Plato and Christian Belief

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Tertullian's query, "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?" is one indication that early Christian thought was entangled with Greek philosophy. More or less sophisticated forms of ideas and themes associated with the philosophical schools of the ancient world were a part of the cultural mix of the era. And many early Christian thinkers utilized the philosophical resources of their era to define and defend Christian thought. In particular, Plato and Platonism had a major impact, culminating in the writings of Augustine. However, Tertullian's question suggests that there is something problematic about the confluence of philosophy, and by implication, Platonism, with Christianity.

It is also useful to contrast the positive response of many early Christians to Platonism with contemporary criticisms of Platonism by those who wish to defend a religious or spiritual understanding of life. Plato clearly and emphatically rejected the materialism of his day and argued for the fundamental importance of the mind in understanding both human beings and the cosmos. Hence, he might seem to be a natural ally for those seeking to establish a place for religion and spirituality in a world dominated both intellectually and practically by modern science and technology. Obviously, this has not happened, and it is useful as a way of understanding our present situation with respect to belief in God to ask "Why?"

Reading Plato

The place to begin in attempting to understand the attraction of Platonism, as well as its problematic character, is with Socrates. The Socrates who became a cultural hero in the ancient Greco-Roman world is primarily the Socrates depicted in Plato's dialogues. Modern Plato scholars have focused a great deal of attention on the question of the historical accuracy of Plato's depiction, just as NT scholars have focused on the question of the historical accuracy of the depiction of Jesus in the canonical gospels. Presently, there is a fairly broad consensus that the so-called "Socratic dialogues," such as, *Euthyphro*, *Crito*, *Laches*, and *Protagoras*, do accurately depict the philosophical practices of the historic Socrates.

On the other hand, other dialogues that had a major impact on the ancient world's understanding of Socrates, such as *Phaedo*, contain ideas and arguments

that did not have their source in the historic Socrates. This is analogous to the role played by the Gospel of John in forming the Christian tradition, which many modern scholars agree is not an accurate representation of the words of the historical Jesus.

Plato clearly revered the historic Socrates he knew as a young man, and in his dialogues he presents him as the embodiment of a life devoted to philosophical inquiry, even when the presentation is not historically accurate. It is this presentation that created a mythic Socrates who became a different kind of hero in the Greco-Roman world.

The best myths often have their basis in historical facts, and most scholars accept Plato's *Apology,* a work that presents itself as Socrates' defense at his trial for impiety and corrupting the youth of Athens, as a reasonably accurate account of what Socrates said on that occasion. In the *Apology,* Socrates defends himself by defending the life of philosophical inquiry. In this defense Socrates makes some extraordinary claims, such as that the unexamined life is not worth living (38a),[1] and that no harm can come to a good man (41d), and that the pursuit of virtue is more important than the pursuit of wealth and political power (29d–e). He also asserted that his fellow Athenians were ignorant regarding the question of how to live a virtuous life and that he is wiser than they are because he is aware of his own ignorance (23a–b).

There is a curious mix of apparent skepticism and dogmatism in these claims. Socrates often used irony in his interchanges with his interlocutors, and his professions of ignorance, which are frequent in the Socratic dialogues, have to be unpacked. For example, someone in our world might plead ignorance on the question of the nature of dark energy on the grounds that s/he knows nothing about contemporary cosmology, but someone else might profess ignorance because s/he knows a very great deal about this subject and recognizes that, given the current state of their knowledge, physicists do not have a good answer to the question. Thus Socrates' profession of ignorance is quite compatible with some very strong claims, such as that the conceptions of virtue presupposed by his Athenian contemporaries are unreliable as guides to living a good life.

The dogmatic claims, on the other hand, do not appear to be ironic. Socrates' life exhibited his conviction that the unexamined life is not worth living, and his behavior at his trial showed his commitment to the principle of the self-sufficiency of virtue. This is the principle that virtue is sufficient for human happiness or well-being and that so-called "external goods" such as wealth and po-

1. All references to Plato's texts are by Stephanus' page numbers that identify the page and column of a passage in the edition of Plato's works published in 1578 by Henri Estienne. Standard Greek editions of Plato's works, and many good English translations, have the Stephanus numbers in the margins for easy reference.

litical power are not necessary for happiness. What is striking about the *Apology* is the absence of even a hint of a reasoned account justifying these convictions.

Reading Plato

Plato wrote dialogues in which he never appears as a participant. A character, Socrates, does appear in most, though not all, of the dialogues as an active participant. Each of the dialogues has a dramatic setting with a variety of participants, some of whom were real persons, while others were Plato's creations, and still others who may or may not have existed. The character named Socrates regularly, though not invariably, defends the principles enunciated in the *Apology,* though his defenses sometimes lead him into the kind of philosophical speculation that is at odds with the professions of ignorance found in the Socratic dialogues.

It is often assumed that the character Socrates who appears in dialogues, such as *Phaedo* and *Republic,* is Plato's mouthpiece, who expresses Plato's own philosophical doctrines. However, this assumption has been questioned in recent years and should not be accepted uncritically.[2]

Many, if not most, contemporary philosophers interpret Plato in terms of a developmental model. On this model the dialogues can be divided into three groups—early, middle, and late—that represent distinct stages in the development of Plato's philosophical ideas. The early dialogues are the "Socratic dialogues" in which Plato uses Socratic argumentative techniques to deal with the sorts of ethical issues with which the historic Socrates was concerned.

The middle dialogues, such as *Symposium*, *Phaedo*, *Republic*, and *Phaedrus*, contain what are commonly thought of as Plato's doctrines—for example, the theory of recollection, the theory of Forms, the immortality of the soul, and the sharp dichotomies between appearance and reality, and opinion and knowledge. The middle dialogues also contain those memorable myths, images, and metaphors with which Plato has come to be identified, such as the myth of the cave, the image of the sun, and the image of the charioteer driving the black and white horses. Finally, the late dialogues, such as *Theaetetus*, *Sophist*, and *Statesman*, deal with much more complex and technical issues and do not rely on either the imagery or doctrines of the middle dialogues.

The underlying assumption of this developmental model is that Plato was essentially a systematic philosopher who began by addressing those questions in ethics with which the historic Socrates had been concerned, but who came to see that the methods employed by Socrates would not yield satisfactory answers to these questions. This led him to investigate a range of interconnected

2. See, e.g., Press, *Who Speaks for Plato.*

epistemological and metaphysical questions that resulted in the doctrines commonly associated with Plato and Platonism. Finally, on some versions of this model, Plato became dissatisfied with the doctrines of the middle dialogues and turned to a much more abstract and logical investigation of questions in epistemology, ontology, and political philosophy. Whatever the merits of this contemporary developmental model, it is not how Plato's dialogues were read in the Greco-Roman world in which Christianity emerged.[3]

Plato founded the Academy, which was a school and research center that existed continuously under an unbroken line of successors until the mid-first century BCE. Less than a hundred years after Plato's death, the Academy adopted a skeptical interpretation of Platonism that rejected the possibility of either proving or disapproving the truth of philosophical doctrines, including those associated with Plato. On this view, the dialogues provide the logical tools and arguments to undermine philosophical doctrines that go "beyond" what we know from everyday life. Academic skepticism meant suspending judgment about the truth or falsity of philosophical doctrines. It should be distinguished from Pyrrhonian skepticism that denied that we could ever determine the truth of any judgment.[4]

Academic skepticism should also be distinguished from the radical skepticism employed by Descartes, who argued that we should begin the task of developing a system of knowledge by rejecting any claim that is not indubitable. This line of reasoning led Descartes to his famous *cogito ergo sum* ("I think therefore I am"), which became the foundation for his reconstruction of human knowledge.

On the other hand, there was another group of philosophers, the Middle Platonists (c. 68 BCE to Plotinus in the early-third century CE), who rejected the skeptical interpretation of the New Academy and argued that Plato was committed to some robust metaphysical doctrines, including the immortality of the soul and the existence of a transcendent reality. The Middle Platonists were not a school in the sense of having a distinct physical location and a common body of teachings. They were a diverse group of thinkers, including the first-century Jewish philosopher Philo, who were like-minded in their reading of Plato. The doctrinal reading of the Middle Platonists had a substantial influence on Christian thinkers such as Clement of Alexandria, Origin, and Augustine.[5]

The roots of both of these interpretive traditions are to be found in Plato's dialogues. In fact, I think that skepticism and doctrine are intertwined throughout his writings, and I shall try to illustrate this by briefly considering four representative dialogues in the following two sections.

3. Annas, *Platonic Ethics,* 1–7.
4. *OCD* 1362.
5. *OCD* 1193.

Skeptical Platonism

In *Euthyphro*, Socrates encounters the character Euthyphro outside of the court where Socrates is to be tried that day on a charge of impiety and corrupting the youth of Athens. Euthyphro is at the same court because he has charged his own father, who had inadvertently caused the death of a hired workman, with murder. Euthyphro, who claims to be an expert in religious matters, justified his action by appealing to the concept of piety. Socrates is astonished by Euthyphro's claim, because harming one's father was widely regarded as impious, and Socrates asks him to explain what piety consists in so as to help him (Socrates) respond to the charge of impiety leveled against him by his accusers (5a).

What Socrates wants is a reasoned account—a logos—that can serve as a model, or paradigm, by which what is pious, or holy, can be identified and distinguished from what is impious (6d–e). Socrates' request for a paradigm of piety is a response to a situation in which there are deep disagreements on a practical level about what constitutes virtues, such as piety, and no consensus on how to resolve those disagreements.

Socrates explicitly contrasts this situation to practical disagreements about the quantifiable properties of things that can be peacefully resolved by counting, measuring, and weighing. He suggests that finding a paradigm for piety will enable people to resolve disagreements about piety with similar results (7b). How this might actually work in practice is never explicitly spelled out in the *Euthyphro*, but Socrates' view seems to be that it is necessary to first reach agreement on how to agree in disputed cases before attempting to settle those cases.

Socrates' working assumption is that the concepts he investigates are governed by logical norms that can be explicated through a process of dialectical reasoning. In his view, there is such a thing as getting it right when it comes to concepts such as piety, courage, or justice. Thus, if a proposed account entails contradictory conclusions, it must be wrong.

For example, Euthyphro claims that piety is what the gods love and impiety is what they hate. Socrates points out, however, that according to the poets, who are Euthyphro's authorities, the gods differ among themselves about what they love and hate. Consequently, on this account one and the same thing will be both pious and impious at the same time.

Euthyphro acknowledges the logic of Socrates' point, and modifies his initial proposal, affirming that ". . . the pious is what all the gods love, and the opposite, what all the gods hate, is the impious" (9e1). Socrates responds to this new logos with another question, "Is the pious loved by the gods because it is pious, or is it pious because it is loved by the gods?" The first alternative presupposes that there is a standard of piety that is logically prior to and independent of

what the gods may or may not love; whereas the second takes the gods' attitudes, as characterized by the poets, as the standard of piety.

The ancient Greeks regarded such things as murder or harming one's parents or violating the norms of hospitality as acts that transgressed fundamental moral boundaries; and the gods are depicted in Homer and Hesiod, as well as Greek tragedy, as punishing such acts. The poets, however, do not depict the gods as having created these norms. They are a given within the moral universe of the ancient Greeks. Hence, it should not be surprising that Euthyphro, who claims to believe all the stories about the gods, accepts the idea that the gods love what is pious because it is pious. But this leaves Euthyphro in a quandary, because he has no way of making sense of the concept of piety apart from the likes and dislikes of the gods as described by the poets.

The same conundrum confronts contemporary Christians who affirm the existence of moral absolutes. When the authority of these absolutes is attributed to God, the question arises, "Are such acts as murder, abortion, and incest inherently wrong, or could God have willed that they are sometimes permissible or even positively good things to do?" The first alternative presupposes a transcendent standard that constrains even God; whereas the second makes "moral absolutes" contingent on the unconstrained will of God.

The *Euthyphro* ends in *aporia*, a logical impasse, and the question "What is piety?" is left unanswered, as Euthyphro leaves to go into court to prosecute his father for murder, even though he has no stable reflective understanding of piety. Though this dialogue has been classified as "aporetic," it embodies a strong critique of any attempt to justify moral norms on the basis of supposedly authoritative texts. Socrates' point is not that all such texts are false or immoral, but that they have to be rationally assessed before being accepted as authoritative.

The impasse confronting Socrates and Euthyphro, as well as the readers of the dialogue, leaves us with two alternatives. On the one hand, we might conclude that there is no standard or model for the concept of piety; it is just a word with an unstable sense, meaning different things to different people in different situations at different times. Hence, it has no logic. On the other hand, if we do accept the intuition that piety has a determinate sense, and hence a logic, then we have to conclude that Euthyphro and most of his contemporaries were seriously confused about what it meant to be pious.

The fixed fulcrum on which this dialogue turns is Socrates' commitment to the idea of a reasoned account of piety. Socrates' rationale for this commitment is quite straightforward. If someone is charged with impiety in court and one of the possible penalties is death, then there had better be clear standards of what constitutes impiety. Furthermore, these standards cannot simply be public opinion, because such opinion may or may not be just. Otherwise, the court's decision of guilt will be a paradigm of injustice.

There is a larger issue here, however, which has to do with the question of the intellectual and moral authority of a second-order rational understanding of our first-order ethical beliefs and practices. This is a very difficult and highly contested question in our world that I cannot address here, except to point out that the second-order practice of rationally reflecting on our ethical practices is itself well embedded in those practices. That is, a part of acquiring ethical concepts and learning how to apply them is learning how to rationally criticize the application of those concepts. For this we have Socrates to thank or curse.

The *Meno* is also an aporetic dialogue, but the *aporia* here arises from perplexity about the very nature of Socratic philosophical inquiry. The dialogue begins with Meno asking Socrates whether virtue can be taught, and Socrates characteristically responding by saying that this question cannot be answered until they know what constitutes virtue. Meno, another self-described expert, is confident that he knows what virtue is, and after some complex preliminaries he says that "virtue is to desire beautiful (noble) things and have the power to acquire them" (77b). It becomes clear in the subsequent discussion that what Meno has in mind is the acquisition of wealth and political power (78c). Socrates points out that there is a difference between acquiring these goods virtuously or viciously, and he is able to reduce Meno to incoherence. At this point, Meno introduces what is now called "the paradox of inquiry":

> A man cannot search either for what he knows or for what he does not know. He cannot search for what he knows—since he knows it, there is no need to search—nor for what he does not know, for he does not know what to look for. (80e)

Socrates responds to this paradox by telling a story that he has heard from "wise men and women talking about divine matters." The story is that the soul is immortal and over time has learned everything about virtue and other things that under the appropriate conditions it can recall (81c–d).

The theory of learning as recollection is not, as presented by Socrates, a reasoned account. Its function in this context is to persuade Meno not to abandon the attempt to answer the question at hand—"What is virtue?" Socrates attempts to illustrate that learning is recollection by asking Meno's slave boy, who claims not to know geometry, how to determine the length of a side of a square whose area is exactly twice that of a given square figure. Initially the slave boy says that doubling the length of one side of a given square will yield a new square figure whose area is twice that of the original square. Socrates then demonstrates to the boy that the area of the new square will be four times that of the original square, at which point the boy is stumped.

Next, through drawing figures in the sand and asking questions, Socrates gets the boy to grasp that the correct answer is that the length of the sides of the new square is equal to the square root of the hypotenuse of a right triangle

constructed from the two equal sides of the original square figure. If, for example, the sides of the original square are each one foot long, then the length of the hypotenuse will be the square root of two, which will be the length of the sides of the new square (82b–85b).

Socrates' interchange with the slave boy makes two important points. On the one hand, in mathematics many of our pre-reflective intuitions turn out on critical examination to be mistaken. On the other hand, we all possess a considerable amount of latent or tacit knowledge that can be made explicit through a dialectical process that will enable us to correct those mistakes if someone is able to ask the right questions. Socrates also wants to apply these two points to questions about the nature of virtue—many of our pre-reflective intuitions are mistaken, but we can overcome these mistakes by engaging in the right kind of reasoning process.

After the slave boy episode, Meno and Socrates return to their attempt to find a successful reasoned account of the concept of virtue, and agree that "virtue as a whole, or in part, is wisdom" (89a). But Socrates immediately expresses doubts about this conclusion, because there do not appear to be any teachers of virtue.

Good men, such as Themistocles, often have bad sons, which leads Socrates and Meno to conclude that virtue cannot be taught (96c). This conclusion raises the question of how men like Themistocles acquired their virtue. Socrates ends the dialogue by saying that "virtue appears to be present in those of us who may possess it as a gift from the god" (100b). This tentative conclusion raises the question of the point of Socrates' practice of engaging others in conversations. The historical Socrates can be credited with having created the practice of examining pre-reflective ethical intuitions in order to reveal and eliminate contradictions, confusions, ambiguities, and false beliefs. But he did not uncover a logically coherent, rationally defensible body of ethical beliefs inherent in the ethical practices of his fellow Athenians. This result led him and Plato to conclude that the everyday ethical beliefs of their contemporaries could not, on their own, be the basis of a good life.

Doctrinal Platonism

How, or if, one can achieve a rationally justified, self-reflective ethical way of life is a very contentious question. But this is what the philosophical schools and movements in the ancient Greco-Roman world attempted to do. And with the exception of the skeptics—Academic and Pyrrhonian—there was a broad consensus that this required a synoptic account of the cosmos, as well as of human nature and its place within the cosmos. The doctrines associated with Plato are in the service of providing such a synoptic account.

The Greek Stoics argued that philosophy was divided into three parts—logic, physics, and ethics. They attributed this division to Plato, and the

Middle Platonists, as well as Augustine, accepted it.[6] The Stoics and the Middle Platonists regarded each of these three areas of inquiry as distinct but interconnected. That is, one could investigate what constitutes a good life on its own terms because neither the study of logic or physics determines some single way of life as best. Similarly, the basic principles of logic or physics could be grasped independently of one another. However, both logic and physics did place broad constraints on what would count as good reasons for adopting a particular way of life. Finally, a proper understanding of physics would make manifest the nature of the relationship between human beings and the cosmos.

Hence, one could start with logic and work to physics and ethics, which was common for the Greek Stoics. But it was not necessary to do so, since beginning with ethical questions would inevitably lead one to deal with logical issues and the study of nature. This way of thinking about philosophy helps make sense of a dialogue like the *Republic,* where Plato seems to throw in everything but the kitchen sink in what begins, ostensibly, as a discussion of justice.

The doctrinal reading of Plato is based primarily on dialogues, such as, *Symposium*, *Phaedo*, *Republic*, *Phaedrus*, and *Timaeus.* I shall focus on the *Republic* and the *Phaedo*, where what is referred to as the "Theory of Forms" and the doctrine of the immortality of the soul play a prominent role. The character Socrates says a number of different things about the Forms in these two dialogues, but he does not speak of a "Theory of Forms"; that is a label applied by later commentators. This is not simply a verbal quibble, because it is far from clear that Plato actually had a theory about the Forms.

There is no consensus among philosophers as to how to interpret the many different things said by the character Socrates about the Forms so as to yield a single coherent theory. Furthermore, there is a dialogue, *Parmenides,* where a young Socrates engages an old Parmenides and his student Zeno in a discussion of the idea of Forms that contains devastating criticisms of this idea. Socrates in this dialogue is unable to respond to these criticisms, and a number of philosophers have concluded that Plato had abandoned the idea as a result of these criticisms. Finally, there have been many philosophers, beginning with Aristotle, who do not think that the accounts of the Forms in these dialogues make sense. I am inclined to agree with Aristotle on this question, but I also think that Plato invoked the Forms as a way of articulating some philosophical intuitions that do make sense.

As we have seen, Socrates in *Euthyphro* sought without success to find a paradigm of piety that would enable him and others to distinguish pious from impious actions and persons. This can be read as an attempt on Socrates' part to reach a reasoned consensus with Euthyphro, and other possible interlocutors, about the shared public meaning of the term "piety" in their society. But I think

6. Annas, *Platonic Ethics*, 109–10.

it is clear that Socrates, as depicted by Plato, was seeking a transcendental standard of piety that applies across the board, as opposed to a standard of piety that would represent a consensus of opinion among fifth-century Athenians, or those Athenians with whom he might chance to discuss the question.

The term "transcendental" is used in a number of different ways. What I have in mind is illustrated by the geometric proof in *Meno.* This proof is universally valid, not as a matter of fact, but as a matter of logic, regardless of whether it is recognized as such by any particular linguistic community. Similarly, modern scientists seek to find invariant mathematical relationships that hold across space and time in all frames of reference. The term "transcendental" applies because these invariant relationships are taken to be manifestations of the inherent structure of the universe. The belief that there are transcendental truths in this sense is commonly referred to as "realism" in academic philosophy.

Plato was a realist with regard to logical, mathematical, and evaluative truths. That is, he believed that there are universal standards or norms for these sorts of truths. His "Theory of Forms," in its various manifestations, is an attempt to articulate and elucidate his realist intuitions about logic, mathematics, and value. On the other hand, Plato also believed that what we refer to as empirical truths are hopelessly confused because the phenomena themselves do not have a fixed determinate nature, but can be legitimately described in more than one way (479a). For example, someone who is tall by everyday standards might well be too short to be a center for an NBA team. Empirical observations are inherently dependent for their meaning on their empirical context, which itself is inconstant. Plato is not a realist regarding empirical claims and, hence, he rejects the idea of empirical knowledge. Sense perception yields opinion, which in his view is an unstable halfway house between ignorance and knowledge.

In the *Republic*, Plato draws a distinction between the visible and the intelligible as an ontological distinction between two different realms of existence (509d). Consequently, the fixed transcendental standards for logical, mathematical, and evaluative truths belong to a different realm, or world, than the empirical phenomena of everyday life. Nonetheless, Socrates speaks of the transcendental standards as somehow present in a confused and ambiguous state in these phenomena. For example, when we correctly judge that someone is beautiful or ugly, it is because s/he participates in or partakes of the Form of Beauty or Ugliness—or both at once. Unfortunately, there is no explanation of what participating in or partaking of actually means. Nor, in general, is it clear how an unchanging reality can be manifested in something that both is and is not at the same time. This same problem haunted Christian Platonism, where the nature of the relationship between a transcendent God and God's creation is ultimately a mystery.

The problems with the "Theory of Forms" come to a head in Socrates' account of the Form of the Good in the *Republic.* In that dialogue, Socrates de-

scribes the Good as "the unhypothetical first principle of everything" (511b). That is, the Good is the unconditioned self-authenticating condition of all the intelligible Forms. Socrates declines to even attempt to offer a reasoned account of the Form of the Good (506d). Instead, he compares the Good with the sun. The sun provides the light by means of which we can see that which is visible and is also the ultimate cause of the growth of plants and animals on earth. Similarly, the Good is that which enables us to understand the other Forms and intelligible mathematical entities, while at the same time being their origin.

The image of the sun is one of those cases where Plato's poetic gifts swamp his critical philosophical acumen. It suggests that the Good is a kind of existing thing, alongside of other existing things, which at the same time is not really a particular existing thing at all. Once again I think Plato introduces an idea in the attempt to articulate an important philosophical intuition.

Plato, like many other ancient Greek philosophers, believed that the cosmos is a rationally intelligible totality that includes everything that exists, including human beings. This belief implies the possibility of what in contemporary science is referred to as a "theory of everything" or a "final theory." Such a theory would have to satisfy what Leibniz called the principle of sufficient reason in which nothing exists simply as a brute, unexplained fact. Everything in the totality that is the cosmos would have an explanation. Plato's conception of the Form of Good as the unconditioned condition of everything is his version of Liebniz's principle of sufficient reason. The idea of the Good, like the idea of Forms in general, is a placeholder for a detailed rational account of logic, physics, and ethics that would elucidate these areas of inquiry and their interrelationship.

Plato never gives us such an account. What he does provide are bits and pieces of the picture in his investigations of specific philosophical issues that arise in particular contexts. Unfortunately, these bits and pieces do not fit together to form a seamless whole, which does raise the question of the viability of a holistic understanding of the cosmos.

I want to briefly turn to another important Platonic doctrine—the immortality of the soul—that played an important role in Christian Platonism. The dramatic setting of the *Phaedo* is the day of Socrates' death, and he and his friends engage in a discussion of the question of whether the soul is immortal. This is a long and complex dialogue that considers a number of different conceptions of the soul, as well as the meta-philosophical issue of what sorts of arguments are appropriate to answering this question.

In response to the latter, Socrates rejects the various theories of causality proposed by his predecessors and contemporaries, such as Anaxagoras, in favor of what he calls the safe form of explanation associated with the idea of the Forms. According to the safe answer, something is beautiful, for example, because of the presence of the Form of Beauty in it, or alternately, because it

shares in Beauty (97b–100e). This sounds like a tautology—a person is beautiful because s/he shares in beauty—but it introduces a robust bit of metaphysics. Similarly, when a human being is alive, s/he partakes of the Form of life, which is what gives them life. Socrates then identifies the Form of Life with the soul and identifies the human soul with the true self—that is, with that within us that is virtuous or vicious, rational or irrational. Forms in and of themselves are eternal and unchanging. Therefore, the Form of Life, the human soul, the true self, is immortal (105c–107a).

Simmias, one of the interlocutors, has reservations about the conclusion of this argument "in view of the importance of our subject and my low opinion of human weakness." And Socrates responds, "You are not only right to say this . . . but our first hypotheses require clearer examination, even though we find them convincing" (107a–b).

Socrates' response can be read as an expression of what has been called "fallibilism"—the view that our convictions are fallible, and may have to be modified, or given up entirely in the light of future evidence or analysis. Fallibilism is not the same as Academic Skepticism, because it does endorse accepting theoretical conclusions, whereas the latter recommends suspending judgment regarding philosophical doctrines. Nonetheless, adopting a fallibilistic reading of Plato's doctrines does narrow the apparent gap between the skeptical and the doctrinal interpretations of Plato's texts. As Julia Annas has concluded:

> Skeptical Academics have to regard doctrinal Platonists as underestimating the problems that have to be overcome before we can finally commit ourselves to the truth of Platonic doctrines. Doctrinal Platonists have to think that the skeptical Academics overestimate these dangers. But each side can in principle respect what the other is doing.[7]

Christian Platonism

The movement that was to become Christianity faced two issues having to do with self-identity: on the one hand, the followers of Jesus had to define themselves in terms of their relationship to both Second Temple Judaism and the Judaism that was emerging after the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE; on the other hand, the members of the Jesus movement also had to define themselves politically, culturally, and intellectually in terms of their relationship to the Greco-Roman world. While I shall focus primarily on the conceptual aspects of this task, it must be kept in mind that these aspects were an integral part of a larger quite complex context.

The concept of God, or the divine, figured prominently in the cosmologies of the Middle Platonists, the Stoics, and the Aristotelians. Their concern was not with the question of whether the divine existed, but with its role in a rationally

7. Annas, *Platonic Ethics*, 23.

intelligible cosmos. In turning the concept of the divine into a rational cosmological principle, these philosophers rejected the ordinary, everyday religious beliefs and associated practices of the Greco-Roman world. In this respect they cleared the ground for a more philosophically oriented form of religion, which, I would suggest, was one of the reasons that early Christian thinkers were willing to utilize the conceptual resources of Greek philosophy. Early Christian thinkers were eclectic, appropriating Stoic, Aristotelian, and Platonic ideas, but it was the latter that was most influential in the first few centuries.

Belief in the immortality of the soul, where the soul is understood in Plato's sense as the true self, was widespread in the Greco-Roman world in which Christianity developed. Care of the soul, understood in these terms, is far more important than wealth or political power that serves only the needs and desires of the body. This Platonic conception of an immaterial soul provided a way to conceptualize the Jewish idea that human beings have been created in the image of God; it also provided the basis for a philosophical explanation of how human beings can have a relationship with an immaterial transcendent God. That is, if God is transcendent, then we as human beings can only have a relationship with God if we in some sense can transcend our all too human nature.

The belief that the soul is the true self that survives the death of the body is also a way of dealing with the obvious fact that we do not live in a just world where the righteous flourish and the wicked are punished for their misdeeds. This belief does have an effect on the lives of those who accept it in that it provides a reason for taking moral considerations into account even when that involves sacrificing one's own needs and interests, or one's life. In addition, it is also a way of making philosophical sense of Jesus' emphasis on the heart, as opposed to purely external standards of behavior.

Plato's conception of an immortal soul is systematically interconnected with his conceptions of the Form of the Good in the *Republic* in that the soul is one of those parts of the cosmos that are subsumed under the Good. It was very natural for Christian thinkers to synthesize this philosophical conception of the Good with the God of Abraham. For example, Platonic Forms, which function as the norms of knowledge and conduct, became ideas in the mind of God, through which God informs the material world so as to make it intelligible and provides us with the norms by which we are to live. Plato's dichotomy between the intelligible and the visible realms in the *Republic* became a way to explicate, on the one hand, the distinction between a transcendent God and his creation and, on the other hand, how the latter is a manifestation of the former. Furthermore, the myth of the cave where the prisoner journeys upward out of the shadows into the sunlight was interpreted in religious terms as the journey of the soul seeking to achieve union with God. In this view, the journey upward is a spiritual journey in which the soul is transformed.

Despite the attractiveness and plausibility of trying to meld Platonic philosophy with Christian belief and practice, I think the product was intellectually

unstable from the outset. Doctrines drawn from dialogues such as *Phaedo* and *Republic* were turned into dogmas by Christian thinkers with apparently no awareness that these doctrines might have to be modified or abandoned in the light of new evidence and arguments. Plato never provides anything like an argument for the idea of the Forms in his dialogues. Instead, this idea, like the idea that learning is recollection, is introduced at various points in different dialogues to serve various purposes.

Many have read Plato as a stark dogmatist regarding the Forms and other related doctrines, such as the immortality of the soul. I have suggested a more charitable reading for two reasons. On the one hand, the idea of Forms is empty of content. To believe that there are transcendental principles of justice, for example, does not tell us what those principles are or how to recognize them when we come across them. If we look at the positive account of justice as developed by the character Socrates in Books 2–4 of the *Republic,* the Forms do not make an appearance. Instead, Socrates bases his account on some observations about human nature and society and some thought experiments. This account stands or falls on its merits, like those provided by Aristotle, the Stoics, Hobbes, Locke, Marx, and John Rawls.

On the other hand, given Plato's own practices as a philosopher, he either is or ought to be a fallibilist regarding philosophical doctrines. His dialogues all begin in particular contexts with different people of varying philosophical abilities and perspectives. Many of the dialogues just break off without a final conclusion (*Euthyphro*); others do reach a conclusion that is not all that conclusive (*Phaedo*). In none of the dialogues does the character Socrates assume a "god's eye" perspective on the issues being discussed, as does Aristotle in his treatises. In all of the dialogues the readers or listeners are silent participants who are invited to continue the discussion after the written dialogue ends. If there is any criticism to be made of Plato, it is that the discussions never end. There is no last word. From a Platonic perspective the problem with Christianity is that there have been far too many "last words." When one dogma is rejected—papal infallibility—it is replaced by another dogma—the inerrancy of the Bible, a "paper pope."

Academic skepticism was also a product of Plato's own philosophical practices. Once the second-order practice of examining the rational basis of first-order beliefs and practices has been established, skepticism about the legitimacy of the latter is a permanent possibility. And there may be no viable theoretical alternative. For example, I think the attempt to meld the God of Abraham, as depicted in the Bible, with Platonic philosophical doctrines was a theoretical non-starter from the outset. Plato's conception of the Good and the Hebraic conception of God were fished from very different streams, such that Christian Platonism was always a strange unstable mix of logos and mythos. Plato's own writings are a mix of logos and mythos, but the latter is always in the service of the former, as he emphasizes in Book 10 of the *Republic.*

It does not follow, however, that what was needed is some other body of philosophical doctrines. For an Academic Skeptic the most rational policy is to resist the urge to explicate and justify first-order Christian beliefs and practices by means of philosophical theories. In the last analysis, Christian belief and practice has to stand or fall on its own merits, as does scientific or ethical belief and practice.

Concluding Remarks

At the outset of this paper I raised the question of why Plato's thought is largely ignored by those in contemporary philosophy who are attempting to make a case for religion or spirituality in our world. I think there are at least two reasons for this.

On the one hand, a form of dogmatic doctrinal Christian Platonism continued to be influential into the twentieth century in universities and colleges in the English-speaking world. This is the Platonism of Benjamin Jowett, whose translations and Christian interpretation of Plato's dialogues were the standard texts in courses on Plato. This is also the Platonism attacked by Nietzsche and Heidegger and those they have influenced in the contemporary world. And it has only been in the past few decades that the readings of Plato that I have discussed have taken hold, primarily among Plato scholars.

On the other hand, a form of philosophical idealism has dominated a great deal of contemporary thought in both the Continental and the Analytic traditions. Thomas Nagel has described this as the view that "the first person, singular or plural, is hiding at the bottom of everything we say or think."[8] What Nagel has in mind is the idea that language and thought are socially constructed, and these are to be understood in terms of what *we* say, where "we" refers to some linguistic community. A variant of this view is that the common element is a shared "form of life," or "vocabulary," or "worldview." There is, in this view, no common meaning or truth outside of some linguistic framework that at bottom rests on a shared body of social practices and attitudes. Those for whom what *we* say is the last word frequently say things like, "there is no way to step outside of our thoughts" or "truth is always relative to one's linguistic framework."

If we identify idealism with Kant and Hegel, then what Nagel and I are referring to is a form of naturalized "linguistic idealism." Don Cupitt, for example, has defended this form of idealism, and it is also present in the work of the very influential American philosopher Richard Rorty. In Rorty's view, Plato is confused or wrong-headed in that, while Plato thinks he is in pursuit of transcendental truth existing "out there," he is in fact succeeding, when he

8. Nagel, *Last Word*, 3.

does succeed, in creating a new vocabulary within an already existing linguistic community. For Rorty, there is no "out there" to which our assertions do or do not correspond. There is and can only be the linguistic community of which one is a member.[9] The views of Rorty have had a great deal of influence in the humanities, but have been largely rejected, or simply ignored, in the sciences. This is yet another example of the conflict between the "two cultures" first described many years ago by C. P. Snow. My money is on the science side of this conflict.

The natural sciences are now our primary authorities for understanding nature, including human nature. In particular, the Neo-Darwinian Theory of Evolution in conjunction with the results of Cognitive Science over the past few decades has in effect turned our understanding of human nature upside down. Despite rumors to the contrary, there is such a thing as human nature and it is a product of our evolutionary history. Not only do genes, operating in conjunction with our environments, determine the physical properties of individual human beings, there is evidence that some of our most basic ideas about space, time, and causality are "hard-wired" into our brains as a result of the process of evolution.

Furthermore, genes, which are embedded in DNA and RNA molecules, function in accordance with the laws of chemistry, which themselves are explicable in terms of the laws of physics. Hence, a large number of scientists and philosophers are convinced of the truth of a bottom up form of materialism, where the concept of matter is understood to refer to the fundamental sub-atomic constituents of the universe. In our present situation, any positive account of religion or spirituality is going to have to go through the sciences.

Of course, Plato would reject contemporary materialism. But many would say that his thought is simply irrelevant to our emerging scientific world. I believe that this is not the case. Rebecca Goldstein has argued in her delightful and insightful *Plato at the Googleplex,* that Plato would have been very much at home in contemporary mathematical physics and Cognitive Science, where he would have had some very pointed and relevant questions about the role of mind in nature.

9. Rorty was a swashbuckler who avoided academic jargon and did not mince words. A good account of his criticisms of Plato can be found in the first chapter of *Contingency* (1989).

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