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The Spirituality of Socrates and Plato

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Socrates

In the famous scene at the close of Plato's dialogue *Phaedo,* the friends of Socrates with tactful sorrow ask where he wishes to be buried. "Bury me if you can catch me," he replies. Any attempt to assess the spirituality of Socrates must face the same evasiveness. He cannot be encapsulated. There are special historical and critical problems: the quest of the historical Socrates is likely to continue.[1] My basic assumption is that Plato is our best witness if his evidence is rightly assessed. Aristophanes, who was almost a contemporary of Socrates, must be taken seriously. Xenophon is not to be neglected but is probably less able to understand the deeper levels of Socrates. Aristotle is neither historically nor psychologically fitted to give first hand evidence, and his words about "what one might justly attribute to Socrates" (*Metaphysics* 13.4.1078b27–30).[2] show that debate on this question had already begun. In Plato himself I attribute special value to the *Apology* and *Crito* as showing insight into some of Socrates' views that he himself did not share. Elsewhere in the dialogues I rely most on the personal touches in the dramatic presentation of Socrates, and I would not feel confident to accept without qualification as his any of the doctrines he puts forward in any dialogue.

There is one historical question that bears directly on the spiritual qualities of Socrates and on his influence in after times. This is his alleged conversion from interest in science and the universe to interest in ethics and in the individual. For the picture of Socrates in the *Clouds* of Aristophanes to be funny and have point, the theater audience in 423 B.C. must have been aware that he took some interest in scientific questions. It seems as certain as any evidence can be that when still young he heard Archelaus, a pupil of Anaxagoras, discuss scientific questions in Athens. He must also have

had some contacts with visiting sophists, and the amusing sketch of the gathering at the house of Callias with which the *Protagoras* opens may well be something that Plato could imagine truthfully. In the *Cratylus,* however, Socrates deplores the fact that he is not well equipped to discuss the problems of language because he could not afford to attend Prodicus's fifty-drachma course and had to be content with a popular one-drachma lecture (384B). But we must not take without skepticism Plato's account in the *Phaedo* where Socrates is represented as saying that he abandoned a "scientific" approach because it failed to explain fundamental questions. The *Apology* also may not be free from special pleading on this question of Socrates' ignorance of the problems dealt with by Anaxagoras. On the other hand there is no need to posit a time in his life before he became concerned with ethical issues. This concern probably went back to the day when he left his father's workshop as an unsatisfactory apprentice and spent his days talking to all and sundry in the marketplace. Certainly the *Clouds* in 423 B.C. guys him as a guru to whom Strepsiades mistakenly entrusts his son. The *Birds* in 414 B.C. describes the young Athenians at that time wearing their hair long, siding with Sparta, and "gone on Socrates." In 405 B.C., when Athens is in real danger and about to be conquered by Sparta, Aristophanes explicitly points out the danger of young men gathering round Socrates in a corner chattering and scratching up ideas. In view of all this evidence it is safest to say that Socrates made no clear division in his life of asking and answering questions, even if in a worsening political situation he attached greater importance to purely personal ethical matters. He was always more interested in people than in trees, but he was always ready for serious question and answer with anyone about anything. It was natural that he drew around him especially the young men with leisure to talk and open minds. Personal attachments naturally followed.

This practice, however, was unwelcome to many of those he questioned, and we have to note two particular words of disparagement used against him, for they indirectly reveal his personal qualities. One was *eirōneia,* which we should not really translate "irony." We misunderstand it if we regard it as a positive, laudable quality. It is his opponents' word and does no justice to him. When he asked questions he honestly disclaimed knowledge himself; and yet he had a firm standard, a sense of objective truth and reality, by which he tested the answers to his questions. It was by this unexpressed standard that he proved the answers inadequate. Though his methods may well have foreshadowed logical methods later formulated, his own ruling purpose was to arrive at an enlightenment shared by questioner and answerer which had a bearing on life and behavior. All too often this

had the actual effect of enraging his partners in discussion. Thus Thrasymachus at the very outset of the *Republic* discussion on Justice complains precisely of this "habitual irony" by which he asks questions to which he knows the answers in order to nonplus his opponent. So he is unwilling to enter another debate with Socrates on these terms. We speak of "Socratic irony" as of "dramatic irony," but neither concept really reflects the Greek word, which implies a curmudgeonly kind of understatement, often with malicious intent.[3] Tragedy does indeed provide scenes where a character speaks words innocently that are only too true, and Socrates can play on paradoxes in the course of his desire to reach the truth. If we accept the traditional use of the word "irony" for this, we must be clear that the professed ignorance of Socrates was not a pose. He knew that he did not know. When he exposed the conceit of wisdom in leading members of Athenian society to the inordinate delight of young men listening in on the argument, we must credit him with the serious intent of discovering any clue that could lead to the solution of the problem discussed. It was of the essence of Socrates that he met his fellow human beings on the basis of readiness on both sides to "give and receive argument." For this reason he insisted on short questions and direct answers, and he distrusted harangues decked out with cosmetic phrases.

A second opprobrious epithet he attracted was that of *adoleschēs,* "chatterer," "idle talker." Such idle talk, as the Athenian politicians saw it, was dangerous and distracting. If it was with their own sons, it was, in their view, deadly. The son of Anytus, according to Xenophon, was among the group around Socrates. No doubt his father believed that Socrates had so shattered his sons's ideas that he had become a dissolute and disgraced member of society (*Apology* 29–32). Anytus was the principal accuser of Socrates in fact if not in name, and the charge of corrupting the young men clearly weighed heavily against him at his trial (Plato *Symposium* 219D.1).[4] Plato in the seventh book of the *Republic* makes Socrates recommend that young men should not engage in dialectic until fully trained and matured through mathematical discipline, for otherwise they will pull each other to pieces like frisky puppies. This, however, is Plato and not the real Socrates, who was made to drink the poison not least for what he had done to the young men of Athens in the judgment of the leaders of the restored democracy in 399 B.C.[5] Socrates paid dearly for his rationalism—or rather for his faith in reasoning as a right and necessary human activity from the practice of which the young would take no harm but rather would profit.

Consideration of this "corruption" of the young leads us to other elements in Socrates. No doubt many Athenians, thinking that there is no smoke without fire, suspected him of physical homosexual relationships. The

sophist Polycrates produced a kind of pamphlet against Socrates in 393 B.C. which may have hinted darkly at it. Both Plato and Xenophon sprang to his defense. Plato is particularly concerned with answering such smears in the *Symposium,* where he makes Alcibiades, drunk from a bottle party, enter a decorous group where Socrates, unusually well dressed for the special occasion, is a guest. Alcibiades with indecorous frankness tells in detail of his advances to Socrates and of the occasion when he slept by Socrates expecting and positively inviting response. But nothing occurred and Socrates slept peacefully through the night. We are told also that no one ever saw Socrates drunk. A story, told by Cicero but claimed by him to go back to Phaedo after whom the famous dialogue is named, says that Zopyrus, who read characters from faces, said when confronted by Socrates that he saw many signs of a vicious and lustful nature in him. The group round Socrates laughed Zopyrus to scorn for this, but Socrates defended him and said that the lusts were indeed there but were conquered by reason.

The maxim "No one does wrong deliberately" may or may not have been first uttered by Socrates, but it was later agreed on all sides that it represents his moral teaching and was a natural corollary of his teaching that human goodness is knowledge. This is not knowledge of facts but a more-than-instinctive moral perception and moral know-how. It belongs to humanity as such. It is more than alike in man and woman: it is identical. (This was indeed revolutionary teaching and elevated women, though it did not help Socrates to appreciate the femininity of Xanthippe.) Euripides did indeed question in Socrates' own lifetime the maxim that no one sins deliberately. He points out that we can know and recognize what is right but not put it into practice because passion is stronger than reasoned willing (*Medea* 1078; *Hippolytus* 377–81), and the same plea is made on behalf of humanity by witnesses as diverse as Ovid and Paul of Tarsus. But Socrates' view was only modified and not abandoned by Plato and Aristotle. Plato justifies the introduction of a penal system in the *Laws* (11, esp. 860D1–861D1),[6] and Aristotle carefully states and defines the condition of *akrasia,* failure of control, in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (7.1145b21–1152a36).[7] Yet in both great masters the optimism concerning reasoned morality remained firm. Behind this optimism about human moral potential lay the teaching and, more important, the life of Socrates. He was, says Plato at the close of the *Phaedo,* "of all men of that time of whom we had tested experience the best, the most moral and the most righteous." It was Socrates who made credible the doctrine that no one does wrong deliberately.

The basis of Socrates' readiness to follow the argument at all costs was his faith in the reality of right and wrong, just and unjust. He believed it possible to discern each, to follow the one and avoid the other. The human

person has the duty, but also the capacity, to obey his or her conscience, and this conscience is an individual conscience. Invited by Crito to escape from prison, Socrates enters on his usual course of question and answer. What makes for bodily health? Avoidance of what hurts the body and use of what benefits it. Who knows what does so? The expert rather than the crowd. Who then knows how to maintain soundness in that which right conduct benefits and wrong conduct hinders? (This he says is "that of us, whatever it is, that has right and wrong behaviour as its proper concern" [Plato *Crito* 47E]. This is about as near as we get to a Socratic definition of the soul or *psychē*.) Who then knows what benefits this vital part of us? Who can judge whether it is right to stay in prison in Athens or escape to Thessaly? The one enlightened mind, which is the mind of Socrates himself, following faithfully in adversity the doctrines he has established for himself as true in the course of moral discussions throughout his life when his own security was not at risk.

This claim for individual conscience is of great importance in the history of ethics in Europe, but it is also important in the history of religion and of human spirituality. Much interest has been taken recently in the short dialogue *Crito*, which shows Socrates refusing escape from prison and death. His conscience will not let him disobey the laws of Athens, which are like parents to him and received a freely given pledge of allegiance from him when he consented to stay in Athens and did not decide to move to another community. It has been suggested that this hardly accords with his attitude in the *Apology* where he refuses in advance to abandon philosophizing if allowed to escape punishment on that condition. "Men of Athens, I greet you and I am fond of you, but I must obey God (or the god Apollo) rather than you, and so long as I have breath in my body and capacity to do it I will not cease from my task of exhortation. . . ." There is no real inconsistency. Decision to conform and obey, and decision to disobey and to accept the consequences of disobedience in hypothetical circumstances, are perfectly compatible decisions of conscience. Conscientious objectors to military duties constantly cite Socrates as their model. He had no objection to military duty and performed it stoutly when called to serve, but the principle that individual conscience is not to be overridden can fairly be regarded as Socratic. James Adam in his note on the passage in the *Apology* compares the answer of the Christian apostles before the Sanhedrin that they must obey God rather than men (Acts 5:29). There we have rather the corporate conscience of a committed group who disobey ecclesiastical authority conscientiously. But there is here also enough relevance to make Adam's note legitimate.

Here too we have to consider the motivation of the "mission" to his fellows from which Socrates was unwilling to cease. The paradoxical quality of his life is perhaps best seen here. He seeks to prove the Oracle wrong by finding a wiser man than himself, and yet he devotes himself, entirely neglecting normal duties and obligations, to persuading his fellow Athenians and anyone else ready for serious talk with him to take the health of their souls seriously. This "therapy of the soul" must come before all worldly ambition and crush degrading desires for wealth. He is in one respect a challenger of Apollo, but his challenge leads him in fact into humble service of the God in his moral crusade.

This stress laid on the "therapy of the soul" leads him to some teaching which he knows to be generally unacceptable but which he insists upon proclaiming. This is the doctrine that it is better (and safer for one's soul) to suffer wrong than to answer wrong with revenge. Revenge so injures the soul of the revenger that it must be renounced. To do wrong to another is worse than to suffer wrong from him. It is absolutely worse, but the emphasis is on the harm it does to the soul. This is not the motive for loving enemies put forward in the Christian gospel, nor are enemies required to be loved. Even so, the ethical and spiritual insight of Socrates stands out in contrast to normal Greek (and other) standards of conduct. There is no employment of nonviolence as a political tool as Gandhi used it. But there is honesty in Socrates' statement that he bore no ill feeling against those who had condemned him and that his only concern was for their false scale of values which no one would point out to them once he was gone.

It might be thought that any consideration of the spirituality of Socrates must concentrate on the *daimonion* or supernatural guide he claimed as his special possession, or perhaps as his special visitant. According to Plato its interventions were always negative or cautionary. Xenophon thought it did on occasion prompt a particular action or course of action. Later generations discussed this *daimonion*. We have writings on it from Plutarch and Apuleius, but the former is not too relevant and the latter is too rhetorical to be of much value.[8] It may well have injured Socrates at his trial, as both Plato and Xenophon believed it did. It lay behind the charge of inventing novel divinities and not believing in the gods the city believed in. We can really only say with any confidence that Socrates believed in a supernatural source of help in certain decisions in his daily life and was prepared to accept this guidance. We cannot say certainly how seriously he felt that the guidance always came from a quasi-personal being concerned with him exclusively (the word *daimonion* is neuter in gender but this is not decisive). We can, however, see the divine sign as part of the spiritual life of a man who was at once a mystic and a moralist.

Plato gives us in the *Symposium* the picture of Socrates standing still in a trance for a day and a night (220C).[9] There is no reason to doubt the story. It helps to explain the strong personal hold Socrates had over his contemporaries. It was not simply the external habits of an eccentric—the snub nose, sidelong glances, rolling walk, shabby dress, and far-from-aesthetic features. Nor was it simply what we now call charisma. It was the power of a personality that combined intellectual challenge with strong moral integrity and authority. Young Meno said it was a chill like that caused by cold fluid from a cuttlefish and that it reduced one to a frozen inability to think and speak. Others were not so chilled, but all were to some extent awed or, in some cases, reduced to furious silence.

We have to ask what ground such a man could give for his accusers to charge him not only with impiety but with virtual atheism. Laying aside the political reasons behind the accusations, we must look for the grounds for it in the minds of his contemporaries. The clue probably lies in the phrase in the indictment "not believing in the gods in whom the city believes."

This does not point to a direct onslaught on the Olympian pantheon, though the discussion in the *Euthyphro*, which seems to have genuine Socratic touches, rejects "dear to the gods" as an inadequate definition of the Holy because what is dear to one god is not necessarily dear to another. This would seem wicked freedom of utterance to Meletus as well as to Euthyphro. What was the real position? The conversations of Socrates recorded by Xenophon show a rather simple, even naïve faith in a general divine providence. But they must be seen as in great measure designed to defend or rehabilitate Socrates and to owe much to this motive in Xenophon. The real truth is probably reflected in his words to the judges just before they cast the decisive vote, as these are given by Plato (*Apology* 25E). If he appealed to them to acquit him because death was an evil he feared to face, he would indeed be guilty of not believing in the existence of the gods and of encouraging doubt in his fellows. "For I believe in the gods in a way none of my accusers do, and I leave it to you the jurors and to God to decide the matter in the way that is best both for me and for you."

I deliberately translated *tōi theōi* as "God" rather than "the god Apollo" in the saying "I must obey God rather than you." The same applies to the final words of the *Apology*, "Well now, the time has come to depart, I to death and you to life. Which of the pair of us goes to the better way of existence is hidden from everyone save God." But in so translating I do not wish to bring in Judeo-Christian or Muslim connotations of the word "God." Only a few sentences before that final one Socrates says that no real evil affects the good man in life or after death and his welfare is never

neglected by *the gods*. Socrates was not alive to the issue of monotheism, but his way of believing in the gods rose above that of his fellow Athenians. He had achieved (or had by natural gift) a faith in a divine reality outside good persons but giving them support and underpinning their moral existence. To such a divine reality one can commit oneself and one's deeds.

Did Socrates, then, believe in immortality? It has frequently been held that he was an agnostic, on the strength of the words Plato gives him in the final section of the *Apology*, and it is hard to discredit this passage. He asks what death really is. He answers "Either annihilation or transmigration." He is quick to say that the former need not be feared: no dreams would come in such a sleep. But his real interest and hope is in the latter alternative, migration to another life. Greek uses the antithesis of *men* and *de* (on the one hand, on the other hand) frequently like this, stating after *men* what is possible or thinkable but after *de* what is likely or preferable. "If the stories they tell are true," he says of this brighter alternative. This means that he sits as loose to detailed mythical descriptions as a modern Christian does to harps and crowns. There is a playfulness which can be mistaken for disbelief but which expresses a deeper faith than "orthodoxy." The final quip that they will not then be able to bring him to trial and put him to death because he will be immortal exactly portrays this deep faith reflected in but not to be confused with "the stories they tell."

Inevitably much of our material in this assessment of Socrates has been taken from Plato, though past generations would have taken much more. One more argument that Plato reports must be mentioned, the so-called argument from the arts, which really is from the crafts. The craftsman in his own sphere has expert knowledge and therefore authority. The leap from such expertise to moral and political expertise is risky, but Socrates seems to have made that leap, and this has a bearing on his personal as well as his philosophical interest. He was on easy terms with all men and no aloof aristocrat, and he thought everyone worth talking to; but he had a respect for expertise that set him somewhat apart. Plato took this much further, but the seeds of the argument are in Socrates.

However that may be, Socrates is seen most clearly if all the doctrinal content attributed to him in Plato's dialogues is not taken into account. What is left is the powerful personal interest of a moral mystic who could capture the allegiance not only of Plato but of Simon the Cobbler, of Antisthenes and, through him and the Cynics, of the early Stoics. They all thought that Plato and his school were too intellectual and based their allegiance to Socrates on his pursuit of moral strength and discipline and on his frugal life-style. Plato is said to have called Diogenes the Dog in his cask in the marketplace "Socrates gone mad." It is a good story whether true

or not; for it catches that element of individualism and that following out of principle that make Socrates an irreplaceable figure in the spiritual pilgrimage of the human race. It also shows the difficulty of his living out his life anywhere in our midst.

Plato

It is almost as difficult to isolate and assess Plato's spiritual qualities as we found it to be to assess those of Socrates. The difficulty now is abundance of evidence, not lack of it. One can readily do what has so often been done and treat Plato simply as a political theorist. One can virtually ignore his political involvement and treat him as a propounder of metaphysical doctrines which he afterwards modified. One can concentrate on his founding of the Academy, paying special attention to his connections with Syracuse, where politics, metaphysics, and the Academy combined in a practical challenge to action. Each of these approaches offers some insight into the man himself, but none of them uncovers his understanding of and commitment to that source of being and thought which he says is "on the further side of being" of which nevertheless every soul is dimly aware. The basic question is whether he thought of this ultimate being as in any sense personal and in any sense concerned about the life of the physical universe and its inhabitants. We shall see that we may have to accept a ragged answer, a belief in the ultimate eternal real and also in an ultimate first cause with personal characteristics.

There is again a prior question as to what evidence we may use. There has been a challenge recently to the use of Plato's dialogues as evidence for his inmost beliefs. The attempt has been made to extract and reconstruct evidence from his unwritten esoteric teaching and from a course of lectures on the Good of which we have only brief reports in order to discover more accurately what were his ultimate views. But such evidence as we have of this teaching and Aristotle's attribution to Plato (maybe meaning his school) of the ultimate principles of the One and the Indefinite Dyad or Great-and-Small (Aristotle *Physics* 4.209b3–210a2) give us reason to believe that what Plato in the *Republic* calls the Form of the Good represents at any rate the positive factor in his view of what ultimately exists. And so the concentration through the centuries on this account of what Plato believed to be real or more than real has not been seriously misguided, though it may not have said all that needs to be said.

When we permit ourselves to consider the dialogues, we find a vast amount put into the mouth of Socrates. We have seen good reason to treat its claim to be truly Socratic with the utmost caution. But if it is not

8. Three Goddesses Attending the Birth of Athena. Eastern pediment of the Parthenon. Ca. 435 B.C.

authentic Socrates, it must in some sense be authentic Plato.[10] There is important evidence of Plato's own position in the earlier so-called Socratic dialogues, but this is even more so in the great central dialogues *Phaedo, Symposium, Republic,* and *Phaedrus.* We must look to them to understand Plato's approach to divinity and the principles that guided his life.

A question of first importance arises here. We have to differentiate and evaluate the Socratic and the Pythagorean influence on Plato at the formative time of his life in his early thirties immediately after the death of Socrates. In the *Phaedo* he shows Socrates at his end surrounded by Athenian friends and devotees but also by two young Pythagoreans from Thebes. Phaedo is to take to the Pythagorean group in Phleious the story of Socrates' last hours. He does it at the request of the Phleiasian Echecrates. The implication of this would be that Socrates himself had close links with the Pythagorean refugees from southern Italy and Sicily now in exile in mainland Greece. But Plato also represents Socrates as countering the skeptical objections of the two young men to the doctrines of the soul's immortality. This at least suggests that Socrates, because he met the young men's objections with arguments, not with reference back to views of Pythagoras on these matters, had his own approach not dependent on Pythagorean doctrine. If so, we may conclude that Plato drew his own convictions about the immortality of the soul from personal contact with Socrates, although in his own great myths (in *Gorgias, Republic,* and *Phaedrus*) he takes over and uses elements of "Orphic" and Pythagorean teachings about judgment and rebirth. But he faces them with the elemental Socratic conviction about the inextinguishable value of the human psyche, which constitutes the human person as a responsible being aware of right and wrong and capable of that knowledge which is specifically human goodness, the *aretē* of human beings.

The other basically Socratic element in Plato is found in contrast to, but in productive tension with, this morality which is knowledge, this knowledge which is morality. This is Plato's account of *erōs,* which is far removed from what was later called "Platonic love." This is perhaps most explicit in the *Symposium* in Diotima's discourse, where Plato can make a wise woman tell Socrates what Socrates himself had made clear to Plato by his direct personal influence more than by arguments and doctrines. The ascent from passion for one beautiful body to vision of and union with "the whole ocean of the Beautiful" is the true account of Plato's ascent with Socrates to help him on. Socrates is the ugly Silenus figure with beautiful images to be discovered within him, images of temperance and sobriety. These inner graces of Socrates had helped Plato himself to scale the ladder of desire, and he makes Diotima and Alcibiades say what he clearly feels to be true in his

own experience. The urge to "create offspring in the Beautiful" is the emotional force behind his philosophic striving for truth. The *Phaedrus* myth shows the same impetus but in subtler myth-making language. The human soul has fallen from the company of the gods as they ride around contemplating the Forms in the place above the heavens. The unruly steed of physical passion has caused its chariot to crash to earth. But it sees the light of pure Beauty before it sees any other form and forthwith its wings begin to grow again.

The meaning of all this is to be seen in the description of the true philosopher in the *Republic.* Now the ultimate object of vision is named as the Form of the Good, which is "the greatest object of learning" and the crown of a system of existents which it surpasses, for it is "on the further side of being, more excellent than being in its worshipfulness and its power." We note two developments here. Instead of the emphasis on levels of desire, we have emphasis on levels of vision. The Good is described by analogy with the sun, the source of all physical life and growth and the only true revealer of all natural phenomena. Second, the note of transcendence is sounded more strongly than before and with it the teleological emphasis, for *agathon* in Greek contains the notion of relevance, of being good *for* something.[11] The ultimate source of intelligibility also in some sense generates the existent objects that the intellect contemplates, though Plato does not explain the meaning of this sentence, which was taken as a basic text by the Neoplatonists. (The sun causes cabbages to grow, but does not create cabbages.)

On the other hand, neither desire nor beauty is absent from the account of the Good. It is introduced at 505E as "that which every soul pursues, the true object of all its acts of choice. It divines that it really is something but is at a loss and cannot grasp adequately what it can be, for it lacks the firm and settled awareness of this which it has in dealing with objects of its normal experience." When Glaucon at last understands what Socrates has said about the Good he exclaims: "This is a beauty we cannot cope with of which you speak, if it provides understanding within us and true reality outside us but is itself above both in its intrinsic beauty." *Agathon* does not supplant *Kalon:* it includes it.

The union of the intellectual and the passionate in the true philosopher is seen even more clearly in Plato's account of him at the beginning of the sixth book of the *Republic.* James Adam, in his note on 486A.3 remarks that "these and the following sentences admirably describe the genius of Plato himself." Pettiness, we are told, is a thing utterly distant from the soul whose desire will always be set on what is universal in things divine and things human. A mind that is really big and able to contemplate all time

and all existence cannot really attach so much importance to human life as to regard death as anything that is to be feared. This high vantage point is, however, the climax of a struggle, and the climax is described in blatantly sexual imagery:

> [The true lover of learning] will have the natural endowment to fight his way through, not staying at each particular class of things men suppose to exist but going ahead with unblunted urgency. He will not cease from his passion till he seizes on each thing that really exists, using the faculty within him able to seize this prize, and that faculty is kin to its objects. When he has thus approached reality as a lover and has been mingled with the real in truly real intercourse, he will achieve knowledge, life that is true life, and true sustenance. Then he will cease from his travail,[12] but until that crowning moment never.

So for Plato intuitive apprehension of an unvarying supersensible reality and personal emotional fulfillment go together. But this is in no way at the expense of the reasoning faculty in the human person, for the highest function of the psyche, which Plato calls *noēsis* (pure intellection), acts dialectically. It is not a mystic absorption that spurns all reason and claims to be above it. So Plato wrestles with analysis and definition and comes to see that propositions about actual situations in life come under the same rules as statements about invariable forms. He also sees the need to restate the theory of Forms itself. But he restates the doctrine and does not abandon it, holding it to be a basic presumption of all process of thought. The seventh letter attributed to Plato is a puzzle to scholars, many of whom doubt its authenticity, but there is in it a passage describing arrival at truth, which Plato would certainly have endorsed.

> Hardly, after practising detailed comparisons of names and definitions and visual and other sense-perceptions, after scrutinising them in benevolent disputation by the use of question and answer without jealousy, at last in a flash understanding of each blazes up, and the mind, as it exerts all its powers to the limit of human capacity, is flooded with light. (*Epistle* 7.344B; trans. L. A. Post)

Here we must turn to the other guiding influence on Plato, that of the Pythagoreans. He was drawn close to them after the death of Socrates, when he was anxiously seeking answers to problems of life and thought in his early thirties. His visit to Archytas at Tarentum and Dion at Syracuse led him to decide to found a school for young men of influence in their various cities who had, or could be given, expertise in mathematics. Archytas had been chosen seven times as chief magistrate at Tarentum and was also a distinguished mathematician. But it was more than pragmatic consideration that led Plato to take the crucial step of founding his research

center by the gymnasium dedicated to Academus. He was himself of distinguished descent and bound to be concerned about political life and doing the duty of a responsible citizen. He could not step aside from politics as Socrates had done, but he saw contemporary politics as degraded and unprincipled. The moral qualities of Socrates were desperately needed in political life, but how could they be introduced and then enabled to survive? His Pythagorean friends could help him, though they themselves had been driven out of political control. For them the principle of harmony applied in all spheres, in the Universe, in the human person, the "little Universe," and in human collectives. Harmony rested on mathematical relationships, or at least on relations mathematically expressible. To understand mathematical laws was both a discipline for the soul and a means of insight into the true working of ultimate forces. Number gave things meaning and relationship and effected the ordering of disorder, the limiting of the unlimited.

This was something other than the Socratic approach. We cannot be sure how much mathematical knowledge Socrates had. Xenophon's doubts about his knowledge of geometry and astronomy are quaintly put in *Memorabilia* 4.5.7 but may reflect fact; and, if so, his evoking an answer from Meno's valet about a geometrical diagram may be true of his method of evocation but the material on which he exercised it may not be typical. However, Plato could "marry" the Pythagorean mathematics with the argument of Socrates based on the craftsman's expertise. Plato was seeking "professionals" in the craft of politics, who must then have the authority of a craftsman within his own sphere and govern. Philosophers mathematically trained would be the enlightened ones and entitled to authority. But the training was vital. This was not a craft one might learn from one's father in his workshop. Vision of truth that at last gave full and competent authority in the state came after ten years' slog in mathematical studies and five years more in dialectic. This is the "prospectus" in *Republic* 7 and the ideal curriculum at any rate for the Academy.

The Pythagorean influence on Plato also explains the definition of Justice finally arrived at in the fourth book of the *Republic*. The attempt to reach an answer to the question "What is the Just?" on Socratic lines is not pursued after the first book, though the insistence on being just as distinct from seeming just continues the Socratic moral requirement. The new approach is through a threefold division of individual psyche and community with the requirement that each fulfill its peculiar function so as to produce a harmony in both state and individual which is the realization of Justice. Here Plato shows his faith in the ordering of the disorderly for the common good which arises from his belief in the real possibility of

harmony. He struggles to keep this faith in the face of all the hard evidence of human nature in communities, which he analyzes with penetration in the eighth and ninth books of the *Republic*. When he seems driven to despair about its realization at the end of the ninth book, he takes up a new ground of hope. In a famous sentence he says that though the city they have just founded in words may not exist anywhere on earth now, a pattern of it is set out in the heaven for any who will to see and then to enfranchise themselves in it. The heaven intended is the one above us with its regular rounds of stars (in his astronomy) and planets. The *Timaeus* (47B) tells us that observation of the heaven is a gift of God enabling us to recognize the undeviating motions of world soul, stars, and planets too, and to seek to assimilate the perturbed motions of our souls to their unperturbed regularity. So Plato believed that the starry heavens without could foster and promote the moral law within. Macrocosm, microcosm, and human society all have potential of perfect orderliness and felicity, almost actualized in the heaven but to be painfully attained in humanity and society.

This high Pythagorean approach based on belief in order expressible mathematically in the world soul and also in the human soul built on the same mathematical basis created a difference of outlook in Plato, which led him away from Socrates. It has lost him much sympathy, particularly in recent years, and led to the view that he is nothing but a dangerous political reactionary and the enemy of democracy. The root of the problem is his equation of mathematics with ethics and of ethics with mathematics. This led him to explain decline from the ideal state in terms of failure to grasp the right numerical formula in arranging matings and births and to say that the philosopher is 729 times happier than the tyrant. We smile at this, but we have to recognize that Plato himself was serious, and his reverence for and devotion to mathematics is to be seen as part of his religious conviction and not only as part of his philosophy. It is dominant in his later view of the Universe.

We have tried to isolate the Socratic and the Pythagorean strands in Plato's spiritual makeup, but we must not think of them as antagonistic or that between them they exhaust the content of Plato's inner life. We must go on to consider how, especially in his later life, he brought in yet other ways of interpreting the highest reality. This is to be seen in the *Timaeus* in particular, where we find the Demiourgos, the fashioner and father of this Universe. He was himself good, so he fashioned it after the good and eternal model, molding in it all the species that model presented. Mathematical relations exist between fire, earth, air, and water that make its body, but above all they are present in the mathematical (and musical) ratios from which the stuff (not, of course, material stuff) of its soul was made. The

Demiurge is the Socratic craftsman at a higher level. Like the carpenter in *Republic* 10 and the auger and shuttle makers in the *Cratylus*, he "looks to" a permanent form or model and then works a copy of that form into the material proper to his skill. Guided by immaterial unchanging form, he imposes form on matter.

We see here an important development—the recognition of the function of mind as a creative organizer and of the psyche not only as capable of intelligence, but also as capable of creative action. This in turn arises from the new definition of the soul as the self-mover capable of initiating and sustaining movement in the lifeless in a purposeful way.[13] Soul can indeed be good or bad and its movements can promote order or disorder, but Plato believes that the soul sustaining and controlling the whole cosmos is a perfectly good soul. It can contain and override the wayward motions set up by contrary wills. Plato then takes over the belief in reincarnation from the Pythagoreans but explains it all in his own way as he seeks in *Laws* 10 to convince the young men in his proposed city of Magnesia in Crete that the gods exist and take notice of us. It is a doctrine of free will and individual responsibility in a preordained Cosmos with a divine Controller. This figure is called "our king" but also "the backgammon player" who makes the best cosmically of the "move" that the individual has made in his moral choices (*Laws* 10.903D.5 [backgammon player]; 909AB [king]). It is here, rather than in the careful plans for a religious cultus based on Delphi set out earlier in the *Laws*, that Plato comes nearest to stating his own faith and speaking in his own person.

Yet we need something more than the references to king and backgammon player to express Plato's belief in an ultimate cause of life and process in time and space. In the *Timaeus* the Demiurge actually makes the world soul as well as divine, human, and animal souls. Is this in fact another way of saying that the Form of the Good can act creatively? Ever since the *Timaeus* was written, there has been controversy over its interpretation. We are concerned here only with knowing whether Plato himself believed in a supreme being with personal attributes. Was he in any real sense a theist?[14]

It is clear from his attack in the *Republic* on legends about gods who deceive and misbehave that he was a radical critic of the gods of the "establishment" of his day. We need to realize how iconoclastic he was at this point. He is more cautious in the *Laws* and concerned in refuting atheism only to prove that gods in general exist, care for humans and note what they do, and cannot be appeased immorally by sacrifices that are bribes. Presumably he would still condemn stories of the gods that failed to uphold these moral standards. His attempt to base the cults in his Cretan colony on advice from Delphi is an attempt to make the state religion as enlightened

and free from scandal as possible while keeping traditional forms. But his own religious faith is at a deeper level and serious enough for him to contemplate putting to death the heretic who after patient persuasion refuses to conform. It is equally logical on his part to exclude all private shrines from his Cretan city. This is for us a dark side of him, but it is there and must be acknowledged.

The traditional view has been that for Plato the Form of the Good is his equivalent of God. It is thought that he elevated an impersonal metaphysical first principle, an *ens realissimum,* to transcendent "worshipfulness and power." Faced with the language about the Demiurge in the *Timaeus* (which forged some links between Greek and Jewish thinkers in Alexandria), some have said that the *Timaeus* is mythical and not to be taken as teaching an actual creation of the Universe at the first moment of time but rather that it is an analysis of the ongoing levels of life in the cosmos, in which the Demiurge is a figure showing the constantly creative and so sustaining activity of the Form of the Good. This interpretation is often supported by citing a passage in the *Sophist* (248E–249D) where the Eleatic Stranger, speaking for Plato, says that "what is completely existent" includes not only static Forms but life, mind, and movement. It is then argued that this attributes life, mind, and in some sense movement to the forms and *a fortiori* to the Form of the Good, who is the Demiurge. But the *Sophist* passage seems rather to mean that the system of Forms does not constitute the sum of reality, and so it is here acknowledged that minds divine and human have the same degree of permanent reality as the permanent objects of their knowledge. Above all, *psychē* as an intelligent responsible center of existence is not to be submerged in an impersonal supreme principle.

There is a further consideration. In spite of what was said about intercourse with reality that brings the ultimate satisfaction of desire, it is not clear that the Form of the Good responds to those who contemplate it. In this respect it seems to be like Aristotle's Unmoved Mover, which never responds to the desire of the Universe centered upon it. At the risk of metaphysical untidiness Plato left room for religious faith in a discernible divine purpose which involves some measure of care and oversight. The god in the myth in the *Statesman* alternately controls the way of the Universe, its inhabitants, and their collectives and alternately leaves them to their own urges. But when these urges portend universal collapse, he intervenes, heals its sicknesses, reverses its direction, and takes over control once again. Here Plato is still myth making, but he goes beyond the needs of this particular myth to indicate more precisely what he hints at in the *Laws* in speaking of the king and of the backgammon player. Faith in a cosmic order and in a benevolent upholder of that order is clearly behind

these hints and this kind of myth. Moreover there is no certainty that the creation story in the *Timaeus* is not to be taken literally, as Aristotle and Plutarch took it. If we do so take it, it becomes less likely than ever that Plato thought of the Demiurge simply as one aspect of the Form of the Good. Though the later Middle Platonic and Neoplatonic systems could look back to Plato for inspiration and cite his dialogues as best suited their own philosophy, we cannot find in Plato the firm doctrine of the One at the apex with mind and its objects in parallel at the next level downward and soul still farther down. If we look for Plato's spiritual insights, we must recognize at one and the same time firm belief in the eternal beyond seeming and change but also a firm sense, never codified, of a divine concerned control and an ultimate benevolent planning mind. This was no survival from his childhood or accommodation to prevailing ideas. It was something basic that cannot be ignored without reducing him as a man. As he saw it, human beings could and should grow like God as far as it lay within them to do so.

Notes

1. Among works that are very skeptical about reliable evidence on Socrates, the most important in recent times is Olof Gigon, *Sokrates, sein Bild in Dichtung und Geschichte* (Bern: A. Francke, 1947). Gigon also produced commentaries on Xenophon, *Memorabilia.*

2. Aristotle's judgment that Socrates took no interest in the philosophy of the universe as a whole is only an opinion, though of course he is right in saying that Socrates propounded no doctrines about it.

3. On the word's meaning in Greek, see W. K. C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy,* 3:446.

4. The whole scene begins at 212D.

5. In 1954 John D. Montgomery edited a series of essays entitled *The State against Socrates* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1954). The essays are by a wide range of nineteenth- and twentieth-century authors, and many reflect on Socrates' personality and religious beliefs.

6. Trevor J. Saunders has important remarks on this passage in his translation of the *Laws* in the Penguin series (London and Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1970).

7. Socrates is expressly mentioned at the outset. On the ethical side Aristotle seems to have a clearer understanding of Socrates than on the metaphysical.

8. Plutarch *De genio Socratis* (*Moralia* 575–99); Apuleius *De deo Socratis.*

9. Alcibiades is made to state that Socrates was struggling with an ethical problem.

10. One must, of course, allow for the purely dramatic settings of the dialogues and speeches ascribed to speakers who clearly do not speak for Plato himself.

11. Note particularly 505A.2 where we are told that the Form of the Good is "that by which just things and the like, when they have summoned its aid to stabilize them, became truly useful and beneficial." This difficult phrase seems to mean that acts and attitudes normally called just need scrutiny in the light of the Form of the Good. Only

then can their validity be tested, and only then can they have the beneficial effect and value that are claimed for them. This emphasis on "good for . . ." does not equate good and beneficial, but it does point to the teleological strand in Plato's thought which becomes prominent in the *Timaeus*.

12. The word means "birth pangs" and at first seems strange applied to the philosopher, but *psychē* is a feminine word and can be thought to be "in labor." J. Lindsay translates "travail of his soul," which is fine if one does not try to equate the phrase with Isa 53:12, which belongs to another world of thought and experience.

13. The definition of soul as the self-mover (and the deduction from this of its inherent life and therefore of its immortality) meets us suddenly in Plato's dialogue *Phaedrus* at 245C. For a brief but penetrating discussion of this passage, see R. Hackforth's translation and commentary (*Plato's Phaedrus* [Cambrigde: University Press, 1952] 62–68). I have discussed the passage and the general account of motion in my *The Theory of Motion*.

14. I have written more fully on this and given some bibliography in the volume on Plato, published as a supplementary volume to *Greece and Rome* [New Surveys in the Classics 10; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976).

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5

Aristotle

PATRICK ATHERTON

THE PRIMARY FORM OF KNOWLEDGE is, according to Aristotle, a theology or a science of god, and this in two senses: god is both the object of the first philosophy or highest science because he is the cause or *archē* of all things, and he is the subject of this knowledge because he alone possesses it or possesses it in the highest degree (*Metaphysics* 1.983a5–9). The human desire to know the truth (*alētheia*) of things is the very fulfillment of his entire being; and this contemplative or philosophical knowledge is a sharing in god's knowledge of himself. It is scarcely possible to estimate more highly than does Aristotle the scope, power, and dignity of the human being's intellectual nature and its essentially religious character. This "god," in whom all knowing is grounded and to whom all knowing aspires (for he is that which is in itself the most knowable of all things), is *nous* or intellect—more properly, he is the self-distinguishing, self-integrating activity of pure visionary knowing (*noēsis noēseōs*) (*Metaphysics* 12.1074b34). This divine intellect "encloses the whole of nature," and it was apprehended by the ancients in the form of myth handed down by tradition (*Metaphysics* 12.1074b1–3). Besides what was graspable of the divine *nous* through the consideration of nature, it was its presence in humans—in their theoretical and practical activities—that elevated them above the merely natural. Through *nous* the human being was capable of science or universally valid knowledge and of moral life. The state—the good life in community—was the realization of practical reason in humans; in aesthetic experience, in art and poetry, through the productive force of *nous* humans got an image of those universal divine forces, in their inner unity and distinction, which regulate their lives and on their relation to which their happiness and misery depend. The spirituality, then, of Aristotle is nothing less than a celebration of the power of *nous*, displayed in all nature, life, and intellectual activity—an exaltation of reason as what is divine and, in particular, as what is divine in human beings.

CLASSICAL MEDITERRANEAN SPIRITUALITY

Egyptian, Greek, Roman