response in Czech philosophical thinking preceding the wars of the Bohemian Reformation, and the initiatives of the revered *doctor ewangelicus* receive further elaborations and novel emphases from the Czechs. For that purpose, the philosophers of Hus' circle could utilize the category of the archetypal world (*mundus archetypus*), which they adopt from the teachings of the School of Chartres, and use to designate the plethora of Ideas in God, or in the divine mind. In

this connection, Wyclif employs the concept of the intelligible world (*mundus intelligibilis*) associated with the Augustinian interpretation of the Neoplatonic tradition. The Czech philosophers in Prague eagerly adopted the concept of *mundus archetypus* in its exemplary status as perfect in its beauty, luminosity, and harmony, and as the eternal, vital, and true goal, as well as source, for the intelligible being (*in esse intelligibili*) of every thing. A comparison of the ideal *mundus archetypus* with the existing world of current sensory perceptions (*mundus sensibilis*) leads the Czech university masters almost inevitably to the projects of reforming the contemporary conditions of the world, the Church, and society.

The cause of rectification, through a suppression of contemporary abuses, likewise inspired the convocation of the Council of Constance. Two differing philosophical and theological starting points, in both of which the concept of the Ideas play a significant rôle, produced there a paradoxical result. As one of the fathers of the Council, Jean Gerson stands among the judges, while Jan Hus and Jerome of Prague sit on the bench of the defendants to be convicted and thereupon cast into the flames.

Those drastic condemnations evoked a surge of radicalism in Bohemia which became the direct cause of the wars of the Bohemian Reformation. On the one hand, in the excitement of that militant radicalism no major rôle can be played any longer by the subtle arguments of the metaphysics of realism, despite its transformation in the texts of the Hussite thinkers of Prague into a certain genre of *philosophia practica* (including, according to the mediæval paradigms, ethics and political philosophy). On the other hand, it is undeniable that a significant contribution was made to the radical denouement – of course in a broader context – by “Hussite” philosophy, including its concepts of the universals and the Ideas. The Czech masters developed that teaching at the Faculty of Arts of the Prague University, and made it accessible to the wider public through the *quodlibet* disputations.

(Translation by Zdeněk V. David)