

## Towards a Platonic critique of ideology: On method and metaphysics

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### Abstract

Plato is accused by some of being a totalitarian, “top-down” thinker, a claim that is linked not just to his politics but to his philosophical proclivities more generally. This essay will argue that Plato’s method and metaphysics collectively provide a few avenues for questioning this outcome. I think Plato’s Socratic-style provides resistance to a hegemonic and carapaced metaphysics, and moreover I would argue that there is a greater coherence between Plato’s method and his positive teaching than is allowed for by some. Through an engagement with central Platonic doctrines, namely his account of philosophical dialogue, the transcendental Good, as well as participation, and recollection, it is argued that Plato’s relational metaphysics does not fit seamlessly into an “ideological” or “naïve” rendering of intellectual intuition, an exclusionary dualism of material and spiritual substance, or an uncritical evocation of “innate ideas,” and, moreover, that it allows for a greater plurality of perspectives, all ordered towards a deeper realism and unity within the Good Beyond Being.

### Keywords

*Plato; metaphysics; ideology; dialogue; participation; recollection*

It seems somewhat devious to start this essay with reflections on an image, given Plato’s vituperations against mimesis. Nevertheless, it has been argued, rather extensively, that Raphael’s iconic fresco depicting the School of Athens moves within the Platonic tradition, having its contextualization within the medieval, Boethian tradition of imaging Dame Philosophy, queen of the liberal arts. This is well-documented, as is corroborated by the adjacent tondo in the Stanza della Segnatura, and given additional credence through Raphael’s probable connections to Platonist currents in

the court of Pope Julian II.<sup>1</sup> This trend is also perhaps noticeable within Raphael's idealisation of the figures who occupy the centre of the fresco (see below), namely Plato (on the left) and Aristotle (on the right). Raphael's painting has given birth to numerous readings, which I will not dwell upon here. Instead, my focus will be to simply direct the reader to one aspect of this work that has been commented upon frequently in the literature, using this as a kind of point of departure for this essay.

On the one side, Plato gestures towards the heavens, furnishing a translation of the *Timaeus*, which describes the creation of the universe, the providence of the craftsman, and its gradual development in accordance with mathematical principles. In terms of the Platonic corpus, this text exemplifies what Krämer has called “the derivational-deductive model” of philosophy. It begins with certain metaphysical givens and then generates logical sequences in a movement from “high to low.”<sup>2</sup> On the other side, we have Aristotle carrying a copy of his *Ethica*, while his right-hand points towards the ground. Aristotle could be here characterized as the practical man, one who keeps his vision close to earth.

On one reading, Raphael's conceit here is that Plato is a philosopher whose vision is drawn upwards towards the invisible realm of mathematical entities, while Aristotle is focused on the exigencies of the material and ethical. Or to put it somewhat simplistically, Plato is a philosopher “from above” while the Stagirite is attentive to the “below.”

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1 This is suggested by Glenn Most in “Reading Raphael: The School of Athens and Its Pre-Text.” *Critical Inquiry* 23 (Autumn 1996): 145–182.

2 Hans-Joachim Krämer, *Plato and the Foundations of Metaphysics: A Work on the Theory of the Principles and Unwritten Doctrines of Plato with a Collection of the Fundamental Documents*, trans. and ed. by John R. Catan (New York: The State University of New York Press, 1990), xxi. This is counterpoised by him to “the reductive-regressive model” that is spatialised as a transition from “low to high”, one whereby Plato moves from sensuous experiences towards their transcendent causes. Or to use more traditional language, it exemplifies the Scholastic distinction between *ratio essendi* (the order of being) and the *ratio cognoscendi* (the order of knowing). For an elaboration of these tendencies in Plato's thought, see *Plato and the Foundations of Metaphysics*, 82.



Raphael, *The School of Athens* (Vatican, ca. 1509-1511)

Now if this was merely a methodological choice, then one might suggest that this is just a question of complementarity. However, we live in a time of sensitivity to the politics of discourse, and how certain terms carry resonances, intended or unintended, in their wake. We cannot simply extract ourselves from this context. Permitting some rather basic phenomenology, it seems that the language of “above” and “below” is affected in this political sense as well. When one, for example, speaks of a “politics” from “the bottom-up” or “from below” there is an overtone of positive coloration, betokening images of “democracy,” “populism,” “grassroots activism,” the *vox populi* and so on. On the other, the language of “top-down” or “the above” is invested with a negative affect: a politics “from above” is seized as being “authoritarian,” “arrogant,” “out-of-touch,” “bureaucratic,” etc. I say this not to address the nitty-gritty of political categories, nor to make any specific judgments on the adequacy of these polarities. My point is simply to alert us to the fact that in our context when we adopt topological categories such as these, we are not simply dealing with questions of methodology but with the machinations of power – in other words, with the workings of *ideology*.<sup>3</sup> It is because of this that the Platonic preference for transcendence has been subject to a certain hermeneutic of suspicion. Does not Plato’s metaphysics open him to the accusation of a totalizing mathesis that refuses the cumbrances of

3 Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction* (London and New York: Verso, 1991), 5.

a material world? Are we not alienated from our physical senses in our contemplation of the transcendent Forms that remain independent and separate from visible reality? And does this not legitimate a dubious mode of politics that sanctions “top-down” totalitarian visions that exclude real difference? One might argue that this primacy of ideation over-against materiality ushers in a violent confrontation, at the expense of the latter.<sup>4</sup>

This would appear to be the opinion of the Scottish theologian Donald MacKinnon, who once cautioned us against a “perilous mythology of a faculty of intuition,”<sup>5</sup> and “the tyranny that metaphysical conviction can exert over the proper assimilation of new insights concerning the ways of human knowing,” thus “canonizing as dogma some particular systematization of human knowledge.” Such assumptions can lead, so he said, to “a false acceptance as final truth of that which in its nature is inevitably impermanent and relative.”<sup>6</sup> Elsewhere, MacKinnon speaks of how Plato in particular seems to have “[dodged] the disciplines of close attention to the concrete and the familiar,” specifically as they open us to “an enlarged awareness of realities.”<sup>7</sup> This procedure is opposed to Aristotle who promoted a diversity of realizable “goods,” and who resisted Plato’s overly-totalizing concept of the transcendent Good.<sup>8</sup> On this reading,

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- 4 This was the opinion of Karl Popper, most famously (and controversially) in his *The Open Society and its Enemies, Volume 1: The Spell of Plato* (5th rev. ed., Cornwall: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966). Popper considered Plato an opponent of the Periclean Enlightenment, one who longed for the atavism and anti-democratic tendencies of the Spartan state. The critical reception of this work is rather vast; see George Klosko, “Popper’s Plato: An Assessment”. *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 26, No 4 (1996): 509–527. John Cleary has argued (rather decisively I think) that Popper created a false opposition between Pericles and Plato, and that he has anachronistically imposed a modern concept of “negative liberty” on ancient ideas of freedom, thus failing to correctly represent Plato’s more nuanced and “aristocratic” account of the proper rule of the self. On this, see John J. Cleary, “Popper on Freedom and Equality in Plato.” *POLIS* 22, No. 1 (2005): 109–127. For an alternative reading of Plato’s politics in *The Republic*, see Catherine Pickstock, “Justice and Prudence: Principles of Order in the Platonic City”. *The Heythrop Journal* 42 (2001): 269–282.
- 5 Donald M. MacKinnon, “Metaphysical and Religious Language,” in *Borderlands of Theology and Other Essays*, edited by George W. Roberts and Donovan E. Smucker (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2011 [1968]), 217.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 212–213.
- 7 Donald MacKinnon, *The Problem of Metaphysics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 111.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 95–103. On Aristotle’s diversified conception of the good, see Jorge Uscatescu Barrón, “Das Gute im Horizont der Seinsfrage: Zur Bedeutungsmannigfaltigkeit des

Plato's supposed aversion to the particular results in a conceptualization that supports absolute, non-negotiable claims, beliefs that can lead to what MacKinnon calls "the cult of the tragic,"<sup>9</sup> a sacrificial regime that comes at the expense of individuals, for the sake of some all-encompassing and uncompromising intuition. To adapt Althusser's language, on this reading Plato's metaphysics would be simply one more ideological gambit devoid of a reflective historicity.<sup>10</sup> As such, it would be a discourse that failed to disclose its material site of production, and its claims for an absolute discernment of truth would be a reified deception, a power-play disguised as a "totalizing" perspective.<sup>11</sup> In Marxist terms, it would be an intellectual superstructure that mystified its material base.<sup>12</sup> And so it would not be about rationality as such – which needs to display its workings and be open to amendments – but would rather be implicated in a regime of *violence*, rhetorical or otherwise. In short, it would be *doing* something different from what it *says* it is doing.<sup>13</sup>

If this is an accurate portrayal of Plato's metaphysics and method, then it does not appear to be an edifying one. Plato has been portrayed by many as an arch-ideologist of state repression and metaphysical totalization. However, is it an accurate representation? Can this picture sustain scrutiny? Or at the very least, are there trajectories in his thought which can be deployed over-against other tendencies? Can we read and think with Plato *beyond* Plato? Right at the outset we can lay aside any crude ideology that reduced truth to sheer forcefulness. Plato would have rejected any equation of coercion with truthfulness, as can be seen in Socrates's engagement with Thrasymachus in *The Republic*. Then again, very few would actually believe that "might is what makes right." Ideology is certainly a more nuanced

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Guten bei Aristoteles." *Perspective der Philosophie* 28, no. 1 (2002): 47–83 and Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Idea of the Good in Platonic–Aristotelian Philosophy*, trans. P. Christopher Smith (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986), 126–158.

9 Cf. Donald MacKinnon, *A Study in Ethical Theory* (New York: Collier Books 1957), 92–93; 97–98; 122.

10 Louis Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, trans. G. M. Goshgarian (London: Verso, 2014), 174–176.

11 See Rowan Williams's "On Theological Integrity," in *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 3–15.

12 Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, 202–204.

13 Eagleton, *Ideology*, 10–26.

affair. Which leads one to ask: what about a more subtle approach that avoids crude reductions and asserts the implications of Plato's thought are inherently or inchoately ideological, in the sense of promoting a misdirecting consciousness?

In what follows, I would like to follow D. C. Schindler<sup>14</sup> and suggest that Plato's metaphysics, in its method and substance, counteracts an "ontological violence"<sup>15</sup> of a specious totality and "sophistical" rhetoric.<sup>16</sup> In the space given, I would like to put forward (somewhat fiendishly) a *Platonic critique of ideology*,<sup>17</sup> insofar as it undermines a both totalized "intellectual intuition" without dialectical refinement, and a violent relativism without rational mediation. If the argument succeeds, it will hopefully show a greater coherency between Plato's method and his metaphysics, between his "Socratism" and his "Platonism." By focusing on his dialogical teaching-style, the Good Beyond Being, the participation of the material in the intelligible, as well as his account of recollection, I hope to show that Plato's *relational* method and metaphysics allows for a plurality of epistemic perspectives, resists an overly "top-down" model of illumination and as well as a hyper-dualism of the material and the spiritual.<sup>18</sup> In this way, I put hope to forward a picture that ameliorates, to

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14 D.C. Schindler, *Plato's Critique of Impure Reason: On Goodness and Truth in the Republic* (Washington D. C., The Catholic University of America Press, 2008), 41–84.

15 The term is taken from John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (2nd ed. Oxford: Blackwell, 2006).

16 By "sophism" and "sophistical", I am adopting the general Platonic conceit of ascribing to the Sophists the tendency towards relativism and priority of "belief over-against knowledge". I do not presume these are historically accurate accounts of their teaching.

17 For a sophisticated, albeit more traditional reading of Plato's "ideology", see Robert Wardy's "The Platonic Manufacture of Ideology; or, How to Assemble Awkward Truth and Wholesome Falsehood," in V. Harte and M. Lane (eds.), *Politeia in Greek and Roman Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 119–138. For a critical response to Wardy's reading in detail, see Catherine Rowett, "Why the Philosopher Kings will believe the Noble Lie." *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 50 (Summer 2016): 67–100, which provides a marvellous counter-interpretation of the Noble Lie (*The Republic* 414c) as being a myth whose chief purpose (amongst others) is to undermine inherited privilege of class since it is only through education (and not primarily from material inheritance) that one is able to discern one's "metal". In this reading, one's "birth" does not concern one's biological inheritance but is rather about one's entrance into the city-state.

18 On the fundamentally relational aspect of Plato's metaphysics, see Adrian Pabst, *Metaphysics: The Creation of Hierarchy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 32–53.

some extent, a politics of violent ideation that negates the material, or an inscrutable, absolutized intuition that denies mediation.

We will begin with the question of dialogical method before moving onto Plato's more substantive metaphysics, while hinting at their entanglements along the way.

## 1. Dialectic and dialogue<sup>19</sup>

Convenience of argument suggests we begin with questions of formal style: just what kind of philosopher is Plato? Within a synopsis of the philosophical tradition, Plato appears a rather un-typical specimen. He did not publish a treatise or any epic poem that detailed his essential doctrine. People debate constantly about Plato's "real" teaching, or whom he is supposed to be identified with in his dialogues. Moreover, we do not have his lecture notes from the School of Athens and find only hints of them in the likes of Aristotle and others. In fact, apart from the genuine letters, a few of which have survived, Plato's self-occultation is pervasive and even deliberate. We know this because Plato says as much: he refuses to commit any doctrine of the highest principles into a written format, since (amongst other things) it represses the living context of dialectic in its adaptation to the slippage of denotation in changing contexts – particularly as these relate to maieutical strategies for cultivating knowledge in the soul, for the stimulating of "recollection" (*Phaedrus* 274b6-278e3; Letter VII 340b1-345c3).<sup>20</sup> Plato privileges a literary imitation of the Socratic conversational-model, rather than a straightforward didactic approach, as being the ideal process for the transmission of wisdom. "For Plato," so Charles Kahn writes, "the highest form of knowledge is ... modelled on conversation, on

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19 In this section, I have sympathy for Michael Cloete's "metaphilosophical" approach to reading Plato as primarily a dialogical thinker. However, I would caution against discarding Plato's metaphysics, as if they did not add or buttress his method. Certainly, we should not equate Plato with "Platonism" *tout court*, but I would certainly not want to assume that his metaphysics is automatically "totalitarian." For his argument, see "Is Plato an Enemy of the Open Society? A Critique of Popper's Critique of Plato". *Politeia* 23, no. 2 (2004): 36–50. Also see Arlene W. Saxonhouse, "The Socratic Narrative: A Democratic Reading of Plato's Dialogues". *Political Theory* 37, no. 6 (2009): 728–753.

20 See Giovanni Reale, *Towards a New Interpretation of Plato*, trans. John R. Catan and Richard Davies (Washington D. C., The Catholic University of America Press, 1997), 51–74.

linguistic exchange, on question and answer.”<sup>21</sup> It is this adaptive to-and-fro that Plato ultimately names *διαλεκτική*, and it is this penchant for an engaged philosophy that suggests Platonic method might not be reducible to some simplistic top-down schematic of illumination *without* material preparation, or that it is necessarily hegemonic, as a reductionist account of the “the derivational-deductive model” might imply. Kenneth Dorter similarly writes that the dialogical format of Plato’s philosophy exists because “Only a work that undermines any attempt to cast its words into dogmatic doctrine can simultaneously remind us that it is only a reminder, a device for opening our eyes to something, rather than an answered question to be accepted blindly through the ears.”<sup>22</sup>

In this regard, one could argue that Plato’s method involves a holistic elenchus that does not fit within the usual binaries imposed on it – with the usual ascriptions of a hard dualism between materiality and spiritual insight, and so on.<sup>23</sup> As is shown extensively in the corpus, the knowledge of the Forms cannot be achieved without the requisite *transformation* of the whole human person in both its material and spiritual elements. They are not separated into hard polarities.<sup>24</sup> This means we are not dealing with a disembodied contemplation, but with a gradual enculturation of the entire person, one which took “the longer road and put as much effort into

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21 Charles H. Kahn, “The Philosophical Importance of the Dialogue Form for Plato,” in Jacob L. Fink (ed.), *The Development of Dialectic from Plato to Aristotle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 159. Also see Drew A. Hyland, “Why Plato Wrote Dialogues”. *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 1, no. 1 (1968): 38–50.

22 Kenneth Dorter, “Plato’s Use of the Dialogue Form: Skepticism and Insemination,” in Jonathan Lavery and Louis Groarke (eds.), *Literary Form and Philosophical Content: Historical Studies of Philosophical Genres* (Madison and Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2010), 43.

23 This is why I have some disagreement with Ochieng’s reading of Plato. The reading that I put forward might complicate some of the things he says about Plato’s denial of material “embeddedness.” For this, Omedi Ochieng, *The Intellectual Imagination: Knowledge and Aesthetics in North Atlantic and African Philosophy* (Notre Dame, IND: University of Notre Dame Press, 2018), 10–11 and passim.

24 Holger Thesleff writes that Plato’s “philosophy and his conception of the Universe are not built on polar opposites. His view of the world as a whole is not dualistic. His is not a ‘white / black’ world. There is no pointed existential or ontological (metaphysical, etc.) opposition in it between, say, light and darkness, good and evil, or truth and falsity. Even the prisoners in the Cave at least see reflections of light,” in Holger Thesleff, “Studies in Plato’s Two-Level Model”, in *Platonic Patterns: A Collection of Studies* (Las Vegas-Zürich-Athens: Parmenides Publishing, 2009), 398.



learning as into physical training” (*The Republic* VI 504d),<sup>25</sup> a tendency which is confirmed in texts like the *Timaeus*. One’s sensibility needs to be cultivated to see the world in a certain way in order for the truth of things to become manifest. Such requires, of course, a disciplined regimen since “neither quickness of learning nor a good memory can make a man [sic] see when his nature is not akin to the object, for this knowledge never takes root in an alien nature” (*Letter* VII 344a-b). Certainly, this does not erase the contingencies of fortune, nor does it supplant divine agency (326b; cf. 337e) and the grace of an inspiring and ecstatic “madness” (*Phaedrus* 238dff.). Illumination and technique, truth and method, are bound up together, but this does not guarantee the gift of insight. The main point to stress though is that this picture does not seem to suggest a merely top-down or unquestioning model of “intellectual intuition.” Instead, the Platonic elenchus implies a sustained, critically-immersive praxis of learning to see the world in a particular way, one that is achieved primarily through dialogical engagement and a physical recalibration of the senses, since it is through the “the between” (or *metaxu*) of sensible desire (*Symposium* 201d-212c) that we are drawn erotically towards the Forms themselves (*Phaedo* 75a). Platonic knowledge, therefore, implies a discipline of the material, but not its complete negation, as I will argue later. In his day, Cicero already noted the earthy character of Socratic philosophy (and by implication, Plato’s and others’ representation of it):

numbers and motions, and the beginning and end of all things, were the subjects of the ancient philosophy down to Socrates, who was a pupil of Archelaus, who had been a disciple of Anaxagoras. These made diligent inquiry into the magnitude of the stars, their distances, courses, and all that relates to the heavens. But Socrates was the first who brought down philosophy from the heavens, placed it in the cities, introduced it into families, and obliged it to examine into life and morals, and good and evil (*Tusculum Disputations* V.iv).<sup>26</sup>

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25 All translations, unless otherwise stated, are taken from Plato, *Complete Works*, edited by John M. Cooper (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997).

26 Translations taken from Marcus Tullius Cicero, *Complete Works* (East Sussex: Delphi Classics, 2014).

These are important points to keep in mind as we go along. However, probably the most important aspect of Plato's dialectic for our purposes is this: as even a cursory reading of the dialogues will show, *Socratic methodology resists absolutized knowledge*. On the contrary, wisdom precisely begins in not knowing or in an *unknowing*. At Delphi, Socrates is called the "wisest" man, but he says about himself "I am very conscious that I am not wise at all" (*Apology* 21b). When comparing himself to another so-called wise man, Socrates admits that "it is likely that neither of us knows anything worthwhile, but he thinks he knows something when he does not, whereas when I do not know, neither do I think I know; so I am likely to be wiser than he to this small extent, that I do not think I know what I do not know" (*Apology* 21d). This indicates that what Socrates desires is a particular kind of wisdom, something that is curtailed and finite: "Perhaps some of you will think I am jesting but be sure that all that I shall say is true. What has caused my reputation is none other than a certain kind of wisdom. What kind of wisdom? Human wisdom, perhaps." Socrates thus explicitly denies to having a wisdom that is "more than human" (*Apology* 20d-e).

This drift towards a finite wisdom is also reflected in Plato's choice for the dialogical method, since it is predicated on a dramatic counterpoise of perspectives rather than a totalized vision. Such implies "relativity" in its presentation of truth,<sup>27</sup> without denying a real transcendence of Truth. This function of the dialogue, and its presentation of a wide polyphony of arguments and images without a seamless and conclusive denouement, has suggested to some scholars that there is a "perspectivism" within Plato's philosophy. Gonzalez speaks of how "Each dialogue presents a particular and limited perspective on the truth, conditioned by the specific context, aim and characters, where this perspective, not claiming to represent the whole truth on a topic," and that this, moreover is "not incompatible with the possibly very different perspectives found in other dialogues nor, on the other hand, can be subordinated or assimilated to one of these

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27 "For in [Plato's] books nothing is affirmed positively, and many arguments are allowed on both sides of a question; everything is investigated, and nothing positively affirmed" (Cicero, *The Academics*, I.vii.).

other perspectives.”<sup>28</sup> Similarly, Charles Kahn echoes this reading of the dialogues:

there is no single formulation that represents the final or “correct” doctrine for Plato. Each formula has its limitations, because each is adapted to its context and to the larger circumstances of the dialogue. Perhaps we may conclude that there is no such thing as a definitive formulation or context-independent doctrine for Plato. There are of course universal concepts, like Being, One, Same and the like. And there is a fundamental distinction between eternal Being and the changing realm of sensible appearances. But there is no definitive description of either realm, or no fully adequate account of the relation between them. Perhaps we should think of the quasi-doctrines formulated in the dialogues as so many devices for bringing the mind to clarity, for liberating us from the distortions due to our localized (“embodied”) perspective ... let us say that each doctrinal formulation is a partial, localized perspective on a total scene for which there is no god’s-eye point of view. What I am calling the underlying unity for a set of schemata is not itself a definitive doctrine but only a deeper perspective for seeing things together.<sup>29</sup>

What this tendency appears to show is that judgments like those of MacKinnon mentioned earlier on, do seem to jar somewhat against the dramatic and dialogical thrust of Platonic method, since it relativizes viewpoints that claim a false comprehensiveness, as in the case of ideological arrogation. Moreover, this proclivity towards unity-in-diversity, this “deeper perspective for seeing things together,” has a metaphysical basis in Plato’s corpus, and is related to his conception of the Good, which we will turn to now.

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28 Francisco J. Gonzalez, “Plato’s Perspectivism.” *Plato Journal: The Journal of the International Plato Society* 16 (2016): 33.

29 Kahn, “The Philosophical Importance of the Dialogue Form for Plato,” 173.

## 2. The good beyond being: Oneness-in-plurality<sup>30</sup>

Pokorny's *Etymological Dictionary* suggests that the root for the English word "good" (*ghedh*) once had the denotation of joining or binding something together.<sup>31</sup> Speculative as it may be, others such as Pierre Chantraine have also wondered whether αγαθός might not have a connection to the Sanskrit word *ghádyā-*, which carries with it overtones of seizing and holding onto something.<sup>32</sup> While certainty on these matters is elusive, it nonetheless provides an entrance into Plato's conception of the Good as that comprehending force that provides intelligibility to all being, both in its unity and multiplicity. For him, as he makes clear in *The Republic*, the Good Beyond Being is that principle, which is the creative source of everything, and provides the metaphysical rationale for our knowledge of them. It is the Sun in which the radiance of every being appears (*The Republic* VI 507b- 509b)<sup>33</sup>, and it is the stimulus for our desire to be reunited with our archetypal wholeness (*Symposium* 192e-193a). It follows that because the Good is the source of all possible existents, then it is also that context in which the Forms of particulars things are to be understood, even if the Good itself is never finally comprehended in them: "the form of the good is the most important thing to learn about," and moreover "it's by their relation to it that just things and the others become useful and beneficial" (*The Republic* VI 505a). This totality of the Good, to use the language of David Lachterman (cf. *Theaetetus* 204a-b), is not however an "additive" totality, a sum of constituent parts, but an

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30 Here I draw upon the work of David R. Lachterman, "What is 'The Good' of Plato's Republic." *The St. John's Review* 39, no. 1–2 (1989–1990): 139–171; Eric Perl, *Thinking Being: Introduction to Metaphysics in the Classical Tradition* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 54–60; Schindler, *Plato's Critique of Impure Reason*, 85–138.

31 Julius Pokorny, *An Etymological Dictionary of the Proto-Indo-European Language: A Revised Edition of Julius Pokorny's Indogermanisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch* (Dnghu Association, 2007), 423–424.

32 Pierre Chantraine, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque: Histoire de mots* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1999), 6.

33 "So that what gives truth to the things known and the power to know to the knower is the form of the good. And though it is the cause of knowledge and truth, it is also an object of knowledge. Both knowledge and truth are beautiful things, but the good is other and more beautiful than they. In the visible realm, light and sight are rightly considered sun like, but it is wrong to think that they are the sun, so here it is right to think of knowledge and truth as goodlike but wrong to think that either of them is the good – for the good is yet more prized" (*The Republic* VI 508e–509a).

“integrative” whole – a τὸ Ὀλον rather than τὸ Πᾶν.<sup>34</sup> It is beyond “being,” and should not be reduced to an aggregation of elements. On the contrary, the Good is *the principle of unity in all things*, insofar as it gives oneness to each particular entity and also constitutes their integral context. The Forms themselves are “one,” and yet “because they manifest themselves everywhere in association with actions, bodies, and one another, each of them appears to be many” (*The Republic* V 476a). Thus interpreted, the Form of the Good provides a unity-in-tension that militates against a collapse into either monism or a chaotic enumeration of differences. Instead, this integrative totality, precisely because it is beyond being and cannot be reduced to one particular “opinion,” relativizes every perspective in light of the whole. D. C. Schindler comments that “Being cannot disclose itself as being in any particular instance except to a reason seeking the whole of it. Reason cannot rationally establish for itself any proximate end as ultimate, but can have for its end only the ultimate, and therefore the comprehensive. Anything less becomes irrational the moment it absolutizes itself.”<sup>35</sup> This again suggests that any localized perspective or ideology that claims a panoptic encapsulation of the whole is *irrational* insofar as it refuses to integrate its “opinion” within the manifest complex of “associating” Forms.

To say that the Good is the principle of unity is also to suggest it is that which establishes harmony and relations between different forms, apart from which semantics and meaning would be absent. It is via this harmonious interrelation that we first encounter goodness in the world. As Plato makes abundantly clear, meaning and order is gathered from bringing together disparate elements into a connective and cohesive arrangement, since to “dissociate each thing from everything else is to destroy totally everything there is to say. The weaving together of forms is what makes speech possible for us” (*Sophist* 259e). To quote Lachterman again, Plato’s is “an ontology of sanity, a metaphysics of wholesomeness,”<sup>36</sup> a trait which is manifest in all major levels of his thought, whether it be his cosmology, his politics or his ethics. As Plato writes in his creation myth, the “god wanted everything to be good and nothing to be bad so far as that was possible, and so he

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34 Lachterman, “What is ‘The Good’ of Plato’s Republic,” 151.

35 Schindler, *Plato’s Critique of Impure Reason*, 137.

36 Lachterman, “What is ‘The Good’ of Plato’s Republic,” 160.

took over all that was visible—not at rest but in discordant and disorderly motion—and brought it from a state of disorder to one of order, because he believed that order was in every way better than disorder” (*Timaeus* 30a). In this light, though now speaking of those unenlightened people who are unable to discern the true “causes” of things, Socrates says “As for their capacity of being in the best place they could possibly be put, this they do not look for,” so he says, “nor do they believe it to have any divine force, but they believe that they will some time discover a stronger and more immortal Atlas to hold everything together more, and they do not believe that the truly good and ‘binding’ binds and holds them together” (*Phaedo* 99c).

For Plato, it is goodness which is the cause of the “binding” between all things, precisely because there is no other “immortal Atlas” which could be more elevated. Similarly, Plato’s allegory of the Cave envisions that the philosopher-kings, after being granted a intimation of the Good, will have to return to the disorderly city-state and once again “grow accustomed to seeing in the dark” and to live as “people who are awake rather than dreaming” (*The Republic* VII 520d), seeking to promote “happiness throughout the city by bringing citizens into harmony with each other through persuasion or compulsion and by making them share with each other the benefits that each class can confer on the community” (519e). This harmony of *polis* is further reflective of the virtuous person – the well-ordered soul is a model of the city-state – since the “good soul is harmonized and, being a harmony, has within itself another harmony, whereas the evil soul is both itself a lack of harmony and has no other within itself” (*Phaedo* 94c).

What this suggests is that Plato’s relational and integrative account of the Good provides the ontological principle for a “binding” nexus of unity and plurality in the world, allowing us to see the Forms through and in relation to one another. It is again within this context that one might understand Plato’s preference for dialogue as itself being an implication of his metaphysics. Since there is an unresolved oscillation between the One and the Indefinite Dyad in Plato, as suggested by the *Parmenides* and the

research of the so-called Tübingen School,<sup>37</sup> it appears feasible to say that the parallax between a simplicity of vision and multiplicity of perspectives is cohesive with Plato's wider dialectical project. "If reality itself is structured as a series of perspectives and images that point to a higher unity that both is and is not this multiplicity," so says Gonzalez, then "what better way of expressing this in writing than by writing dialogues in which each is its own world, completely different from and in some ways even contradicting the others, but in which all together point to a Truth that transcends them?"<sup>38</sup> This reading again counteracts a simplistic account of top-down transmission, and rather suggests a much more complex interaction between the "above" and the "below," as Schindler suggests:

the very comprehensiveness of the good is what makes the act of apprehending it simultaneously immanent and transcendent. If it were merely immanent, we would not be able to get beyond a relative perspective. On the other hand, if it were "merely" transcendent (and therefore falsely transcendent), it would be imposed simply from the outside as an epistemological violence, with no relation whatsoever to the soul's power to know or to the things that form its objects of intelligibility; we would have either a continuity without discontinuity or a discontinuity without continuity.<sup>39</sup>

As suggested earlier, the Socratic maieutic is a holistic approach which is adaptive to the situation of the interlocutor. It cannot be "violently" imposed from outside without a corresponding attentiveness to the idiosyncrasies of the teacher-student relation. It must work prudentially within the limitations of the knower's current capacities and seek to adopt strategies congenial to their status. It desires persuasion and not indoctrination; it works *within* particularities of circumstance, and mediates its influence through differing styles, techniques and imagery, depending on the specific placement of the student and teacher. Plato's dialogues therefore adopt a multiplicity of arguments and viewpoints, very often without a resolving cadence, precisely to indicate that one does not approach Truth through a single-avenue or image. Such would belie his method and his bewildering

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37 See Krämer, *Plato and the Foundations of Metaphysics*, 77–127.

38 Gonzalez, "Plato's Perspectivism," 43. Gonzalez is here commenting on the *Parmenides*.

39 Schindler, *Plato's Critique of Impure Reason*, 172.

deployment of allegories. Rather, to return again to the image of the sun, the light of the Good is refracted in the world through a multitude of spectra, without the light as light being seen as such.

One can see then that Plato's metaphysics and his dialogical model of philosophy are mutually supportive. But there still remains that perception of Plato which sees him as proposing an overly-disjunctive model of the transcendent and immanent, one where material imprints of the senses are seen to be a hindrance to a knowledge of the Forms, since they are considered to be "separate" from one another and from their material expressions, and therefore are deemed to come from "elsewhere." In other words, Plato (on this view) is finally a dualistic rather than a holistic thinker, and moreover proposes a destructive relation to physicality and the material conditions required for knowledge of truth. This in turn could be used to support a violent zero-sum game between ideation and the materiality. But how sustainable is this view in light of Plato's project overall? We suggest, at least in the ways in which that term is normally understood, that it might not be.

### 3. Participation or dualism?

In what sense is Plato understood to be a "dualist"? De Vogel has given an apt summary of this debate,<sup>40</sup> and has offered several critiques of this ascription which will not be repeated here. Sufficient for our purpose is simply to restate the common summations of Plato's thought as proposing (1) a "two worlds theory" and (2) the opposition of body and soul. Both of these readings of Plato appear to be justified through a glance at the *Phaedo*, where it speaks of "two kinds of existences," namely of the visible and the invisible (*Phaedo* 79a), and clearly advocates a variety of "pure" knowing that needs to leave behind anything associated with the body, here correlating philosophy with a preparation for death (79d-81a).

The charge of "dualism" as per (1) goes back at least to Aristotle, who argued in *Metaphysics* M 1078b30-31 that Socrates did not himself "make

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40 C.J. De Vogel, "Was Plato a Dualist?" in *Rethinking Plato and Platonism* (Leiden: Brill, 1986), 159–212. A similar, even more expansive critique of the "dualist" reading of Plato can be found in Holger Thesleff, "Studies in Plato's Two-Level Model", in *Platonic Patterns*, 387–506.



the universals or the definitions exist apart,” and rather that it was his “successors [who] gave them separate existence.”<sup>41</sup> Again, he speaks in *Metaphysics* M 1086a33-b12 of those who, because “the sensible particulars were in a state of flux,” asserted that the Ideas were “separable and individual,” that “the universal was apart from these and different,” and that it is this “separation” that is “the cause of the objections that arise with regard to the Ideas.” This is simply one variation of the stranger’s argument in the *Parmenides* 132a-b which asserted that if we understand the relation between Forms and their particulars to be one of “likeness” or imitation, then “alongside the form another form will always makes its appearance, and if that form is like anything, yet another, and if the form proves to be like what partakes of it, a fresh form will never cease emerging” (132e-133a). Such a critique, as is well-known, was developed by Aristotle in his *Metaphysics* as proposing an untenable delay of explanation unto infinity, without any conceptualization of particular things.

However, one should say, as Gonzalez has argued, that Aristotle exaggerates the language of “separation” far beyond anything we find in Plato’s dialogues; and he tends to read Plato’s Forms in terms of his *own* theories regarding individualized substances.<sup>42</sup> In this regard, Plato’s teaching in *Letter VII* already bypassed the Aristotelian schema of Forms-in-themselves as particular subject and universal predicates since the Forms-as-such cannot be reduced to either. This is one of the reasons why Plato believes that his highest principles could not be written down because our linguistic usage continually shifts between one or other polarity.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, as scholars such as Allen have argued,<sup>44</sup> if we take the Platonic account of Forms as literally implying a copying or imitation of archetypes by material exemplars, then we have failed to see that Plato’s other account

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41 The translation is taken from *The Complete Works of Aristotle: Revised Oxford Translation*, edited by Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

42 Francisco J. Gonzalez, “Plato’s Dialectic of Forms,” in William A. Welton, *Plato’s Forms: Varieties of Interpretation* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2002), 46–47.

43 See Gonzalez, “Plato’s Dialectic of Forms,” 48–55.

44 See R.E. Allen, “Participation and Predication in Plato’s Middle Dialogues.” *The Philosophical Review* 69, no. 2 (April 1960): 147–164; Alexander Nehamas, “Participation and Predication in Plato’s Later Thought.” *The Review of Metaphysics* 36, no. 2 (1982): 343–374; cf. Gregory Vlastos, “The Third Man Argument in the *Parmenides*.” *The Philosophical Review* 63, no. 3 (July 1954): 319–349.

of *ontological participation* (μεθεξις) does not imply a splitting of “reality” into two “separate” spheres. Instead, we should rather speak of two levels of a *single*, quasi-monistic Reality that expresses itself only opaquely and confusedly to the senses and does not necessitate a model of “external” imitation. Simply put, Plato’s metaphysics does not imply any radical separation of physical and spiritual realities, but rather a *methexis* of the visible in the invisible. We are not dealing with two worlds but two distinct levels of the same reality.<sup>45</sup> Even Plato’s *Parmenides* affirms that the reality of Forms is required for “dialectic” for if someone “won’t allow that there are forms for things and won’t mark off a form for each one, he won’t have anywhere to turn his thought, since he doesn’t allow that for each thing there is a character that is always the same” (135b-c). Admittedly, things are rather complex here, and Plato’s language of “participation” or “sharing in” is probably not worked into a complete theory; it is one metaphor among several that he employs to explain the relation between sensible particulars, which of course decay and change, and the ideas about those things that do not experience such alteration.

Here Plato is distinguished from the historical Parmenides who prioritized the immobility of Being itself (the “that is” or ὡς ἐστίν), understood here against the background of a disparity (διάκοσμος) existing between the arena of “appearances” (δόξας) and the sphere of the gods (Ἀνάγκη ἐπέδησεν). The metaphysical contrast separating these two perspectives is accentuated by the fact that, for Parmenides, it is only Being that can be thought, and therefore any gradation of Non-Being or motion is unthinkable, since it remains unreal. Consequently, there is no ontological

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45 Commenting on Phaedo 79a, De Vogel has the following to say: “physical being is a kind of reality, but a kind of reality which can neither exist by itself nor be known or explained from itself. It is found to be dependent on that other, superior kind of being. There proves to be a ‘difference of level’ in such a sense that, after all, there appear to be *not two realities*, the one next to or opposite the other, realities of basically the same order and thus independent the one of the other – which would be *dualism* – but one kind of reality which symbolically should be indicated by a capital, a Reality which in the ontological order must be called ‘basic’, and in their qualitative order ‘supreme’, a Reality which does not surpass the other in degree, in the way we say of things surrounding us that one of them is ‘superior’ to another, but ἀπλως and another kind of reality which does ‘exist’, but in its very existence is found to be dependent on the first,” in De Vogel, “Was Plato a Dualist,” 162.

depth to the appearance of movement.<sup>46</sup> This emphasis on immobility influenced Plato's understanding of being as ἰδέα or εἶδος, in the sense that being unchangingly remains "itself." However, there is a genuine movement within Platonic thought beyond the untenability of a Parmenidean stasis. Plato was aware of the un-deniable factor of movement and change and had very much internalized a kind of Heraclitan ontology (as is shown extensively in *Cratylus*). It was this dynamic that spurred Plato to think the material world within the category of "the intermediate," as a universe existing within the flux of being and non-being (*The Republic* V 478e-479d). This is clear from his epistemology: as Plato argues, "knowledge" is not antithetical to "opinion." Plato grants a partial being to "opinion" insofar as it exists as an intermediate between "knowledge" and "ignorance" (*The Republic* V 458a-e), between being and non-being. Moreover, according to *Timaeus* 51d-e, the distinction between "knowledge" and "true opinion" is not about divergent, "separate" realities, but concerns the question of "understanding." While the former has a "true account," the latter is unable to demonstrate its truthfulness because it remains entrenched within the flux of senses.<sup>47</sup> So the comparison between "knowledge" and "opinion" is not the same as between "truth" and "falsity." "Opinions" may still be true, but they cannot show how they are true.

We must also keep in mind that the *Phaedo* – the most explicitly "dualistic" of the dialogues – suggests that the intelligibility of the world can only be a movement *through* the sensible and therefore cannot leave the world and physical mediators behind (*Phaedo* 65d-67b), and that it is through these that the Forms are manifest as *images* (*Phaedo* 75a). To be sure, being itself (οὐσία) does not occur within the world as an object for apprehension. But such invisibility does not negate the fact that the "appearance" or "look" (δόξα) remains indispensable for the mediated progression towards the thing-in-itself, here agitated through a μεταξὺ (middle/medium) of "desire." The χωρισμός or "separation" (*Parmenides* 150b-15) between the two spheres of reality should not then be read dualistically, as if the forms could exist independently of their instantiations (which is

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46 See Jean Grondin, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Lukas Soderstrom (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 1–20; Eric Perl, *Thinking Being*, 11–17.

47 Perl, *Thinking Being*, 27–34.

a common reading), but rather should be framed within the ontological participation of the visible within the invisible.<sup>48</sup> To quote Holger Thesleff, “there is no distinct gap of difference between the two levels in Plato’s vision,” “no pointed  $\chi\omega\rho\iota\varsigma$ ,” and “no deep separation of the ‘immanent’ from the ‘transcendent.’”<sup>49</sup> Gonzalez goes even further and argues that “The dialogues never explicitly say, much less argue, that the forms exist independently of their instantiations, and attempts to find in them an implicit commitment to this view are tenuous at best.”<sup>50</sup> Moreover, Plato’s account of the Forms does not necessarily imply a separation of Forms from each other, but as we have said in relation to Plato’s doctrine of the Good, the Forms are bound together by a *relational* determination (as can be seen in his examples of the Equal and the Unequal, Bigness, Smallness, etc.).<sup>51</sup> While some Forms may be relatively “separate” from one another in some cases – as Gail Fine argues – we cannot assume any thoroughgoing disjunction between them.<sup>52</sup> Once again, the ascription of “dualism” to Plato, at least on this score, might be an over-hasty judgement, and one could conclude that since the Forms must be understood within a scenario of mutual determination and association, there is no index of knowledge that can be isolated from another. There must be a synoptic vision that sees things together rather than a myopic vantage of false universality.

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48 Eric Perl summarises the point more generally: “Plato’s understanding of reality as form, then, is not at all a matter of setting up intelligible forms in opposition to sensible things, as if forms *rather* than sensible things are what is real. On the contrary, forms are the very guarantee of sensible things: in order that sensible things may have any identity, any truth, any reality, they must have and display intelligible ‘looks,’ or forms, in virtue of which they are what they are and so are anything at all. It is in precisely this sense that forms are the reality of all things. Far from stripping the sensible world of all intelligibility and locating it ‘elsewhere,’ Plato expressly presents the forms as the truth, the whatness, the intelligibility, and hence the reality, of the world” (Perl, *Thinking Being*, 25).

49 Thesleff, “Studies in Plato’s Two-Level Model”, 446.

50 Gonzalez, “Plato’s Dialectic of Forms,” 39.

51 See Héctor-Neri Castañeda, “Plato’s ‘Phaedo’ Theory of Relations.” *Journal of Philosophical Logic* 1, no. 3–4 (1972): 467–480; Pabst, *Metaphysics*, 32–49. This is in accord with ancient thought which conceived opposites and contrasts “as relational or complementary rather than pointedly polarized”; see, Thesleff, “Studies in Plato’s Two-Level Model”, 393.

52 Gail Fine, “Separation,” in *Plato on Knowledge and Forms: Selected Essays* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2003), 252–300.

But what about Plato's supposed dualism between body and soul (2)? Here there are certainly statements, which we have mentioned previously, that seem to indicate a denigration of the material order for the sake of the pure contemplation of the Forms, best exemplified by the separation between the body and the immortal soul at death. However, this asseveration between the physical and the invisible, between the body and the soul, should not be pressed too far. For one thing, as the eschatological myth of *The Republic* X presupposes, metempsychosis is an eternal *return* to materiality (being either for reward or punishment), of reincarnation rather than a perpetually disembodied state. Much like Plato's Cave, the Myth of Er proposes – with its narrative of a post-mortem judgement, the Spindle and Throne of Necessity, the River of Forgetting, and so on – that the contemplation of the Forms is followed by a return to the Cave with the hope of instructing others in matters of the Good.<sup>53</sup> On the basis of this myth, there is no real escape from the material world, since upon receiving judgement for one's deeds in life one then is returned again so that the cycle may continue. The main thrust of the myth appears to be that we must choose justice in the here and now for this is what ultimately brings us happiness. And even in its description of the post-mortem state, the imagery used expresses a rather strong continuity in physical composition – tyrants are tortured, people wear their judgements around their necks – so to even use the language of “disembodiedness” to describe this scenario is fraught with interpretative opacity.

In addition to these imports, one could also add that the *Timaeus* is replete with exaltations of the harmony and beauty of the physical world. And as regards the soul-body dichotomy, it asserts – in accordance with its mathematical ontology – that there should be a “proportion” or “analogy” between the body and soul, between mental and physical training, since the beautiful is not “ill-proportioned,” and “the various body parts should be looked after,” namely, in-step with “the exercises of the soul” as these form an “imitation of the structure of the universe” (*Timaeus* 87c-88d).<sup>54</sup>

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53 Schindler, Plato's *Critique of Impure Reason*, 307–335. On the complexity and ambiguity of the myth, see Stephen Halliwell, “The Life-and-Death Journey of the Soul: Interpreting the Myth of Er,” in G. R. Ferrari (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Plato's Republic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 445–473.

54 On this see De Vogel, “Was Plato a Dualist,” 171–177.

These material “appearances,” as is well-known, are not to be confused with the Supreme Reality itself, since there are gradations of beauty in the ascent to the Idea of the Beautiful (as the *Symposium* famously argues). But this does not negate that *all* appearances of beauty participate in the Form of the Beautiful, as the *Phaedo* makes clear: since “if there is anything beautiful besides the Beautiful itself, it is beautiful for no other reason than that it shares in that Beautiful, and I say so with everything.” Socrates confesses that “I simply, naively and perhaps foolishly cling to this, that nothing else makes it beautiful other than the presence of (παρουσία), or the sharing in (κοινωνία), or however you may describe its relationship to that Beautiful we mentioned, for I will not insist on the precise nature of the relationship, but that all beautiful things are beautiful by the Beautiful” (*Phaedo* 100c-d). This means that all beautiful things – all beautiful people, souls, and ideas, etc. – participate, in a fashion not completely mapped out or developed, by differing degrees in the Form of Beauty itself. And if this is the case, then pleasing and joy-inducing “appearances” cannot be completely separated from their ultimate principle, however limited and one-sided such experiences may be.

Now all of this will not end the debate on whether Plato is a dualist or not. My purpose here was simply to lay out a reading of Plato’s thought which, at the very least, ameliorates some of the more extreme trajectories within his writings, showing how Plato might not be as “Platonic” as he is usually supposed to be. What the above has hopefully limned schematically is that if we take Plato’s account of *methexis* at face value, then the idea that materiality is opposed to the knowledge of the highest principles is not quite correct. Certainly those who remain entrenched in the *doxa* will not advance towards truth, but this does not mean that “appearances” are to be equated with falsehood – nor are they to be identified with evil, as the Gnostics supposed.<sup>55</sup> On the contrary, as we have suggested and will see again, it is only through the senses that we gain any knowledge, and that it is through a discipline of the body that one will come to a deeper sense of the real. And lastly, it suggests that an overweening “top-down” or violent ideation at the expense of the material, at the very least, jars with certain trajectories in Plato’s thought.

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55 See De Vogel, “Was Plato a Dualist,” 179–184.

#### 4. Recollection or innate ideas?

Earlier on we alluded to MacKinnon’s vituperations against a “perilous mythology of a faculty of intuition,”<sup>56</sup> and how Plato in this regard was called to task for such mythologizing. So, in this final section, it is worth commenting on the question of whether the Platonic Forms are to be “essentially” understood as simply the recalling to mind of substantively predetermined Ideas, a teaching which is associated with his account of “recollection” (ἀνάμνησις). If this is correct, then it might suggest that there are fully achieved concepts that are simply received from “elsewhere,” apart from intellectual and linguistic formation. Lydia Schumacher says regarding the standard interpretation of the doctrine that

Since the late Medieval period, philosophers have tended to think of Platonic Forms as totalized mind-and-language independent realities that subsist in their own “Platonic heaven”: fixed essences, after which physical objects are inferiorly copied. Accordingly, many have understood the recollection of Forms as an act that involves summoning innate ideas of the Forms up from the recesses of the mind that perceived them before birth. In order to retrieve a Form from the intelligible realm of immutable “being,” it is generally believed that the mind must shun and see past those mutable instances of the ultimate essences that clutter the sensible realm of “becoming.” Only in this way can the human intellect conceive a thought that corresponds to the way things really are.<sup>57</sup>

Schumacher goes on to say that this “essentialising” interpretation of Plato is more historically recent than one might expect, and that it is probably traceable to Franciscan interpreters of Avicenna.<sup>58</sup> If Schumacher is right, then the antiquity and hermeneutical viability of such readings are questionable. Additionally, if one returns to Plato himself, especially after the philological reconstructions of Christoph Helmig,<sup>59</sup> then what

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56 MacKinnon, “Metaphysical and Religious Language,” 217.

57 Lydia Schumacher, “Rethinking Recollection and Plato’s Theory of Forms.” *Lyceum* 11, no. 2 (Spring 2010): 1.

58 *Ibid.*, 1.

59 Christoph Helmig, “What is the Systematic Place of Abstraction and Concept Formation in Plato’s Philosophy? Ancient and Modern Readings of Phaedrus 249 b–c,”

Plato's account seems to suggest is that what the soul "recollects" are not individual Forms but *the unity of all things as they are held together and abstracted by the senses*. As the *Phaedrus* says: "For as a human being one has to understand universal/generic names (κατ' εἶδος λεγόμενον) which coming out of a plurality of sense perceptions, are gathered together into a unity by reasoning," and that "such understanding is recollection of those things which our souls beheld aforetime as they journeyed with their god, looking down upon the things which now we supposed to be, and gazing up to that which truly is" (*Phaedrus* 249b-c).<sup>60</sup>

What this ocular mythology intimates – notice the dual movement of gazing downwards and upwards – is that what the mind remembers is the process of abstraction whereby it carries out an ordering procedure of re-collecting the flux of impressions under unifying concepts or generic names. It involves "seeing together things that are scattered about everywhere and collecting them into one kind," as Plato writes (265d), and then proceeding to divide them into more specialized categories in accordance with "dialectic" (266b-c; cf. *Parmenides* 135b-c). As is spelled out, when one recollects, one draws inferences from sense perceptions "that cannot come into the mind in any other way" (*Phaedo* 75a) and thereby makes comparisons, connections, and distinctions between different things so that our knowledge may be brought into an orderly account. As Socrates asks: "when a man sees or hears or in some other way perceives one thing and not only knows that thing but also thinks of another thing of which the knowledge is not the same but different, are we not right to say that he recollects *the second thing* that comes to mind? [italics mine]" (73c).<sup>61</sup> What the mind remembers, therefore, is not the individual entities but the binding relation between things that was garnered when the soul

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in Caroline Mace and Gerd Van Riel (eds.), *Platonic Ideas and Concept Formation in Greek and Medieval Thought* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2004), 83–105. Allen does not address this passage in his more traditional reading in R.E. Allen, "Anamnesis in Plato's 'Meno and Phaedo.'" *The Review of Metaphysics* 13.1 (1959): 165–174.

60 This translation is taken from Christoph Helmig article cited above and can be found on p. 87.

61 Socrates goes on to give an example: "Well, you know what happens to lovers: whenever they see a lyre, a garment or anything else that their beloved as accustomed to use, they know the lyre, and the image of the boy to whom it belongs comes to their mind. This is recollection ..." (*Phaedo* 73d).



contemplated everything in relation to the Beautiful and the Good (76e).<sup>62</sup> To quote Schumacher again: “Anytime it accomplishes the feat of knowing, or successfully engages in recollection, the idea that results is one that was effectively waiting to be discovered. In producing this idea, the mind transforms the potential for understanding its existing knowledge created into actual understanding.”<sup>63</sup> “Recollection” then is primarily concerned with the human intellect’s ability to abstract a unified arrangement from the untethered flow of being, and it is this process of making connections and disentangling our confused sense imprints that Plato describes as “learning.” As Socrates famously says: recollection is primarily concerned with the mystery of how we learn as human beings (72e, *Meno* 81d); this is the central question of Meno’s paradox: *how does one learn what one does not already know?*

But how does one begin to learn? Socrates’s conversation with the slave Antyus in the *Meno* shows that “recollection” does not begin in a state of confident intuition. On the contrary, if anything “recollection” begins within the experience of *unknowing*, a kind of apophatic suspension. It does not begin from a place of power but an attitude of “dispossession” (*Meno* 84a-b).<sup>64</sup> This is attuned to the Socratic doctrine, mentioned previously, that wisdom begins in the self-acknowledgement of one’s finitude and ignorance. This is what stimulates the desire to learn. To realise that one does *not* know what one thought one knew is to place oneself in a better position for recollection. And if one takes this *aporia* and open-mindedness as a predisposition for learning, then this also buttresses the intimation that *anamnēsis* for Plato is not concerned with the recalling of innate, disconnected ideas which are brought to the mind again. As *Theaetetus* suggests (197bff.), one may begin the learning process as a child with an

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62 As Pabst writes, “the process of ἀνάμνησις is best described as a gradual awakening that does not consist in remembering innate ideas and enabling the soul to overcome bodily entrapment through abstract contemplation but rather encompasses the natural desire to know, the senses that mediate perceptions, and an intellect that has the capacity to receive species forms” (*Metaphysics: The Creation of Hierarchy*, 40).

63 Schumacher, “Rethinking Recollection and Plato’s Theory of Forms,” 5.

64 Jean-Louis Chrétien, *The Unforgettable and the Unhoped For*, trans. Jeffrey Bloechl (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 1–39. On p. 13: “The way of recollection, just like the way of love, begins with emptiness and dispossession, and not with the accumulation of rediscovered or re-conquered memories.”

“empty” mind. One then gradually begins to enter the storehouse of one’s memory, and in memory there are many ideas which are “possessed,” like birds in a cage which have been collected. But one does not “have” them within one’s grasp (199b). At one time you may have caught a bird, and now “possess” it, but in order to “have” it one has to reach out to grab one; but in accordance with the Socratic analogy, the bird one latches onto may be “false opinion” and not yet “knowledge” as such. Birds may fly and swarm about, and we are liable to be sometimes confused or disorientated by their flight. We might discover that we have grabbed the wrong one. This is a part of the learning-process. One may “possess” knowledge that has already been gained inchoately, but without learning, without tracing how things are understood conceptually, one does not “have” such knowledge.

And this is not a necessarily easy assignment, as can be seen in Plato’s frequently aporetic conclusions – which suggests that to gain knowledge is not a once-off event but is placed within “the long-continued discourse between teacher and pupil” (*Letter VII* 341c). The original, pre-embodied sense of “a hidden holding-together”<sup>65</sup> cannot be grasped at once, but requires dialectical unfolding: to quote Kahn again, “the nature of the Forms is to be understood not from the perspective of vision but from the perspective of λόγος, where λόγος is conceived as the dialectical pursuit of definition, the pursuit of clarity and understanding by way of linguistic exchange, by means of question and answer concerning what things are and how they are.”<sup>66</sup> Echoing the language of *Letter VII*, Gonzalez confirms this reading when he says that “While it does seem to be the case that, given the inherent weakness of *logos*, we need to see *beyond logos* in order to know the forms, the dialogues make clear that any direct vision of the forms without the mediation of *logos* is impossible in this life.”<sup>67</sup>

Nor should we assume that the recollection of Forms necessitates a reproduction of the same order in the mind *ad infinitum*. Jean-Louis Chrétien has eloquently spoken about “the eschatological character of recollection” in Plato’s thought, arguing that “if recollection aims to make

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65 I take this phrase from Catherine Pickstock’s “Matter and Mattering: The Metaphysics of Rowan Williams.” *Modern Theology* 31, no. 4 (2015): 611.

66 Kahn, “The Philosophical Importance of the Dialogue Form for Plato,” 168.

67 Gonzalez, “Plato’s Dialectic of Forms,” 62.

us recapture what we have always known and always, as humans, forgotten, if it draws back the forgetting of being, it in no way consists in making us rescind time, and it does not have as its end making us become once again what we were before, when we knew for the first time,” since “Were we to do that, we would cease to be human.” Within Plato’s lexicon, he suggests, “recollection is the properly human modality of knowledge, and not the reestablishment of a state anterior to humanity.” For Chrétien, “[the] immemorial of a knowledge that one must recapture by uprooting forgetting is what gives us the future; it is what opens a future where rediscovering is not repeating, and where the second time of recollection does not at all reproduce the first, antenatal time,” which to him suggests that “[the] absolute and pre-human past of the first vision produces the human future, granting it its perpetual resource,” and that it is in this vein that “we re-collect ourselves only to the future, in seeking.”<sup>68</sup> Once more, if this reading is correct, then we should not be too quick to assume Plato’s doctrine projects an overly-confident or naïve paradigm of “intellectual intuition,” one immune to the augmentations of time and sensibility. This seems to be confirmed from Diotima’s speech on *eros* in *Symposium* 207d-208b, where she says:

Even while each living thing is said to be alive and to be the same – as a person is said to be the same from childhood till he turns into an old man – even then he never consists of the same things, though he is called the same, but he is always being renewed and in other respects passing away, in his hair and flesh and bones and blood and his entire body. And it’s not just in his body, but in his soul, too, for none of his manners, customs, opinions, desires, pleasures, pains, or fears ever remains the same, but some are coming to be in him while others are passing away. And what is still far stranger than that is that not only does one branch of knowledge come to be in us while another passes away and that we are never the same even in respect of our knowledge, but that each single piece of knowledge has the same fate. For what we call *studying* exists because knowledge is leaving us, because forgetting is the departure of knowledge, while studying puts back a fresh memory in place of what went away,

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68 Chrétien, *The Unforgettable and the Unhoped For*, 12.

thereby preserving a piece of knowledge, so that it seems to be the same. And in that way, everything mortal is preserved, not, like the divine, by always being the same in every way, but because what is departing and aging leaves behind something new, something such as it had been.<sup>69</sup>

## 5. Conclusion

One of Plato's gravamen in his infamous critique of the poets is their "sophistical" reduction of reality to "appearance." To his mind, their preference for *mimesis* produces a flattened representation that does not inquire after the true causes of things.<sup>70</sup> Because the mimetic arts imply a copying of ideas (and even copies of copies), imitation continues to remain "far removed from the truth" (*The Republic* IX 598b). For Plato, these doubling simulacra will not ultimately disclose reality, but will entrench human beings within a chaotic vale of mirrors, producing imitation upon imitation – but not transformation of the soul. As the stranger catalogues at the end of the *Sophist*, one could liken sophism to an "insincere and

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69 "A vanished image, a memory imprint, of something "known" is replaced by a new image, a new memory imprint, of that very same thing, again as a "known" one. The two images, the two "memories," are two remembered knowledges and are thus subjected to the vicissitudes of time, but they give the appearance of being *one and the same knowledge* because their content is the same, *unchanging and timeless*. That is why this exchange of "knowledge" for "knowledge" is so much "stranger" (ἀτοπώτερον) than any other change or exchange in man"; Jacob Klein, *Commentary on Plato's Meno* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1965), 157. On p. 167: "The effort of learning...does not aim at some point back in time, it rather anticipates the acquisition of knowledge at some future point of time. Does, then, the *repetition* involved in ἀνάμνησις and μελέτη, with their contrary motions, tend toward the same goal? At the moment of insight, after a period of learning, we cognize that what we have learned is true. Can this cognition be anything but re-cognition? Does not thus learning ultimately indeed merge with recollecting? And must not then, conversely, the 'yet unknown' and 'unlearned' be equated with the 'forgotten' (as Diotima's pun intimates) and the state of ignorance with that of forgetfulness?" This might constitute, as Catherine Pickstock has suggested, a kind of anticipation of Kierkegaardian non-identical repetition. She emphasizes that Diotima's recounting of erotic knowledge is a contrast to *Meno* and *Phaedo* with its theory of "backward recollection". The feminine imagery in the *Symposium*, somewhat differently, emphasises the language of production, pregnancy and birth in the progression towards the Form of the Beautiful. See Catherine Pickstock, "Eros and Emergence". *Telos* 127 (2004): 97–118.

70 See Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Plato and the Poets," in *Dialogue and Dialectic: Eight Hermeneutical Studies on Plato*, trans. P. Christopher Smith (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1980), 39–72.

unknowing sort, of the appearance-making kind of copy-making” (*Sophist* 268d).

Now, of course, one may have serious reservations about his account (as many have had, and continue to have), especially in light of a corpus that is replete with images, allegories, poetry, and so on. However, if his tirade against *mimesis* touches upon something of substance it is that truth is deeper than any regime of the image – something that should be lucid for us in an age of Baudrillardian hyper-reality, social media, and “deepfakes.” One could even say that Plato’s critique of the poets, to adopt modern terminology, is a critique of an ideological reproduction, of belief-without-knowledge, intuition without logos. For Plato, one cannot remain with “opinions” or mere political consensus but must seek after that truth which is hidden within the tangle of the senses. It must seek to show *how it knows what it claims to know*, thereby undermining an uncritical, absolutized intuition, and must relate its conceptual knowledge to a more comprehensive vision in which *every perspective is related harmoniously*, thereby puncturing any isolated perspective. We saw this in our discussion of Plato’s dialogical method and his testament to the Good Beyond Being that brings all things together and gives them their individuality. Moreover, we saw how the Platonic doctrine of methexis destabilizes *a dualistic topology of materiality over-against spirituality*, which presupposed that sensibility made no contribution to knowledge, or could have implied a violent imposition of ideation over materiality. And lastly, we addressed his myth of *anamnēsis*, showing that it does not presuppose a simplistic recalling of innate, pre-determined ideas received from “elsewhere” unquestioningly, but is rather concerned with the *a priori* capacities of dialectic *to connect and distinguish the Forms* as they are *abstracted* from sensory imprints. These abstractions and making-of-connections are part of knowledge-formation that starts from a posture of Socratic unknowing, and which becomes paradoxically both a recollecting *and* learning of new things – a kind of proto-Kierkegaardian “repetition.” All in all, we suggested that all of these trends, when combined with that original Socratic penchant for *aporia* and sober self-reflection, would resist an ideological suasion towards pseudo-universality and misplaced concreteness.

It should also be said, in conclusion, that this essay has not sought to reintroduce a new dualism, as the undercurrent of the argument might

be seen to imply, between topographies of “above” and “below” in the name of recovering Plato as a more worldly philosopher. It has provided a meagre summation of some modern scholarship on Plato, particularly as these have clarified certain debates regarding his method and metaphysics. I am not advocating for viewing Plato as exhibiting one proclivity more than another. This would be an obviously reductionist reading that failed to attend to the dual movements within his doctrine, which clearly exhibits both trends. Nor am I necessarily excusing Plato for some of his more controversial political ideals – the nuances of which will continue to be debated, probably without end. However, if we are reminded again in our own times of the ambiguities associated with a topology of being that privileges a purely top-down distribution of power and knowledge, and all the ideological quagmires this raises, then we need to be reminded again today that at the root of the Western philosophical tradition there is a figure (Socrates) who did not survive the machinations of political power, and that he did so for the sake of a more humane wisdom.

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