Neoplatonic Or Aristotelian: Arabs and Indians as Philosophical Entities in Shota Rustaveli's *The Man In The Panter Skin*

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Abstract: The author considers the Arab and Indian societies in "The Man in the Panther Skin" as philosophical institutions or unity and relates them to Dionysios the Areopagite entities of humans and animals of hierarchic order - to their intellect.

Dionysios posits a supreme being, the One, with an all-encompassing intellect: It understands all. Angels, too, have such an intellect but their intellect is lesser than the intellect of the One. The One understands all because of its all-encompassing intellect but also because It has created all. Angels have a lesser intellect because they have not created the world. Humans have an intellect that is lesser than the Angels, they have a discursive intellect and it is proposed in this paper that Dionysios' Angels correspond to Rustaveli's Arabians, who plan and anticipate the results of their actions.

Lower than the Humans we find in Dionysios' hierarchy Animals, whose intellect Dionysios characterizes as sense-perception. An attempt is made in the paper to argue that the Indians in Rustaveli's poem correspond to the Animals in Dionysios' hierarchy: the Indians are impulsive and don't anticipate the consequences of their actions. Dionysios stresses that entities can move between the Angels, Humans and Animals. For example: a Human can acquire an angel-like intellect through philosophical study. Also, an animal-like entity can acquire a human intellect; this is what happens with Tariel: at first he is an impulsive Indian but at the end of the poem he has moved into the class of Dionysios' Humans, as is shown when he proposed a better plan than Avtandil for the liberation of Nestan-Darejan.

Key words: *The Man in the Panther Skin, Neoplatonism, Plotinus, Tariel, Avtandil.*

Introduction. Shota Rustaveli's approximately 6,300 line epic poem *The Man in the Panther Skin*, henceforth *MPS*, was written around 1200 AD in Georgia. The literal translation of the Georgian

title, *vepxist'q'aosani*, is "In the Leopard's Skin." All English translations translate *vepxi* as "panther;" while its Modern Georgian meaning is "tiger," in this paper we will follow Abaev's finding that its Old Georgian meaning was "leopard" [1, p. 311]. We know little about the poet; the poem itself seems at first a clear work of courtly literature: a princess--soon to be a queen--sends her noble lover on a quest, which he fulfills. Georgian scholars however, e.g. Elbakidze, doubt the courtly nature of the *MPS* [7].

Courtly literature originated in southern France in the 11th century; its origin is unclear: Arabic literature [12, p. 11], Plato [12, p. 5], the Cathars [13, pp. 106-09], the Christian veneration of Mary 12, p. 8], and Ovid [12, p. 5] have been suggested as sources but the question of its origin remains unsolved: given the wide variety of possible sources one cannot be certain whether we are dealing here with derivational relations or similarities arising from a common cultural background. This paper analyzes a feature we find both in the *MPS* and in Neoplatonism: the classification of some people as Humans and others as Animals.

Neoplatonic Elements in the MPS. Several authors have noticed a Neoplatonic influence in the *MPS* [20, p. 8; 18, p. 22; 15, p. 77]. This influence is rarely defined but can easily be inferred: first, we find in the *MPS* the typically Neoplatonic one-way influence or transfer of ideas: the higher entity in the hierarchy influences the lower one but never the other way around. Tinatin, e.g., influences Avtandil, and later Avtandil influences Tariel, but without feedback: Avtandil follows Tinatin's instructions and Tariel does not object against anything Avtandil tells him. Second, we also find the unchanging hierarchy typical for Neoplatonism: Tinatin is Avtandil's superior, both socially and intellectually, and, similarly, Avtandil is socially and intellectually Tariel's superior.

Halfway through the poem, however, we find that this changes: first Avtandil and later Tariel do provide feedback: they bring up better alternatives to what had been proposed to them. Also, both Avtandil and later Tariel show in the second part of the poem that they are not intellectually or socially inferior anymore to Tinatin and Avtandil, respectively. The similarity between the *MPS* and Neoplatonism is hence restricted to the first part of the *MPS*.

The typically Neoplatonic one-way transfer of ideas in the first part of the poem was discussed in a previous paper [4]; the subject of this paper will be the mental activity—that is, the different types of knowing and thinking—we find in the *MPS* and also in the tribes associated with these types, because Shota indicates they are important. That is: we find in the *MPS* symmetrical contrastive pairs, and we interpret their presence as an indication that the members of these pairs are important. For example: in the *MPS* we find two types of abdication: King Rostevan's abdication and the one by King Saridan, and we assume that the paired presence of these types indicates they are important and should be analyzed [5, p. 151]. Similarly, we find two types of killing of a defenseless opponent and we assume this is significant and should be analyzed [3, p. 221]. This paper is then about two types of mental activity, and we assume they, too, are important and should be analyzed.

Knowledge and Thinking in the MPS. These two types of mental activity are the thinking and knowing of the Indians, who act impulsively, and of the Arabians, who anticipate the results of their actions. We assume Shota considers these two types important because he has placed them in a symmetrical contrastive pair — like the two abdications and the two killings of a defenseless opponent — but also because each type of mental activity is associated not with individuals but with a tribe — Indians and Arabs — which we assume is Shota's way of underlining and emphasizing the importance of the two types, and make them stand out.

The mental activity of the Indians is impulsive actions: King Saridan gives away his kingdom not realizing that his son will therefore not be a king and will have a harder time finding a marriage partner than if he had been a king. Also, King Parsadan adopts Tariel, not realizing that infertile marriages may turn fertile and that he may have two claimants to the throne of India. Later, Nestan-Darejan orders Tariel to kill the Prince of Khvarazm, not anticipating the resulting chaos. King Saridan's abdication contrasts with the way the Arabian King Rostevan handles his succession: he conducts, anachronistically speaking, an opinion poll and asks his viziers their opinion of what the results of his proposed succession will be. The murder of the Prince of Khvarazm provides an instructive contrast with Avtandil's killing of the wine taster of the

king of Gulansharo: in both cases a sleeping or almost sleeping opponent is killed, but while Tariel does so without thinking and with disastrous results, Avtandil gets away with murder because his actions are directed at most effectively protecting Patman, as she may tell him about Nestan-Darejan's whereabouts. Avtandil's killing is rational; Tariel's murder is impulsive without anticipation of the results.

We can therefore conclude that the Indians ignore causal relations between events: they seem not to realize that events have results. The reasoning of the Arabians is rarely given but is implied by the successful results which indicate careful thinking.

There is one major exception to the pattern of disastrous Indian actions: at the end of the poem Tariel, an Indian prince, comes up with the best plan to liberate Nestan-Darejan. We will come back to this exception at the end of the discussion of Neoplatonic mental activity.

Knowledge and Thinking in Neoplatonism. In this section we will discuss the mental activity of four Neoplatonic entities — the three hypostases and Animals. The three other entities — Living Beings or plants, Beings or lifeless objects, and non-Beings or matter — are non-cognitive: they do not think or know [14, p. 66]. These entities are arranged in an unchanging hierarchy, as mentioned above. The first three entities in the hierarchy, the One, the Intellect, and the Soul, are the so-called hypostases. These hypostases are interrelated as follows: the One exists independently but has an excess of goodness, and this goodness causes the next hypostasis, the Intellect, to exist. The Intellect then causes in the same way the Soul to exist, also because it has an excess of goodness. The Soul causes in a similar way the existence of the Animals, which are not a hypostasis, though they are a Neoplatonic entity. Each of these hypostases and entities has a unique mental activity which in the following we will summarize as posited by the Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, henceforth Dionysius [14, p. 66].

The first hypostasis, the One or the Good, knows everything, because It has created everything. It has, one can say, creational knowledge. Next is the Intellect which also knows all but not creationally. Still, one can say that the Intellect has an innate or *a priori* knowledge of everything. Plotinus taught that the Intellect

consisted of the Forms [19, p. 54], the philosophers of the Athenian School of Neoplatonism thought the Greek and Oriental Gods made up the Intellect [19, pp. 133-43, 147], while Dionysius thought the Intellect consisted of the Angels [14, p. 65]. The third hypostasis, the Soul, consists of Humans, who think discursively or logically; e.g. according to the rules of Aristotelian logic. They think in terms of premises, arguments, conclusions, causes and results, at least according to Dionysius [14, p. 90]. The Arabians in the *MPS* belong in the category of the Soul, they are Humans. Plotinus' views on the Soul are slightly different and will be discussed below [19, pp. 52, 73].

Animals also think, according to Dionysius, but they think based on sense-perception [14, p. 71]. When they perceive something, they act without thinking rationally. They do, eat or avoid something but without thinking rationally, based, anachronistically speaking, on a reflex or on instinct. Indians belong in this category: when the idea of killing the Prince of Khvarazm enters the mind of Nestan-Darejan, she immediately acts without reflecting on the possible results. She tells Tariel, who, also without thinking rationally, acts upon her command. He is like a dog obeying his master, not like a person weighing the possible results of his actions.

The mental activity of each entity includes the mental activity of the next and lower entity in the Neoplatonic hierarchy. That is: Animals think or know based on sense-perception only, Humans do so based on sense-perception and additionally on logical or discursive reasoning, Angels do so using their innate or *a priori* knowledge and rational thinking in addition to the knowledge and thinking of Humans and also sense-perception, and the mental activity of the One consists of the mental activity typical for the Angels, Humans and Animals in addition to the One's own creational knowledge and thinking.

These three entities — the Intellect or the Angels, the Soul or Humans, and the Animals — may have a changing content. Humans, especially philosophers and theologians, can become Angels by e.g. studying or living exemplarily and then move from the Soul into the hypostasis of the Intellect, and Animals can become Humans, [14, p. 83] e.g. by being trained or instructed by them. This is then how one

can explain Tariel's change: after his conversations with Avtandil, he turns from an Animal into a Human and he proves his humanity by designing the better plan to liberate Nestan-Darejan. Throughout the first part of the poem Tariel behaves like an Animal, without thinking discursively and led by instinct or reflexes only, but at the end of the *MPS* he has turned into a planning Human.

The above is an explanation of Tariel's change in personality according to Dionysius. Plotinus distinguishes a Lower and a Higher Soul: the Higher Soul is characterized by rational, e.g. Aristotelian, thinking while the Lower Soul thinks like an Animal, based on sense-perception only [19, pp. 52, 73]. Plotinus would have analyzed Tariel's behavior near the end of the poem as the de-activation of his Lower Soul and the beginning of his use of his Higher Soul.

Greek, Aristotelian and Neoplatonic Knowledge and Thinking. But is this really the Neoplatonic conception of Animal and Human thinking? The idea that Animals think by using sense-perception only while Humans think by using both sense-perception and rational thinking we find as early as 500 BCE with Alcmaeon [6, pp. 1: 211-12 (A5); 215 (B1a)]. Aristotle, too, sees Animal thinking as based on sense-perception only while Humans use understanding in addition to sense perception [17, pp. 77-8]. Hence, we find that the *MPS* and Neoplatonism do share a common idea — Humans think logically in addition to using sense-perception but Animals think based on sense-perception only — but this was a general Greek philosophical idea rather than a uniquely Neoplatonic one. Hence, one cannot say that the *MPS* received its representation of Arabian and Indian mental activity from Neoplatonism; rather, both share an idea that was part of Greek philosophical thought.

The Kajis. This still leaves us with the Kajis, a tribe of mysterious mountain wizards [16, pp. 150, 210; 20, p. 206]. If we assume that Shota used the Indians and Arabians to illustrate and emphasize different mental activities and make them stand out, we can also expect that the Kajis illustrate a way of thinking, e.g. impulsivity or magical thinking.

Examples of Kaji thinking are rare. Davar, King Parsadan's sister, is a Kaji and is indeed impulsive, but she was born an Indian; she became a Kaji by marriage. Roshak, the Kaji leader who finds Nestan-Darejan, seems to display logical reasoning when he decides

to use Nestan-Darejan to come into the good graces of his queen, rather than, say, sell her as a slave.

Hence the Kajis do not seem impulsive. That leaves us with their other characteristic: witchcraft. Neoplatonism took witchcraft, or, "theurgy," seriously. It was for Neoplatonic philosophers a normal way to get results [19, p. 3]. True, serious philosophers did not engage in witchcraft but they could if they wanted. If they did not, it was because they thought philosophical study and disciplined living gave better results [19, pp. 71-2]. But witchcraft was generally accepted and was not an exclusively Neoplatonic concept [19, p. 15]. So again we find that a common characteristic of Neoplatonism and the *MPS* — witchcraft — may have been part of a general cultural climate rather than an indication of Neoplatonic influence in the *MPS*.

The Defeat of the Khatavians. If Tariel does not change from an Animal into a Human till late in the *MPS*, then how is one to explain his victory over the Khatavians in the first part of the *MPS*, when he seems to display clear logical and therefore Human — as opposed to Animal — thinking (see [8] and [10])

In an earlier paper it was proposed that the *MPS* provides an analysis of human nature by comparing the leopard with men. The leopard is seen as the animal which most resembles men: both are hunters and fighters. The similarity between leopards and men leads us to ask what their difference is or, in other words: what is the essence of manhood. The paper concluded that in the *MPS* men — actually only mature men — are seen as being able to control their emotions while leopards can not, otherwise they are similar [2, pp. 40-41]. This explains why in the *MPS* heroes in battle are positively and approvingly compared with a leopard — for example when Avtandil fights off the pirates. War and hunting are hence seen as areas where being like an animal, or, rather, like a leopard, is approved — when hunting or fighting Georgian men need not exercise emotional control and can be like animals. But it also explains why Nestan-Darejan is likened to a leopard in her jealousy [20, p. 92]: in her fury she is not able to manage her emotions constructively. She could, for example, have told her parents or the Prince of Khvarazm about her love for Tariel, or she could have eloped with him. She is hence like a leopard: she can not control her

emotions. But in her case the absence of emotional control is not socially approved; it is only in hunting and war approved. It also explains why Tariel wears a leopard skin when he cannot control his emotions: while he mourns the loss of Nestan-Darejan unconstructively, he is described as wearing a leopard skin. But when he has gained control over his emotions, when he has stopped bemoaning her loss and gained enough self-control to act constructively and devise the best plan to free her, there is no mention of his leopard skin anymore.

Levi-Strauss provides a similar analysis for South American Indian myths where the jaguar is seen as the animal that, like the leopard in Georgian culture, most resembles man. The difference is that man has fire while the jaguar does not; otherwise they are similar [11, p. 132]. South American Indian myths see men as jaguars that have fire; the Georgians see them as leopards with self-control.

In Georgian culture, therefore, war is analyzed as an animal activity which Georgians share with the leopard along with hunting, but it is not seen as an inferior activity. In some societies "animal" may have a derogatory meaning; however, war and hunting are activities that guarantee the continuation of Georgian society and, as Abaev has pointed out, it is a compliment for a Georgian to be compared to a leopard [1, p. 311]. Hunting and fighting are seen as animal activities and humans display some animal features: like animals, humans are born and die, for example.

Tariel's victory over the Khatavians is therefore seen as an animal mental activity in the *MPS*, an activity without self-control. It is seen as something like a reflex or an instinct, anachronistically speaking. Tariel's plan for the liberation of Nestan-Darejan, on the other hand, involves the discursive or logical thinking typical for Humans: Tariel analyzes two different plans, each leading to a different result, and provides an argument for the result he prefers, thereby proving that he has become a Human.

We in the 21ª century have a different understanding of war but the conception of war in the *MPS* is not unique: the ancient Scandinavians had a similar idea in their conception of a berserk.

Plotinus sees sense-perception without logical or discursive reasoning as a characteristic of both Animals and the Lower Soul [19, pp. 52, 73]. He would have characterized Tariel and the Indians as

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Humans whose Lower Soul dominated till, at the end of the *MPS*, Tariel started using his Higher Soul. Dionysius would have classified them as Animals, with Tariel becoming Human at the end of the *MPS*. Westerners may recognize the intellectual aspects of warfare; in the *MPS* war is an activity where the uncontrolled animal nature of mankind is useful and acceptable.

Women, Men and Animals. Mature women, like mature men, are in the *MPS* characterized by emotional control. Additionally, women, mature or not, guide the activities of the main heroes — not including Nuradin-Pridon — and establish contacts between them. Both Avtandil and Tariel follow in the first part of the *MPS* the orders of Tinatin and Nestan-Darejan, respectively. Also, Avtandil meets Tariel through the efforts first of Tinatin and then of Asmat. Additionally, when Nestan-Darejan meets her liberators, it is through the efforts of Patman who earlier had established contact between them.

Conclusion. The *MPS* and Neoplatonism share two basic ideas: witchcraft and the idea that people think logically while animals think based on sense perception only. These common elements, however, may be more due to a general Greek cultural climate than to an influence of Neoplatonism on the *MPS*. Indians and Arabians can be seen as illustrations of Aristotle's understanding of Human and Animal thinking and knowing.

But we find in the *MPS* a unique and non-Neoplatonic feature: feedback. While in the first part of the poem we find the typically Neoplatonic one way transfer of ideas — from Tinatin to Avtandil and from Avtandil to Tariel — we find in the second part examples of feedback: Avtandil improves on Tinatin's initial idea and proposes that finding Tariel's identity is not enough: he proposes to find Nestan-Darejan as well. This feedback is then accepted by Tinatin. Similarly Tariel provides feedback to Avtandil's proposal to free Nestan-Darejan, which, too, is accepted by Avtandil. The presence of feedback makes the *MPS* a modern poem and "highlights the new world outlook" [9, p. 28], in spite of the features it shares with Neoplatonism and Greek culture.

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