100 DAYS OF PLATO

BROGAN BUNT

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Day 0
0.1

If I'd only known that it was possible to read the whole of Plato so quickly...

Consulting the *How Long to Read* website, I discover that it takes just three hours and six minutes to read a recent version of Plato's complete works.[1,2] This assumes a reading speed of three hundred words per minute for a total of 55,870 words altogether. The difficulty, of course, is that the book is actually closer to 850,000 words. It is 1,745 pages long with approximately five hundred words on each page. So the actual reading time, at just a bit under the very brisk pace specified, is much closer to fifty hours. Honestly, I don't think I can manage better than fifteen to twenty pages a day - certainly if I wish to roughly digest what I have read. On this basis, I expect it will take me at least a hundred days to read the entire corpus of Plato's

1. *How Long to Read*: **https://howlongtoread.com/**
2. *Plato: Complete Works*, 1997, ed.John Cooper, Hackett Publishing

works, which is what I hope to accomplish over the following year or so.

0.2

Of course, I recognise that I cannot simply consume Plato as though I were clocking up kilometres in a car. It is not as though any methodical strategy can guarantee a worthwhile engagement with his work. Yet better to make some kind of effort than none at all.

0.3

My plan is to keep a journal along the way, summarising and reflecting on what I have read. I will adhere roughly to the hundred days schedule but things to spread out as necessary. Hence any specific 'day' will probably extend across several or more days and involve a mixture of reading, note-taking, reflection and writing.

0.4

I have decided to document my journey on *Instagram*. I adopt this approach with a clear sense of its perversity. *Instagram* is geared towards instantly appealing stuff - vivid and intense scenes and stories. Much more relevant if I were to make a long walk across a remarkable landscape, record my hip flexibility improvements or document a series of increasingly dangerous leaps from steep cliffs into deep lagoons. But, then again, why not attempt something different? Why not read Plato? This is hardly likely to produce anything visually engaging. My posts will be mainly composed of just text - but, who knows, perhaps I will include some images? Perhaps some diagrams? Perhaps even a photograph or video? But please don't hold out any great hope for ordinarily compelling content. I issue a very clear warning: if the thought of a long series of potentially opaque, text-filled posts seems tedious, then please do the obvious thing - look away, scroll onwards, don't follow.

0.5

First impressions. Anticipation. The paper is thin. It is like reading the *Bible*. I have cut a ribbon as a bookmark. Wish me well - although I am quite prepared to travel alone.

0.6

At some point, I should explain my particular interest in reading Plato, but maybe not just yet.

This is a work of following. I am not attempting to write anything original - to forge any new paths for thought. Rather it occurs to me that it may be better just at this moment - just when we have little idea how to proceed, and even whether proceeding is tenable or worthwhile - to pause, like a person lost in the forest, or lost in the absence of anything credibly resembling a forest, to seek our bearings. While we possess nothing like a compass, we can at least, in the dim twilight of our destitute condition, look to the side of the track for signs of other ways, however apparently faint, anachronistic or compromised.

Very briefly, Plato offers this for me. While it is easy to criticise his idealism and inegalitarian politics, there is also value in attending to a philosophy that is deeply reflective, poly-vocal and ironic. The possibility of Platonic discourse may depend upon slavery, but that is not to say that it cannot also be mobilised towards the interests of emancipation. Particularly, it is in the knotty conundrums of his thought - his commitment to a notion of justice, for instance, that we can scarcely recognise, which appears at once holistic and inclusive as well as socially differentiated and exclusive - that we can begin to make sense of and rethink some of our strands of confusion.

In short, the point for me is less to critically expose and exorcise Plato than to push him further, which involves delving into his work to consider aspects of continuing value and possibility. The Platonic (and Socratic) questioning (and suspension) of ordinary modes of thought and action, however much this encodes plainly inequitable social relations, provides an avenue for reconsidering what thought and action involves in ways that are not only liberating but wisely attuned to the limits of human endeavour.

This section is written later and falls outside the set of numbered days. I must acknowledge that I failed to read Plato's works in a single push. The hundred days quickly became a malleable quantity, posting to *Instagram* an awkward (and invisible) chore and my exhaustive approach to reading seemed neither feasible nor worthwhile. I made it just over a third of the way through the corpus before giving up, reading sixteen dialogues altogether. A decent sample, even if many significant works such as *Protagoras* and *Republic* are not included. I restrict my focus here to only those dialogues that I encountered during my aborted effort to negotiate Plato in full. This will also include some digressions, particularly to consider the philosophy of Parmenides, which crucially influenced Plato.

Summary of the Dialogues

Here is a brief summary of each of the sixteen dialogues covered in this book:

Plato: Complete Works begins with four dialogues that deal with the trial and death of Socrates. They provide an accessible introduction to the figure of Socrates and to Plato's philosophy generally. It is worth noting that the book is not organised chronologically (the precise order in which Plato's dialogues were written is a continuing issue of debate).

Euthyphro

Socrates is charged with both impiety and corrupting the Athenian youth. Socrates and Euthyphro meet outside the Athenian courts. They search for an integral definition of piety but are unable to find one.

Apology

Socrates speaks to the jury of Athenian citizens. He defends his controversial practice of interrogating customary ideas . He explains also his distance from ordinary practical and political life. This dialogue provides a concise summary of Socrates' overall philosophical approach.

Crito

Crito encourages Socrates to escape from jail but Socrates refuses

to do so. Socrates argues he is a product of Athenian society and has been given appropriate scope to defend his practices. He must now adhere to to the city's laws and accept the sentence of death.

Phaedo

On the day of his execution, Socrates engages in a final dialogue. He contrasts the ephemeral and passionate features of life to the higher reality of immaterial and immutable truth. More particularly, Socrates defends a notion of the immortal soul.

These introductory dialogues are followed by a series of more philosophically challenging ones. The first two consider language and knowledge respectively.

Cratylus

A meditation on the natural and conventional character of language. Socrates argues that 'names', however analogically linked to particular things and circumstances, also necessarily incorporate a conventional aspect. On this basis, and because the names may have initially been mistakenly assigned to things, there is always the need to return to, and critically interrogate, underlying concepts.

Theaetetus

What is knowledge and knowing? Socrates plays the role of intellectual midwife to the young Theaetetus who proposes a number of unsatisfactory answers. Initially, Theaetetus suggests that knowledge is perception and later that it is a mode of judgement that includes a rational account. Socrates identifies the shortcomings of both of these conceptions. The dialogue ends in aporia.

The next two dialogues seek to clarify the expertise of sophistry and statesmanship (as professions roughly akin to philosophy but also different to it). Beyond this, the dialogues also set out to model features of well conducted philosophical enquiry.

Sophist

The dialogue is led by the Visitor from Elea, who employs a

method of division to clarify the nature of sophistry. It quickly becomes evident that sophistry is difficult to pin down. It is a shape-shifter. It seems to involve falsehood - but how can falsehood be credibly conceived? If falsehood manifests a form of non-being and if non-being itself cannot possibly be (exist) then how is falsehood (and the specific falsehood of sophistry) possible? In order to describe sophistry, the Visitor recognises the need to confront and refute this logical dilemma. This involves critiquing the philosophy of Parmenides. Aiming to resolve the gulf between the latter's metaphysical monism and pre-Socratic notions of essential flux, the Visitor proposes a dialectical conception of being that is not categorically opposed to non-being but rather includes it within the complex, differential identity of things. This leads to a consideration of the difficult existential status of the copy (imitation), denoting the species of things that falsely or truly summon the thinking of other things. Copies are disturbingly prevalent. They include not only all manner of natural phenomena - light flickering on waves, for instance, signifying the presence of the sun, moon or a lit torch - but also the field of language, which is the sophist's proper habitat and hunting ground. The Visitor concludes that the sophist is 'the contrary-speech-producing, insincere sort of the appearance-making, kind of copy-making' (268c).

Statesman

At once an examination of the expertise of statesmanship (as a weaving together of souls to form an overall community) and a discussion and demonstration of key methods of philosophical analysis (division, story-telling, and reference to pertinent models). The process of division indicates that statesmanship involves taking care of human animals. The 'great story' of the spinning forward and backward cosmos indicates that statesmanship has a human-political character rather than involving divine oversight. The model of weaving provides a means of conceiving the political skill necessary to combine diverse (moderate and courageous) human dispositions into an effective social whole. It become evident that statesmanship demands relevant knowledge and expertise, with written laws

offering only a pale substitute for properly knowledgeable and expert ('kingly') political authority.

The next two dialogues address fundamental metaphysical questions. Parmenides is a famously difficult dialogue that frames an imaginary encounter between Socrates and the Pre-Socratic philosopher Parmenides. Philebus includes an ambitious attempt to reconcile diverging features of Pre-Socratic thought into a more encompassing metaphysics.

Parmenides

A young Socrates is unable to defend his theory of forms in the face of criticism from the philosopher Parmenides. Parmenides highlights various ambiguities and impasses in Socrates effort to delineate a super-sensible reality of 'things grasped by reasoning' (130). It is not that Parmenides opposes Socrates's view, but rather that he recognises that the notion of form requires more careful thought and elucidation. On this basis, he sets out to demonstrate features of a more coherent metaphysics by reviewing an exhaustive set of hypotheses concerning the nature of being.

Philebus

Initially, *Philebus* seems simply about distinguishing between the relative value of pleasure and thought, but this debate swiftly discovers wider implications, demanding yet another effort to describe an overall metaphysics of being. Pleasure is associated with the flux of the infinite, while thought links to the limit (and cause) that enables anything to become coherently manifest. As representatives of aspects of infinite and finite, Socrates argues that pleasure and thought are best integrally combined rather than entirely opposed. However, if a determination of which is more valuable must be made, then thought is plainly superior. The only beneficial pleasure is purified of sensible-affective chaos to reveal, in its concern with calmly regulated form, a tendency towards our better, rational nature.

A change in tack. Two dialogues that consider love and its philosophical implications.

Symposium

An animated drinking party in which various speeches are offered in praise of 'Love'. Socrates speaks last - but not quite last, as his former lover Alcibiades, who arrives late (and drunk), is permitted special scope to speak. After a range of speeches that emphasise customary views of love, Socrates describes it as a sphere of mediation between the mortal and the divine. Love is directed towards the Good and involves features of preservation and renewal. It is embroiled in living transformation but focused upon immortality. Love leads us beyond ordinary mortal experience to the realm of the soul and towards contemplation of the beautiful itself. After the tumult of his arrival, Alcibiades speaks in praise of Socrates, describing his double character. He is at once an impudent 'snake' possessing souls (218) and 'bright, beautiful' and 'godlike' (217). In this respect Socrates exemplifies the two sides of philosophy - both its capacity for intoxication and its 'sober and temperate' interior (216d).

Phaedrus

Resting beneath a tree while on a rural walk, Phaedrus reads a speech by Lysias to Socrates. It makes the cynical case that boys should allow themselves to be seduced by suitors that do **not** love them, since love is associated with a lack of control and a lack of care for the mutual welfare of both parties. Socrates criticises the speech for failing to distinguish between a selfish kind of love that is entirely pleasure focused and a superior love that is rational and divinely inspired. The former is certainly to be condemned, but not the latter, which is vital towards realising the higher potential of the human soul. The discussion then changes tack, turning away from the issue of love to evaluate the propriety of various forms of communication. More particularly it considers the relative merits of speech and writing. Dialogic speech is positioned as the proper medium for communicating truth between souls. In contrast, writing is regarded as an inferior and potentially dangerous proxy that is

justified only as an amusing pastime or as an imperfect reminder of actual speech.

A series of four dialogues that are most likely not written by Plato himself but that usefully address issues related to the nature and scope for beneficial political wisdom.

Alcibiades

Socrates deflates the pompous self-belief of Alcibiades. He demonstrates that the latter's sense of political acumen (his capacity to advise the Athenians on matters of war and peace) has no sound basis. How can he know about justice if he has never learnt it? How can he expect his natural talents to compensate for his lack of knowledge when he faces such formidable and well trained foes as the Spartans and Persians? But what does Alcibiades need to learn precisely? It is clarified that political knowledge (expertise) has a primary basis in 'knowing thyself' - in a self-cultivation that involves seeing into one's own soul to recognise the proper nature of the good.

Second Alcibiades

Socrates, with an aspect of impiety, critically reflects on the value and efficacy of prayer. All too often, people wish for things they later regret. Prayer without wisdom necessarily misrecognises the nature and scope for any beneficial improvement in conditions. Far better that people simply wish for good generally than pray for particular things that they have no means of properly anticipating. Even more importantly, they should attend to the advice of genuinely knowledgeable political leaders rather than attempt to recognise beneficial futures themselves. Socrates provides a critique of popular democracy and considers how proper political authority demands philosophical insight - it hinges upon the capacity to rise above ordinary human concerns and activities to reflect holistically on the nature of things.

Hipparchus

This dialogue ostensibly defends the thesis that 'greed is good'. Yet this contradicts Socrates' more ordinary condemnation of materi-

alistic desire, suggesting perhaps an aspect of irony. Is the overall aim to provide an unlikely ethical defence for emerging economic systems or, on the contrary, to identify shortcomings in the conventional ethical condemnation of greed? Just possibly, both interpretations are valid - highlighting a vital aporia affecting the relationship between economic activity and beneficial social gain.

Rival Lovers

What is philosophy? Does it simply involve knowing many things? Socrates argues that philosophy is not about the quantity known but rather involves a particular capacity for judgement. This capacity has its basis in reflective self-understanding. Philosophy is at once a particular skill and rises above the absorbed particularity of ordinary expertise. Philosophy is useful because it informs the political skill of distinguishing the good from the bad and making things better.

1

EUTHYPHRO

Day 1

- *pp.2-16*,
- *Stephanus: 2-16*

1.1

The first of four dialogues that deal with the trial and death of Socrates - Plato's mentor and regular philosophical proxy.

1.2

Socrates and Euthyphro cross paths outside the Athenian courts. Socrates attends because he is charged with impiety and morally corrupting Athenian youth. The charge of impiety involves failing to respect the traditional pantheon of Greek gods and promoting new deities, while the associated charge of corruption hinges upon encouraging a questioning of accepted ideas and beliefs amongst the city's young. Euthyphro attends on an entirely separate matter - to indict his father for murdering a murdering servant. The father had left the servant bound in a ditch while waiting on word from the

authorities, and the servant had died during this time. Despite these mildly extenuating circumstances, Euthyphro argues his father has offended against piety in failing to care properly for a member of his household. Socrates recognises himself similarly accused of impiety and asks Euthyphro to explain the concept of piety. The young man makes several efforts but is unable to provide a satisfactory answer. Socrates argues that Euthyphro describes associated qualities of piety rather than defining the notion of piety itself. The dialogue concludes in *aporia*, having only established the elusiveness of the meaning of piety. Euthyphro excuses himself and departs.

1.3

Euthyphro explains that piety is 'what is dear to the gods' (7). Socrates objects to this definition, not only because the gods differ amongst themselves and lack any consistent preferences but because the notion of piety itself is not clarified. The definition identifies merely an associated feature (endearedness to the gods), which is scarcely adequate. Very evidently, however, any effort to isolate the notion of piety, to remove it from the entire customary field of associations in which it is situated, necessarily enacts the very impiety for which Socrates stands accused. Inasmuch as Socrates convinces Euthyphro to attempt such a definition, the latter is at least partly corrupted - even if his failure to rigorously pursue the issue confirms that Socrates will almost certainly be executed.

1.4

We can recognise a roughly Oedipal scenario. A conflict of sons and fathers. but where is the figure of Jocasta in all this? Where is the wife to the father and the mother (and lover) to the son? How does her absence affect this scene of conflict - of piety and impiety, of respect and murder? A possibly anachronistic criticism but it is already apparent that we shall not hear much from Greek women - nor from slaves, common people or the poor.

1.5

I find myself imagining Socrates and Euthyphro in further conversation:

S: Please define a fish for me.
E: Well, a fish lives in the sea.
S: What then of all the fish that live in lakes and rivers?
E: Ok, fair enough - a fish lives in water.
S: What about octopuses? They also live in water but are not fish. On this basis, living in water hardly defines a fish adequately. Can you please try again to explain to me precisely what a fish is?
E: I expect you would like me to mention various parts - fins, gills, scales and stuff? You would like me to describe any number of specific attributes. However in doing so we risk losing sight of the overall fish and how we engage with it. We are standing at the edge of a body of water - actually the sea. Perhaps we should just catch one? Then you would learn that fish can be caught in the sea, cooked on a fire and eaten for dinner. They obtain identity in terms of their place within an overall experiential context that involves a wide variety of associated features.

2

APOLOGY

Day 2

- *pp.18-36*
- *Stephanus: 17-42*

2.1

Socrates defends his practices and modes of thought before the jury of Athenian citizens. He demonstrates the corruption of Athens by being judged himself. Athenian corruption has its basis in a false pride (thinking one is wise when one is not) and an incapacity to overcome fear (the fear of death, for instance). Socrates argues that there is an urgent need to reflect genuinely and bravely on how best to live our lives.

2.2

Socrates describes himself as a gadfly, stripping away falsehood, complacency and craven self-interest in order to pursue truth and foster the essential conditions for justice. He argues he knows nothing himself, except precisely that he knows nothing - which actually provides the only viable pathway towards pursuing wisdom.

2.3

He speaks specifically about his distance from features of ordinary life. For example, despite his constant interaction with people, he makes no effort to earn a living as a teacher. Furthermore, he deliberately withdraws from 'public affairs'. He describes an inner voice that 'turns me away from something I am about to do, but it never encourages me to do anything' (31d). He conceives a separation between philosophy and the sphere of political engagement and action. Philosophy is cast as a distinct practice of reflection that has the role of critically picking apart ordinary ideas and modes of living to discover better options. In doing so, philosophy, in its very nature, risks being reviled. In this work of properly critiquing whatever exists, it necessarily precipitates its own exile. In this sense, exile and the sentence of death not only provide the necessary conditions for philosophy but indicate, for the philosopher, its necessary consequences.

3

CRITO

Day 3

- *pp.38-48*
- *Stephanus: 43-54c*

3.1

A brief dialogue. Crito, an old friend, arrives early in the morning at Socrates's prison cell, just days before the latter's scheduled execution. He proposes bribing the guards and helping Socrates escape to Thessaly. He justifies this in terms of a concern for his own reputation (people expect friends to assist one another no matter the financial cost) and also because justice demands that Socrates make every effort to preserve his own life. Socrates argues, on the contrary, that public opinion (the view of the 'majority') is unimportant and that justice (the moral health of his soul) is better served by acceding to the judgement of the Athenian jury. There is never any excuse to do the wrong thing, even in response to an initial injustice. In any case, he is bound by a contract to the Athenian *polis*. Athens gave him life and provided the essential

milieu shaping his identity. If he had wished to leave he could have done so already. Furthermore, he has been supplied with appropriate opportunity to persuade the jury of his innocence but has failed. Athens has kept its end of the bargain. It is now time that he keep his. Overall, it is better that he preserve the health of his soul than cling pathetically to a compromised life. Crito gives up. He can offer no further arguments to convince his friend.

3.2

Socrates argues that the views of the majority should be ignored. They are nonetheless precisely the views that have condemned him. In this light, how can Socrates' efforts to persuade them have ever succeeded? Or could they only succeed by failing?

3.3

It must be noted that Socrates is most likely guilty as charged. He demonstrates impiety. Elsewhere, for instance, he questions that Zeus rebelled against his father and consigned him to Tartarus. A god, apparently, would never do such a terrible thing. But, of course, to question the notion that gods can do bad things is also to question their capacity to do any good. It is to throw into doubt the whole field of customary belief. However, arguably Socrates roughly follows the model of Zeus. He overturns the father (the world of traditional cosmology and myth) to encourage new horizons of philosophically lucid thought and action. In this respect, just perhaps, he demonstrates a deep piety.

3.4

Socrates is hardly unaware of his ostensible guilt. He would have accomplished nothing if he were not evidently guilty.

4

PHAEDO

Day 4

- pp.50-70
- Stephanus: 57-80d

4.1

On the last day Socrates is alive, his friends assemble early in the morning for a final philosophical discussion before later in the day, at sunset, he must drink hemlock and die. The friends are struck by how 'happy' and unworried Socrates seems (58e). He explains why philosophers should not fear death - how, indeed, their life's work is to actively pursue it. This hinges on conceiving an intimate relation between death, immutable reality, wisdom and the immortal soul.

4.2

After swiftly dismissing his grieving wife Xanthippe, Socrates remarks on the pleasure of having his nighttime bonds released (60b). He describes its 'strangeness', explaining its close relation to the pain that immediately preceded it. Rather than perceiving these

separately, Socrates conceives pain and pleasure as a single, semi-monstrous thing ('two creatures with one head'). He considers the ordinary vicissitudes of sensible life from a distance, in a manner that their absorbing specificity and flux is represented as essentially static - a constitutive difference framing a predictable, cyclical alternation. This corresponds to the overall argument of the dialogue, which contrasts the ephemeral and passionate features of life to the higher reality of immaterial and immutable truth.

4.3

While I worried previously that I had over-emphasised Socrates' death wish, *Phaedo* makes it pointedly evident. Socrates insists, for instance, 'we shall, only then, when we are dead, attain that which we desire and of which we claim to be lovers, namely, wisdom' (66e). Wisdom is associated with death because dying represents a separation from the confusing flux of bodily life. It represents the point at which the soul obtains distinctly separate identity. Life and death run in a cycle, with the soul always present, yet losing proper sight of itself within the 'dizzy' (79c) distraction of life, only discovering its genuine identity in death. According to Socrates, the living senses provide deficient signs of the true nature of things, which are never manifest at the level of particular evidence but must be rationally and ideally realised. Rather than achieve wisdom within the conditions of mortal life, the philosopher recollects glimmers of an ideal reality that precedes and exceeds mortality. In this sense, death involves not only the end of life but also access to 'deathlessness' (80b).

4.4

But why is Plato not there? What are the implications of his distance from the death of his friend and mentor? What does the sensible gap between them signal? Perhaps not the gap of death exactly but more that of representation as a mode of distanced and unreliable recollection.

4.5

Phaedo is the first of the longer works - those that cannot be read in a single sitting. My observations are in this manner necessarily restricted. I cannot take into account the overall argument but only

the arguments that I encounter in the given section that I am reading on any particular day. This also entails that I'm likely to make unwarranted assumptions, to reflect as though I have actually read the whole dialogue - that I know where the argument is heading - when I actually need to read further to confidently argue anything. This, combined with my capacity to misinterpret whatever I am currently reading, establishes a fertile ground for error. Both of these circumstances align, of course, with the nature of reading generally.

4.6

I underestimated how long each day of 'reading' would take me. Apart from discovering that twenty pages can be a great deal of territory to traverse in a single day, I have learned that a single reading is often inadequate. In order to reflect more cogently, I must read each section several times and take notes along the way. I may also need to chase up secondary readings (although I try to restrict this). I must also allow adequate time for reflection. I must mull over what I have read. It is often in the midst of doing other things - showering, mowing the lawn or going for a late afternoon walk - that particular reflections emerge. All in all, this process can easily entail more than a single day's effort. Nonetheless, I'll continue to refer to it as a day and do my best to remain roughly on schedule.

4.7

One last point. My reading of the first portion of *Phaedo* suggests the possibility of an infinite process of reflection. There is so much within the dialogue at the level of philosophical argument and resonant narrative detail that I could write almost endlessly. But obviously no scope to do this. That would be to reduce the particular value these observations have in their brevity and selective focus. My first reflection for each day will attempt to provide a brief summary. Subsequent ones will have a more arbitrary character - picking up on a few stray bits and pieces. I realise that this may prove by turns worthwhile and frustrating. In its failure to address everything adequately, I am hoping that this strategy signals, if nothing else, both an infinite potential for reflection and the need to read Plato oneself.

5

NIGHT A

NA.1

There will be occasional nights - moments of meta reflection that don't quite belong in the days. I will allow myself no more of these than there are letters in the alphabet.

NA.2

Why document this process of reading Plato? Why not just read Plato silently? Am I primarily motivated by the perversity of the project? Am I forcing myself to read Plato by making a semi-public commitment that I can't now honourably shirk? Am I simply trying to lend my days some coherent sense of purpose? And why should anybody attend to my reflections? Especially as they are not reading Plato alongside me? Especially as there is nothing like a conversation happening? Indeed, how can they even make sense of what I write without having read the relevant portions of Plato's work themselves? All of this should probably make me stop, give up and do something else. But I'll continue just in the vague hope that something comes of it.

NA.3

Technical issues. Firstly, working with images of text makes the whole process of publishing material laborious and inflexible. Much harder, for instance, to rapidly edit my work. Added to this, *Instagram* makes the editing of images within posts very awkward. There is no way to simply replace one image in a set. The only option it delete the overall post, edit the image and republish. However, this introduces an additional difficulty. There is no way of manually re-sorting posts. If, for instance, I want to amend the Day 2 post then I have to remove that post and all the following ones before reposting each one in the relevant chronological order. Not really viable for an extended piece of writing that will require many corrections and amendments. I guess my lesson is to live with the errors or face an interminable task of revision.

NA.4

I am uncertain about how to pitch my writing. At one level, I am making a serious effort to summarise. At another level, I am following a comic, mildly idiosyncratic path through Plato's work. I am hoping these approaches will discover some capacity to effectively co-exist.

NA.5

I can't fully anticipate what I will write because I have only just started reading Plato. I certainly don't have a plan of what I would like to argue. I am relying on Plato's work to inspire a form of thought that both follows and veers away from origin. Why adopt this approach? Why not come up with my own ideas at the outset? Perhaps because the whole effort to make an altogether fresh start seems unconvincing? Perhaps because reading Plato provides a structured and arbitrary starting point for an open process of reflection and writing?

NA.6

I suppose I could describe this as philosophical notes or commentary - yet I am hardly writing thorough commentary, so 'marginal notes' is probably more appropriate. Marginal notes are written in the process of reading and, like my reflections, are typically

illegibly scrawled and opaque. The only difference is that I remove these notes from the book itself and make them public, which affects their overall sense of relevance and identity in ways that I cannot altogether anticipate.

6

PHAEDO (CONT.)

Day 5

- *pp.71-100*
- *Stephanus: 80e-118a*

5.1

There is muttering in class. Simmias and Cebes whisper reservations about the notion of the deathless soul. Socrates requests they more directly express their concerns so that he can try to answer them.

5.2

Simmias compares the soul to the harmony of a lyre, arguing that this harmony disappears when the lyre itself as a composite framework of strings and wood is no longer available as anything materially composed. Socrates argues that this conception of harmony is mistaken. Harmony is less anything composite than an integral abstraction (form) that precedes and informs the creation of any particular instrument. The lyre, in this sense, recollects harmony rather than providing an (untenably) composite foundation.

5.3

Cebes employs another metaphor - that of a cloak. In the same way a person can wear through many cloaks in their lifetime, yet still have a final cloak that persists beyond them, so too a soul can adopt a series of bodily guises but still itself wear out. He suggests that souls may exist at a longer temporal scale than individual organisms but can nonetheless eventually reach a mortal limit. Socrates counters that this argument is contradictory. Inasmuch as souls are associated with life they cannot possibly contain any aspect of death. Here 'death' is distinguished from the philosophical attractor of deathlessness, indicating instead the unequivocally negative quality of an absence of life.

5.4

Having refuted these objections, Socrates launches into a critique of the whole notion of material causes and a defence of the notion of pure form. He concludes with a speculative tale concerning the nature of the Earth and the Underworld. Sunset approaches. Socrates bathes, farewells his family and friends, jokes with his poisoner, drinks the Hemlock and soon afterwards peacefully dies.

5.5

Of course, countless further objections seem pertinent. Most obviously, the immortality of the soul is characterised in circular terms. Souls are represented as both imperceptible presences and as entirely notional things. There is altogether no scope to discover a dead soul, not only because souls cannot be seen and perception is conceived as irrelevant to knowledge, but because their deathless state is logically (intelligibly) deduced. There is no possibility of encountering a soul that falsifies its predefined conditions of being. Just as all swans are white (apparently, if not in fact), so, too, all souls are immortal. We know nothing more about souls than how we define them. On this basis, any further debate is redundant.

5.6

In order to conceive the immortality of the soul, Socrates insists upon a neat distinction between life and death. While this can involve paradoxes (for instance, that the soul discovers its proper life

in death despite being represented as the distinguishing characteristic of animate things) the distinction cannot strictly permit any blurring of what life and death entail. Nonetheless, this is what occurs, but in an asymmetrical manner. Life discovers a wider identity beyond the condition of mortality but death is left simply as a transition to deathlessness. Why not call the latter lifelessness? Why not call the life of the soul literally death? Quite simply, because life is the privileged term, but only on the condition that it is stripped of the thinking of mortality. The notion of deathlessness involves setting death aside - sublating it so that appears as an aspect of its other (in a manner that, in the modern era, Hegel also famously adopts). And this indicates the point of confusion. The notion of deathlessness suggests a mode of life that incorporates an aspect of death, indicating that the soul is not entirely aligned with the living. On this basis, there is no reason why it should be regarded as necessarily immortal (forever alive). It could just as easily be regarded instead as eternally dead.

5.7

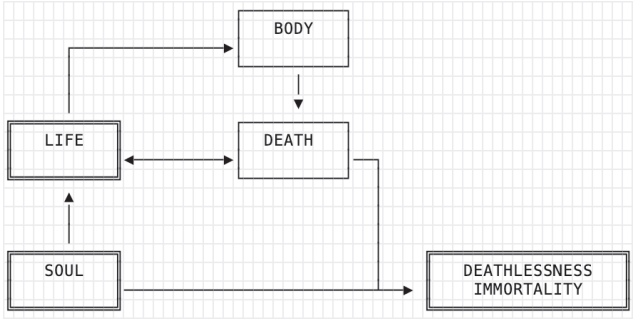

Fig. 1. Trying, and failing, to make sense of the relation between life and death in the notion of the immortal soul.

5.8

If it were up to me, I'd probably go with the metaphor of the lyre. Not that I believe in the soul as some distinct thing (a suprasensible harmony) but in order to indicate the emergent quality of sentient life. Conscious being emerges from a complex interaction of more

basic elements and processes. The smallest misalignment of these can eliminate life and consciousness altogether, which leaves any number of specific things still persisting while our coherent identity passes into oblivion.

5.9

Although we are hardly entirely individual things. We are also instances. So, genetically speaking, the cloak metaphor is also apt. This is to conceive a very old cloak passed down through the generations but itself eventually wearing out - or possibly modified for other purposes.

7

CRATYLUS

Day 6

- *pp.102-131*
- *Stephanus: 383-413d*

6.1

Hermogenes and Cratylus disagree on the nature of language. Hermogenes believes that language is entirely conventional. Cratylus contends that our naming of things has a natural basis. Hermogenes seeks clarification from Socrates. Socrates acknowledges that language has a conventional aspect in that systems of naming differ across different societies and historical periods but also argues that language has a natural aspect. Our names for things relate to their meanings in the same way that a well-designed tool relates to whatever medium that it is designed to shape. An axe, for instance, is sharp, metallic and precisely weighted in order to cut through wood. Words, as tools for thought and discussion, behave similarly. Yet, here, Socrates focuses not, as we might expect, on the issue of the choice of an appropriately matching sound

(in fact he recognises that different sounds will do) but on the choice of a word that carries an appropriate legacy of culturally inscribed meaning. Socrates demonstrates the aptness of names through an etymological examination of the names for gods, abstract concepts and features of the natural cosmos.

6.2

The emphasis on tools, craft and expertise is characteristic of Plato. It links to his notion of the justice of the *polis* having its basis in everybody pursuing their particular area of expertise - and not meddling in anything else (such as politics, which should be left to professional statesmen (and perhaps philosophers)). This will become clearer later when we consider *Statesman* and the *Republic*. For now, what interests me is that, in arguing against Hermogenes conception of the entirely conventional character of language, Plato rejects the popular, shared basis of language. He regards language less as a popular invention and common resource than as a set of tools developed by a particular group of expert craftspeople (the 'rule setters' (388a)) for the purposes of another group of expert word-smiths (the 'dialecticians' (390d)). This plainly has anti-democratic implications but also, very interestingly, employs the systems of understanding of craftspeople - the sense of their own differentiated expertise, as well as of the quality and usefulness of their own work - in order to explain why they cannot possibly name or even properly speak of anything.

6.3

The etymological accounts that Socrates provides are illuminating. For instance, he explains that the traditional cosmic gods - 'the sun, moon, earth, stars and sky' are known as the '"theoi" because it was their nature to run (*thein*)' (397d). The meaning of man (*anthropos*) is traced to 'one who observes closely what he has seen' (399c), the soul (*psuche*) to 'nature sustainer' (400b) and the body (*soma*) to 'tomb of the soul' (400c). Various abstract concepts are explained in terms of a Pre-Socratic heritage that emphasises motion and change: wisdom (*phronesis*) as 'understanding of flow'; understanding (*noesis*) as 'longing for the new'; knowledge (*episteme*) as 'a

worthwhile soul follows the movement of things'; and the good (*agathon*) as 'moves quickly' (411d-e). The notion of justice (*dikaiosune*) emerges as particularly complex and open to etymological dispute. Aligned perhaps with Anaximander's conception of the *apeiron*, Socrates describes one meaning, 'such a kind as to do nothing but give way, but that something penetrates all of it and generates everything that comes into being' (412d). Socrates admits ultimately to be 'perplexed' by the nature of justice, indicating that etymology as the natural account of names is insufficient to get at the truth. Something else is required - philosophical reason specifically.

6.4

In the midst of his display of etymological erudition, Socrates explains enthusiastically, 'I've got a whole swarm of wisdom in my mind!' (401e). This is plainly ironic, signalling the limits of this mode of thinking and its very evident links to features of sophistry. Socrates allows himself to be briefly carried away by the fluid possibility of words rather than focusing on his true vocation, which is to moderately and reasonably examine the true nature of things.

6.5

For those of us brought up in the wake of Saussure (the notion of the arbitrary sign and the conventional character of language) Socrates' seemingly naturalistic conception of language can seem absurd. More than this, if taken at all seriously, it would seem to undermine the basis of our exceptional human identity - the vital gap that establishes human autonomy and its essentially historical character. For we moderns, our names for things - our words and even the concepts that are associated with them - have an irreducibly human and cultural origin.

6.6

Yet what does the natural correctness of names imply? Certainly not that the thing itself simply preserves and manifests a proper name. Socrates explains very clearly 'that we know nothing about the gods themselves or about the names they call themselves' (400d). Instead, the naturalness of names indicates a due and humanly conducted process of naming that responds to the nature of the thing

and to the existing legacy of names. Arguably there is no independently existing thing at all - only things that are already divided and named. But if we take a less strictly binary view - if we are less intent to place nature and culture at odds - then we can conceive a more complex space of interaction. The thing need not be entirely determining of language and the existence of language need not annihilate the mystery of the thing (the possibility of an encounter).

6.7

The notion of an entirely arbitrary relation is not helpful. Naming is hardly simply a matter of chance. Things can be named differently but this scarcely prevents naming involving a mobile attention to aspects of likeness, difference, proximity, displacement, echoing, exaggeration, etc. that takes into account not only particular circumstances but also the stock of existing language (including scope to steal words from elsewhere). None of this may be recoverable later. We may not know why we call a lion a 'lion' - but the process of naming the lion will have followed some kind of relevant contextually informed poetic-cognitive logic that indicates if not the irrefutable evidence of nature then at least the always at once open and predictable character of any effort at naming.

Day 7

- *pp.131-156*
- *Stephanus: 413e-440e*

7.1

Socrates and Hermegones continue their elucidation of names (Cratylus has said nothing so far). Socrates comments on a variety of words that have been subject to so many 'distortions and ornamentations' (414c) that it is very difficult to discover their original meaning. Eventually, Hermegones asks about some basic words related to

motion ('going', 'flowing', etc.) that have informed their overall discussion. Unable to easily account for their meaning, Socrates distinguishes between derivative names that can reveal their meanings through etymological analysis and primary names that cannot be explained in terms of their borrowing from others.

7.2

In relation to the provenance of primary names, Socrates makes some qualified suggestions concerning their meaning. Assuming they are not foreign imports, he considers the putatively analogical character of their component letter sounds. He argues that the agitation of the tongue involved in pronouncing the letter 'r' is appropriate for words that denote aspects of motion (426e). He distinguishes this mode of imitation from anything like the sensible mimicry of onomatopoeia. Rather than copying any sensible aspect of the original, it represents a formal correspondence - a summoning of the idea of motion through a particular species of motion. Cratylus is finally brought into the discussion to comment on Socrates' analysis. Cratylus approves everything that has been said. Socrates, however, now admits to having his own doubts about the entirely natural correctness of names. Cratylus remains adamant that it is in the nature of names that they are always correct.

7.3

Socrates unpicks dogmatic linguistic naturalism by referring once again to the metaphor of craft. He wonders whether some things are better named than others, on the basis that some craftspeople (rule-setters) are better than others. Some are likely to make names well and others badly. He asks how people can continue to recognise the meaning of words if they are not entirely well-wrought - if they contain, for instance, the odd inapposite letter? In this case, he argues that there must be a conventional aspect to meaning otherwise people would not understand these names. Alongside this, Socrates pursues another line of questioning that demonstrates that names can scarcely convey the essence of things. Rather than representing perfect copies of meaning, they are mimetic tokens that can only ever highlight significant features of whatever they name. Overall, both in

terms of their imitative distance and their regular imperfection, names slip free from any simple notion of natural correctness.

7.4

Finally, Socrates argues - very much contrary to Cratylus - that names do not provide sure guides to the nature of truth. There is always the need to return to the concepts themselves rather than rely on imitations, however carefully and authentically derived. This is especially so because the initial name-setters may have been mistaken. Here, Socrates refers once again to the emphasis on motion in Ancient Greek etymology, arguing that Heraclitus particularly reveals a misunderstanding of the nature of being. Resisting the notion of a constant motion between opposites and an associated retreat from anything like stable identity, Socrates argues that what is true remains true. It is not true one moment and false the next. Cratylus is unconvinced. They all depart.

7.5

Heraclitus links being to the flux of manifestation and disappearance. Rather than interpreting the inherent motion of a river as a feature of its consistent identity, it provides evidence of a lack of stable identity. The river's ceaseless non-identity provides a metaphor for the ephemeral and elusive nature of being. Plato takes a different approach. While acknowledging the flux of mortal things, Plato focuses on a suprasensible feature of being - its essential and immutable truth. This involves looking beyond mutable phenomena to discover the changeless character of being. This capacity to see beyond the transient hinges upon the craft of philosophical thought. Plato's philosopher is not merely an *anthropos* who 'observes what he has seen' (399c). Instead they employ the tools of dialectical enquiry to unveil being and draw its true nature out. This explains why Socrates - however much this is 'to haul a boat up a very sticky ramp' (414c)- discovers within the name 'techne' not only 'craft' but also 'possession of understanding' (414b). Despite any sense of superior relation to any merely artisanal work, Plato's regular recourse to the example of craftspeople links to his conception of philosophy as an expert capacity to reveal the truth of being.

7.6

So at one level, in opposing Hermogenes conventionalist notion of language, Socrates piously conceives a natural heritage of linguistic meaning - in which an original moment of correct naming is then more or less faithfully reproduced and remains roughly legible through careful phonemic-mimetic and etymological analysis. Processes of linguistic change that veer from this patriarchal model are cast as 'monstrous' (415d) corruptions - as the twisting, effacement and obliteration of meaning (418b). At another level, however, in resisting Cratylus' linguistic naturalism, Socrates takes a more pragmatic view, acknowledging that a variety of factors, hinging on the nature of mimesis itself, as well as the difficulty of crafting adequate imitations, means that language necessarily incorporates a conventional aspect. Of course, Socrates never quite says what we moderns may be thinking - that the interplay of analogy and obliteration is precisely characteristic of language. Language, in our view, never has any such thing as an original scene; it is endlessly subject to inventions and reinventions, scenes of remembering and forgetting. Nonetheless, Socrates does include a vital impiety. Whereas Cratylus argues that the first name-setters were gods, indicating that the names they established were correct and should be respected, Socrates argues not only that the names the gods had for things are unavailable to us but also that the original human name-setters may have been mistaken - that they may have named things incorrectly. Overall, we can recognise a very characteristic interleaving of aspects of piety and impiety.

8

THEAETETUS

Day 8

- *pp.18-36*
- *Stephanus: 17-42*

8.1

A discussion between Socrates and a young mathematician Theaetetus on the nature of knowing. Plato emphasises his distance from the events. It is not his recollection of the discussion but rather the written recollection of Euclides. Plato fictionally reconstructs that recollection. At the very outset then, in the very conditions that inform our relation to this enquiry into knowing, there is sense of separation from any context of intimately knowing. Not only that, but the dialogue is represented as read aloud by a slave. How is this meditation on knowing affected by its narration by an unknowing slave? What does the slave know - already know - that allows them to read it?

8.2

After agreeing that knowledge and wisdom are alike, Socrates sets

out to clarify the nature of knowledge. He is not interested in hearing a list of specific examples of knowing (geometry, cobbling, etc. (146d)), but seeks to know what knowing itself means. Rather than establish this in terms of how the terms 'knowing' and 'knowledge' are used and the contexts in which they become relevant, Socrates calls, in his characteristic way, for a more fundamental account. He has faith that Theaetetus can assist him in this endeavour. Socrates likens his own role to a midwife (149-151) - too old to give birth to wisdom himself, he helps others, performing the especially vital task of distinguishing between offspring (ideas) that have viable life and those that should be left to die.

8.3

Theaetetus offers a first definition. He suggests, 'knowledge is perception' (151e). Socrates questions this definition both for its relativism and for its failure, in his view, to acknowledge an independently existing world. He associates it with Protagoras' conception that 'man is the measure of all things' (152), as well as with the Pre-Socratic notion of primal flux. With the exception of Parmenides, the Pre-Socratics (particularly Heraclitus) emphasise that 'nothing is one or any kind of thing'; it is always instead a 'coming to be' (152d-e). Adopting a common sense and less immediately esoteric approach (154c), Socrates argues that things have some aspect of stable and consistent identity. They are not altered except through processes of becoming (155).

8.4

I have read just fifteen pages but need to think more carefully about all of this.

8.5

What do I know about epistemology? Can I recollect anything? Leaving aside whatever I may have specifically learnt, what is it that I can intuitively remember (rationally conceive)? I seem to recall (know) - that the word 'know' is used in many contexts and can mean different things. I know my name, for instance, which indicates I can recall it. I know how to ride a bike, which is hardly anything that corresponds to the ordinary sense of knowledge, but represents a

learnt capacity to perform a complex and coordinated action. I know one plus one equals two on the basis of some modest level of mathematical understanding. I also know that one thing cannot be at the same time an altogether other thing on the basis of equally modest level of logical understanding. It seems that I must qualify any particular knowledge I have, explaining on what basis I know it: as something remembered; practiced; deduced; etc.

8.6

Some knowledge has an additional declarative aspect. I know the Sun exists. This statement attests not only to my knowing but also to the definite existence of some external thing. At the same time, my confident relation to the Sun depends upon living on a planet in its orbit and upon possessing relevant sensible affordances that enable me to experience its warmth and light. Of course, I cannot look directly at the Sun and most of what I actually coherently know about it has been learnt from books. I know a few specific things about the Sun. These particular facts do not stem from me or anything in my experience. They have a separate character, requiring only that I learn them.

8.7

To know knowing - to define it precisely so that it may be known - has a necessarily circular aspect. It is very different, for instance, from learning about the nature of a circle. The notion of circle is not assumed at the outset. We are not circling a circle in the same way that knowing knowing circles. One must already have a sense of what knowing involves to even pose the question. We assume that something can be known and made known to us. In this sense, it is less that we are seeking precisely to know what knowing is than to have something we already know adequately explained to us.

8.8

It would be different perhaps if Socrates were a rock and if Theaetetus were attempting to explain what knowing is to Socrates the rock. While we maintain that a rock 'knows' its situation in a rocky stream - inasmuch as it is affected by it, inasmuch as it is gradually smoothed - this is scarcely the same as knowing that it carries

this indexical trace or demonstrating any capacity to reflect lucidly (and circularly) on its conditions. Since a rock does not know what knowing is, since it is constitutively unknowing, it could at least - if only it could only reflect and speak - genuinely pose the question: what is knowing?

Day 9

- *pp.173-191*
- *Stephanus: 156-171e*

9.1

Socrates, who claims to know nothing and that he is simply administering potions to assist in the birth of genuine knowledge, bamboozles Theaetetus with various arguments that explore the adequacy of the thesis that knowledge is perception. At some points he adopts the sophist (and Pre-Socratic) position that knowledge is entirely relative, emerging in the fluid interaction between a changing world and internal changes within the perceiver. In this view, nothing exists as such, there is only the flux of 'becoming' (157b) and the relational and private character of perceived truth. At other times, he introduces lines of doubt. Illusions and dreams seem to undermine the certainty of perceived knowledge. The notion of ceaseless motion threatens any sense of stable identity. Socrates wonders, can he even say that he himself consistently exists? (159). Furthermore, the relativist account of knowledge makes it impossible to distinguish between better and worse accounts of things. Socrates suggests that he may as well consult a 'Baboon' or a 'Pig' (161c). Memory must also be cast as unreliable knowledge since it is not directly seen (163d)? The thesis that 'knowledge is perception' even leads to the absurdity of potentially knowing and not knowing some-

thing at once, as evidenced by perceiving the world with just one eye (165b-c).

9.2

Finally, Socrates considers a sophist response to all of these objections. Playfully adopting the voice of the dead Protagoras, Socrates criticises the initial assumption that knowledge and wisdom are identical (145e). He explains that wisdom is distinct from knowledge. However necessarily limited our conditions of knowing the world, we can nonetheless distinguish between better and worse conceptions of truth on the basis of their human benefit. The wise person 'works a change and makes good things appear and be for him' (166d). Truth is positioned as having 'wholesome' (167c), life-affirming and curative consequences. It rises above its epistemological ground (perceived knowledge) to have an ethical-utilitarian dimension (beneficial wisdom).

9.3

I anticipated Socrates responding to this effort to preserve some more assured field of comprehension by arguing that a relativist epistemological conception can hardly establish any consistent basis for distinguishing between wise (beneficial) and unwise (damaging) truth. Any perception of benefit varies in the same manner as any perception of any other thing. However, Socrates focuses instead on a contradiction affecting the statement that 'man is the measure of all things'. While it proposes a general truth, it also logically allows that people can credibly (according to their perceptions) believe the statement to be untrue. On this basis, the statement is subject to refutation even when it is true.

9.4

Socrates regards Protagoras' conception of knowledge as indicative of a misguided relativism, in which truth is cast as entirely variable and unfixed. It is linked to the accidents of each person's sensible experience. But there would seem to be scope to read 'man is the measure of all things' differently. We could interpret 'man' more generally to refer to human beings and the cultural systems that inform particular

experiences of human identity. In these terms 'knowing the truth of things' is a private and individual matter than involves a mixture of generic human affordances and social processes of 'knowing'. The former can be aligned, for instance, with Kant's conception of *a priori* categories of understanding, while the latter possibly anticipates the contemporary notion of knowledge as a complex cultural construct, involving everything from systems of customary belief and language to the epistemologies of craft, science and philosophy.

9.5

Adopting this wider perspective, the notion of truth certainly remains relative. Something is always true only in relation to particular contexts, affordances and systems of knowing, but this hardly implies that truth is entirely malleable and free-floating. It is constrained at multiple levels - most importantly within any context of human comprehension and debate, in which statements of truth are always subject to verification. Any notion of the relativity of truth is qualified by the recognition that human truths are hardly all equivalent. They are more or less credible, with some regarded as 'self-evidently' true, others 'plainly' false and many other arranged uncertainly in the middle. Most importantly, claims to truth are always subject to negotiation and potential refutation.

9.6

Still, does this recognition of human contexts of truth ultimately represent a solipsism? Are we caught up in human frames of knowing with no capacity to identify any true and independently existing reality? The notion of solipsism suggests an entirely self-contained focus, but what I have described above is primarily about conceiving the contextual and relational character of truth. Rather than assuming there is only the bubble of human perception, thought and activity, 'man is the measure of all things' can also signal a primary - and primarily mediated - relationship to the wider world. Our measuring, for all its reductive, constructive and self-interested character, also identifies a context of imbrication and interaction. We may not be able to attest to absolute truths, but the truths that concern us inscribe relations that are better conceived as engaged than solipsis-

tic. Arguably, there is greater solipsism in insisting upon our access to absolute truth than in acknowledging our necessarily mediated and limited conditions of knowledge.

9.7

Of course, the statement by Protagoras can be interpreted in other ways again. It is worth considering the quotation in full: 'Of all things the measure is man: of those that are, that they are; and of those that are not, that they are not.'[1] Instead of describing the limits of human knowledge, this can also be read as making an absolute claim about the world; specifically, that everything that both exists and does not exist depends upon human measure. It is not, for instance, a matter of a universal mediation, in which everything provides a measure for everything else. Only 'man' is lent the capacity to measure. That some things exist and others do not depends upon a human work of measuring that represents phenomena as either evident or imperceptible (in the sense that irrational numbers are not represented on a ruler). In this manner, everything in the world is manifest only in terms of human 'powers' (147d). Within the overall context of what Protagoras argues, I doubt this accusation of dogmatism is credible, but it does highlight the prioritisation of a human field of mediation. It ignores how we ourselves are reciprocally 'measured', even if this involves nothing like a scene of truth.

Day 10

- *pp.191-207*
- *Stephanus: 171e-187b*

10.1

Theaetetus is a complex and densely argued dialogue with many

1. **https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/protagoras/#ManMeasThes**

peculiar turns, digressions and references to wider strands of philosophical argument. It also incorporates a constant play of tone and voice that makes it difficult to disentangle who believes what and where the overall argument is heading.

10.2

Socrates continues to argue against the thesis that knowledge is perception, keeping in mind that he associates this conception with a privatised and relativistic conception of truth, as well as a privileging of becoming over coherent being. Socrates pursues three lines of argument:

1. the first employs the notion of wisdom to question any notion of entirely relative (equivalently true and useful) knowledge;
2. the second questions the primacy of flux (motion) over aspects of stable existence;
3. and the third establishes that perception alone provides an insufficient basis for conceiving knowledge.

Let's consider each of these three arguments.

10.3

1. Wisdom undermines relativism

Responding to the distinction between necessarily relative knowledge and useful and beneficial wisdom, Socrates argues that Protagoras assumes the wise person has the capacity to assess what will happen in the future. The future, however, can never be directly perceived (178). Just as only a good doctor can suggest appropriate treatments (178c) and only a good law-maker can design laws that will foster just social relations (172b), so too any determination of benefit can only be made by somebody with relevant expertise and understanding. Wisdom is hardly equally distributed. The example of wisdom highlights a key epistemological dilemma of the relativist

position - not all representations of truth are equally valid or valuable.

10.4

2. Incoherence of absolute flux

Socrates distinguishes two types of motion: spatial motion; and actual alteration of any given thing (181d). Unless one takes the view that both are always at any time pertinent, any thing will at various times include some aspect of stability. But more significantly than this, the whole notion that the thing can be identified and named indicates some aspect of stable being. Our language simply provides no adequate means to represent a thing that both exists and does not exist at the same time (183b). Motion cannot be conceived without conceiving the possibility of a coherent object moving. Furthermore, if perception is unfixed and knowledge is perception, knowledge itself can hardly have any consistent identity (182e). The notion of essential flux collapse because it cannot be coherently thought with the linguistic and conceptual tools we have available.

10.5

3. Knowledge extends beyond perception

Socrates mentions several different sense organs - eyes, ears, taste - and asks Theaetetus if knowledge is obtained 'with' or 'through' these affordances (184c). Theaetetus acknowledges that the latter makes more sense. The senses are vehicles for knowing not the locus of knowing itself. More particularly, it becomes evident that the mind (soul) make all kinds of 'judgments' (187) concerning features of being - regarding, for instance, similarity and difference, beauty and ugliness, good and bad, etc. (186) - that extend beyond perceptions as such. A definition of judgement is provided: 'that activity of the soul when it is busy by itself about the things which are' (187). Theaetetus proffers a new definition of knowledge as 'true judgement' (187b).

10.6

There is a digression earlier in the dialogue concerning how a philosopher differs from an ordinary person (172d-177b). The philosopher has 'plenty of time' to think - to consider broadly the nature of truth, justice and the universe - whereas the 'practical man' is 'bent and distorted' by his myopic focus on immediate matters and his own self interest (173b). Socrates explains that, in preferring the life of the soul, only the philosopher's 'body lives and sleeps in the city' (173e).

> The scramblings of political cliques for office; social functions, dinners, parties with flute girls - such doings never enter his head even in a dream (173d).

This leisured freedom and this essential concern with virtue and justice links the philosopher to the sphere of the gods, whereas the ordinary, mortally bound person is 'a bad man tied to bad company' (177). Although removed from the main argument, this portrait of the philosopher anticipates the specific role for philosophy in pursuing the possibility of 'true judgement' (187b) and lucid scope for beneficial futures.

9

NIGHT B

NB.1

My process. I read and take scribbled notes. I leave things for a while (maybe a few hours or overnight). I write some summary text and comments, referring to my notes and the relevant section of reading. Once done, I copy the text into images and post to *Instagram*. There are always typos and bits of awkward prose that only become apparent once I've posted. So I remove the post, do my best to fix issues and then post again.

NB. 2

Very evidently, I am not reading Plato in Ancient Greek. I am reading his work in English. This makes it less like walking across a landscape than riding a bicycle or catching a bus. My journey is ordinary rather than remarkable. Many others have read Plato's entire corpus without feeling any need to (tediously) document their efforts.

NB. 3

I realise that I am attracting no further readers. Once again, I am uncertain about continuing. It weighs upon me that what I am doing is pointless. It is not even evidently pointless. It is just literally, invisibly without point.

NB. 4

What is the relevance of all this discussion of knowing to contemporary circumstances? Firstly, my own circumstances. What can I know about knowing? How does Theaetetus contribute to my sense of knowing? I pose this question with a recognition of the limited time I have available to reflect knowingly on any of this. Knowing less accumulates into a permanent pile than coheres briefly and blows away - framed on each side by oblivion.

NB. 5

Of course, there is also the issue that we scarcely know anything ourselves. We experience our ordinary lives, sure, but knowledge itself takes shape as a wider store. It is not something that we can ever individually possess. We tap into it but have no means of comprehending it as a whole. It is detached from any intimate human scene of knowing. Knowing involves a complex process of mediation, of finding one's way (or becoming lost) in the essential distance of what is known.

NB. 6

Apart from the mediated and ephemeral nature of knowing, there are any number of associated and more immediate issues. How can I tell this email is not a scam? Is that person really speaking to me or are they just an AI bot? Lies, simulations, misrepresentations. Who's to know?

NB. 7

Science was once represented as an authoritative context for knowing. But now that it turns its attention to the ecological consequences of capitalist modernity its epistemological authority is questioned. Rather than a neutral mechanism for knowledge acquisition it is charged with systemic error, political motivation and a lack of common sense. In its efforts to highlight the dangers of our current situation - our recklessness - it is dismissed as exaggerated, fanciful and doom-mongering. Evident here are the twisted vestiges of a former, more credible critique of scientific epistemology. Suspending altogether any naive faith in scientific fact, the influence of value is recognised everywhere. In this fashion, critique is redeployed to serve

an altogether different purpose. The authority of science is undermined not to expose a destructive and inequitable modernity but to maintain the latter's maleficent influence.

NB. 8

A feature of the dialogue stands out for me - the relationship it describes between knowing and beneficial action. Whereas epistemology is focused on the possibility of knowing itself, here the issue of knowing is linked to its practical usefulness. This is pertinent to our current circumstances, in which we confront profound social, economic and environmental crises. We know these crises only too well but seem unable to act on them. Knowing has become detached from any scope for coherent wisdom or adequate action.

NB. 9

We deliberately turn away from the future. The underlying question for us is less simply 'how to know' than 'how to discover any will to know'. This is particularly evident when relevant efforts at knowing - those that are directed towards elaborating a better future - very plainly conflict with anything that we happen to will for just now (wealth, material possessions, overseas holidays, etc.).

10

THEAETETUS (CONT.)

Day 11

- *pp.207-222*
- *Stephanus: 187b-200e*

11.1

Having rejected any notion that knowledge can be conceived in terms of particular fields of enquiry or as identical with the flux of perception, the discussion turns to knowledge as true judgement. Although the focus on judgement acknowledges the rational character of knowing - the cognitive work of recognising aspects of identity, similarity, difference, etc. - this activity is represented in largely passive terms. If modern philosophy and psychology conceive mobile processes of cognition, involving a rich interplay of perception, memory, anticipation and action, here knowing is objectified as knowledge. It is linked to the capacity to record and recover bits and pieces of independently existing stuff - sensible impressions and self-evident features of identity and difference. Is this simply in the interests of maintaining a consistent

critique of empirical epistemology, with its confusion of the sensible and the intelligible, or does it represent a very different epistemology from our own - one that is less centrally focused on any specifically human activity of knowing?

II.2

Theaetetus acknowledges that there are two forms of judgement - the false and the true. Knowledge is defined as only relating to the latter. It is conceived as true judgement. In this respect, the false and the true are distinguished prior to even fully comprehending what judgement involves (187c). This provides the major reason why this definition of knowledge is ultimately rejected - inasmuch as it defines particular classes of judgement prior to considering judgement itself. Initially, however, Socrates is prepared to consider Theaetetus' proposed distinction. More particularly he focuses on the nature of false judgement. How is false judgement possible? At one level this engages a series of increasingly complex logical puzzles concerning the relation between the known and the unknown, the perceived and the unperceived. At another level, it introduces complications within the process of knowing - for instance, the potentially poor recording and recall of impressions and thoughts. It should be emphasised that the model of judgement is largely that of recognition - of recognising that the person you see is the one you know or that the sum of 7 and 5 is twelve.

II.3

I'm unsure that I can cogently summarise the logical critique of the notion of false judgement. It hinges on the point that something cannot be known and not known at once. In this sense, the not known (which is conceived as coextensive with falsity) can never logically constitute the basis of a judgement. It can never strictly speaking adopt the guise of knowledge.

> But a man certainly does not think that things he knows are things he does not know, or again things he doesn't know are things he knows. (188c)

We can imagine all kinds of commonsense objections. Of course you can mis-recognise something. Of course you can think you know when you are actually mistaken. Here, however, the point is that we remain deeply unclear about what true and false judgement involves. It contains paradoxes that we brush aside and, in so doing, lose the capacity to consider what knowledge genuinely entails.

II.4

In order to consider the possibility of false judgement beyond the simple paradox that it not possible to know something that is false (and therefore not legitimately known), Socrates conceives additional difficulties in terms of the storage and recall of knowledge. He employs two metaphors to conceive how judgement can go astray - how it can disrupt any context of immediate truth. The first metaphor affects the thinking of how knowledge is inscribed and stored in the soul. Instead of the transparent recording of impressions, the metaphor of a wax block suggests that things can be represented imperfectly. Socrates describes impure souls for whom their wax is '"shaggy"' - 'with earth or filth mixed all through it' and taking 'indistinct impressions' (194e). A second metaphor affects the capacity to recall existing knowledge. Stored knowledge is conceived as elusive. Think of wild birds (the stuff we know) that are hunted, captured and kept in aviary (197c), We may '"possess"' the birds but we scarcely '"have"' (197b) them 'ready to hand' (198d). We grasp at them but often miss or grasp the wrong bird altogether. A gap is projected within the space of knowing between knowing and the known. This provides another potential basis for false judgement.

II.5

Both of these imagined mechanisms of false judgement are rejected. Socrates stresses that the metaphor of the wax block highlights a potential misalignment between perception and thought (195d). However, this fails to account for false judgements that may arise in thought itself - for instance, in the calculation of the sum of two numbers. Here, however, I find myself confused. If both sensible impressions and rationally grounded calculations are written to the wax block and then subsequently read off it (as manifestations of

knowing) (196), then surely impurities of the wax can affect both sense and thought? In any case, I would have thought that the notion of reading necessarily incorporates an aspect of perception. How can the wax block be read without conceiving the potential for an infinite regress of wax copies (endlessly potentially misaligned)? Of course, this is also most likely why Socrates finally altogether rejects the metaphor of the wax memory device - because it disrupts any thought of the integral immediacy of knowing.

11.6

The aviary argument is refuted on the basis that it represents knowing as indistinguishable from not knowing. The owner of the wild birds is positioned as merely possessing knowledge. They are a vacant knowing agent who must clutch at birds to know anything and instantly lose that knowledge when they release their grip. The metaphor highlights an awkwardly close, even inextricable, relationship between knowing and not knowing, knowledge and ignorance. This confusion is unsettling and profoundly affects any capacity to properly consider the nature of knowledge. According to Socrates, in a similar manner to the logical puzzles of the known and the unknown, the metaphor of the wax block and the aviary represent superfluous complications that fail to illuminate whatever knowing represents. Rather than clarifying what knowing involves, they suggest the need for more and more devices to make (less and less) sense of things. Overall, recourse to this technological labyrinth leads us astray from any adequate conception of knowledge (200b).

11.7

Early in the discussion of false judgement, prior to the mention of the wax block and the aviary, Socrates describes a set of fourteen logical postulates representing incompatible states of knowledge (192-192c). Each is a pair and adopts the form that one thing is not identical to another on specified conditions. So, for example, one thing cannot be known and not known at once. The conditions extend beyond simply known and unknown. They also involve, for instance, whether or not something is perceived. With these options in mind, I recognise the possibility of diagramming the various postulates on a

two dimensional grid that maps between the poles of the known and the unknown, the perceived and the unperceived. I doubt, however, that this clarifies matters. If anything, it possibly demonstrates Socrates' ironic relation to efforts to precisely distinguish between true and false knowledge.

II.8

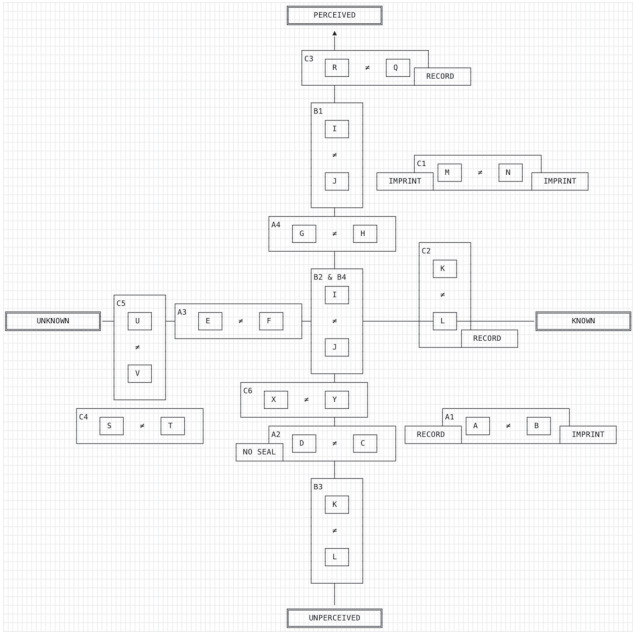

Fig. 2. *The various sets of incompatible states of knowing described in Theaetetus 192-192c.*

- *A1-A4: first set of 4 postulates*
- *B1-B4: second set of 4 postulates*
- *C1-C6: final 6 postulates*

Note: if an element is displayed directly on an axes then it partakes only of that axes, with no indication of its relation to the other axes.

II.9

An interesting feature of the diagram (fig.2) is that includes addi-

tional dimensions beyond the two I had anticipated. Beyond knowing and perceiving there is also mention at times of whether something is a 'record', 'imprint' or 'seal' (192-192c). This seems curious. These postulates are presented prior to mention of any particular mechanisms of knowing. Yet, retrospectively, we can plainly recognise feature of the wax block metaphor. What are the implications? Does this render the notion of a mechanism less a fanciful imposition than an un-theorised assumption? Or is Plato deliberately mocking the laboured complexity and presuppositions of existing traditions of epistemological argument?

Day 12

Theaetetus

- pp.222-234
- 200d-210d

12.1

I have been making slow progress through the dialogue and only just managing to follow the complex argument. We are nearing the end but must persevere a bit longer.

12.2

Socrates urges Theaetetus to think again. What is the nature of knowledge? Theaetetus cannot find any means of thinking beyond his definition of true judgement. Pressing harder, Socrates provides the example of a court case in which a lawyer persuades a jury about the nature of a crime so that they can judge correctly. The jury has no knowledge of what actually happened. They must rely on what the lawyer argues. In these circumstances, Socrates argues, perceptible knowing can be distinguished from true judgement. This encourages Theaetetus to recall something he had forgotten (as thought it were a dream). A person had once explained to him that knowledge is 'true judgement with an account' (201d). The account (*logos*) can be likened

to the lawyer's speech. It confirms knowledge in a situation in which knowledge itself is unavailable. Apart from this obvious paradox, the new definition does precisely the opposite of what Socrates requests. Instead of focusing on knowledge itself (200d), it adds an additional feature, the account.

12.3

Socrates responds to this new definition with his own dream. He 'thought he was listening to people' who explained that there can be no account given of the fundamental elements of perception, only of the complex things formed from simple elements. The primary elements are unknowable. Only that which is complex can be lent an account and known. In their ineffable singularity, the primary elements resist the generality of language. Nothing can be said about them - they can only be named (201e-202b). Focusing on this link to the theme of language, Socrates relates the primary elements to the letters of the alphabet and the complex entities to syllables, which can literally be spoken (202e). Focusing on this example - and this underlying model of the logos - Socrates proceeds to refute this dreamed conception.

12.4

Socrates argues that the complex things (the syllables) can only be explained in relation to their constituent elements (letters). In other words, one must know the elements in order to know the complexes. In any case, he observes pragmatically, this is how we learn language (from a knowledge of the letters upwards to syllables, words, sentences, etc.) (205c). More subtly, Socrates demonstrates that if the complex thing can be known and if the whole is the same thing as the sum of its parts then the parts themselves, as aspects of the complex, must be knowable. If on the other hand, one insists on the simple integrity of any whole (its indivisibility into parts), then the whole appears exactly similar to the primary elements and is presumably unknowable and unspeakable. It would seem that however one conceives the relation between parts and whole the dreamed account of the nature of the logos is contradictory.

12.5

Finally, Socrates turns to the meaning of 'account' itself. He describes and rejects three different conceptions of the logos. The first is simply a verbal expression of the correct judgement, which he regards as redundant. It is always possible but accomplishes nothing in securing judgement any further. The second involves the elucidation of the parts of any particular thing that is judged. Here Socrates objects that the enumeration of parts hardly demonstrates any integral understanding of the principles in which they are brought together. Finally, providing an adequate account in linked to a differentiation of the thing judged from other things. Socrates rejects this as well because it simply introduces an additional layer of required knowing. Logically, it produces the formula, KNOWLEDGE = CORRECT JUDGEMENT + KNOWLEDGE OF DIFFERENCE. Appearing on both sides of the equation, knowledge is scarcely adequately explained.

12.6

The dialogue ends in aporia. Socrates, the mid-wife, admits that he has presided over the birth of a series of 'wind-eggs', none of which are 'worth bringing up' (210b). If nothing else, Socrates hopes to have made Theaetetus 'gentler and less tiresome', with a sense of modesty about what he knows (210c).

11

SOPHIST

Day 13

- *pp.236-255*
- *Stephanus: 216-235b*

13.1

The first of two dialogues that consider the nature of the sophist, the statesman and the philosopher (although actually only the the first two of these professions are explicitly considered). Socrates introduces a visitor from Elea (the city of Parmenides and Zeno). He is a philosopher but never named. Socrates also introduces the initial problem - that genuine philosophers are often confused with sophists, statesman and the literally insane (216c). He asks the visitor to lead this first dialogue in which they will consider the character of the sophist. Theaetetus is once again positioned as interlocutor. The visitor proposes employing a process of taxonomic differentiation to identify the particular expertise of sophistry. Acknowledging that this is a complex expertise, he opts to begin with an apparently simple example - an angler (fisher-

person) (219-221c). The following diagram charts his overall taxonomic analysis of how angling can be differentiated from other forms of expertise.

13.2

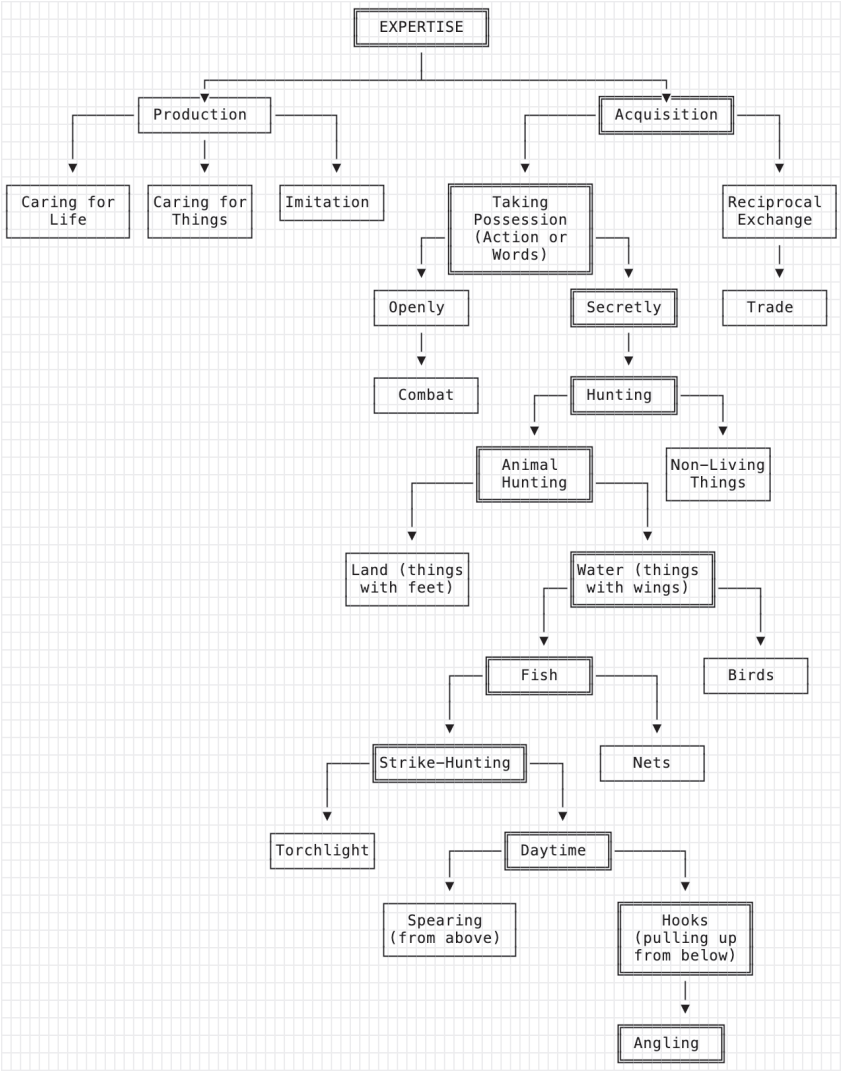

Fig. 3. Angling as a distinct form of expertise.

13.3

I'm not sure how much credence Plato gives to this taxonomic approach, but experience with object-oriented programming suggests that there is no neutral schema of analysis. Any system of entity identity and relations depends upon conceiving overall contexts of purposive action. There are any number of ways of defining things depending upon whatever it is that you aim to accomplish. The process of scientific discrimination may seem to have a less instrumentally motivated aspect, but still encodes a particular view of the world. Linnaeus himself acknowledged the artificial character of his biological taxonomy, which emphasised sexual features of identity and differentiation. Very simply, the world - its apparent order - can always be represented in other terms. In this sense, even something as concrete as angling has no self-evident (218d) position in any naturally given schema of expertise. Alongside, for instance, the hunting of fish (acquisition) there can also be the farming of fish (production - care of life), which nonetheless involves a variety of means of capture (netting and hooking) when the fish are harvested. Of course the farming of fish was probably not common in Ancient Greece but this only emphasises the culturally situated character of the schema.

13.4

Sophistry is positioned as a more complex expertise than angling. The visitor describes a number of different taxonomies for conceiving it. Clearly enough, despite the insistence on a simply descriptive logic, these taxonomies all represent analogical critiques of sophistry - a craven 'hunting' of young men for profit, an equally craven form of economic 'exchange', or as a money-making form of verbal 'combat'. These taxonomies are represented in the following three diagrams.

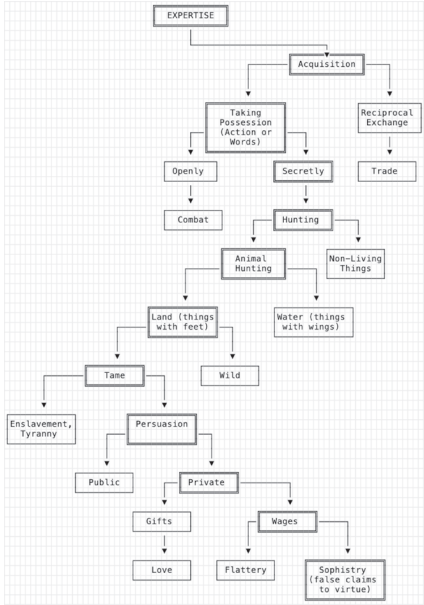

Fig. 4. Sophistry as hunting.

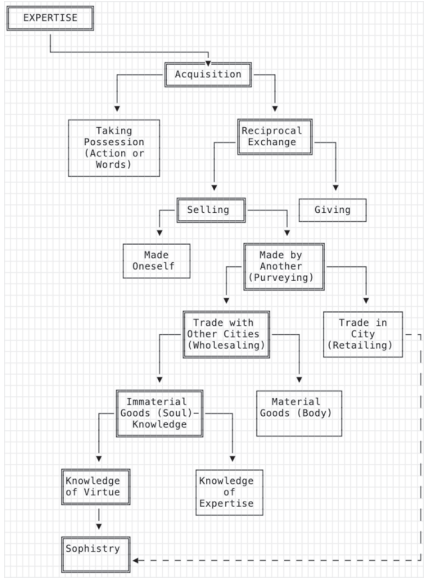

Fig. 5. Sophistry as exchange.

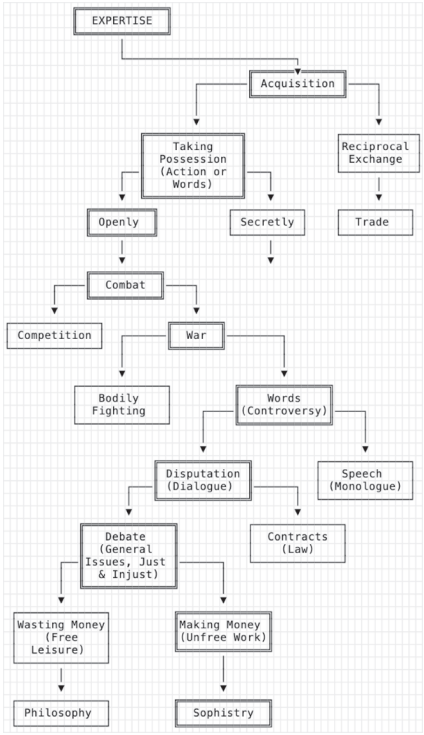

Fig. 6. Sophistry as combat.

13.5

Note to self: the fundamental problem of society that Plato brushes away as though it were simply a matter of virtue. How can anybody discover the leisure to either teach or study? How can a teacher and a student share a relation of leisure together, without one being forced to charge in order to survive and the other compelled to pay? Only a context of aristocratic wealth makes this possible. There is certainly no scope to find time alongside work because that undermines the essential principle of the just city - the resolute and necessary focus on expertise (see *Republic*). See also Jacques Ranciere's *Proletarian Nights*, with its examination of 19th century working class efforts to subvert regimes of proper expertise.)

13.6

We can get a sense of where this heading. All of this complex

analysis indicates that the expertise of sophistry is slippery and confused. The whole difficulty of precisely positioning it indicates a lack of any genuine, clearly differentiated identity (232). Significantly, the theme of differentiation serves not only as a method of analysis but is highlighted as fundamental to what both philosophers and sophists claim they do, which is to filter the good from the bad (representing the latter as ignorance). This intellectual cleansing is conducted through education and verbal cross-examination. Yet sophists are 'imitators', 'cheats' and 'magicians' (234b-235b). They are cunning wolves rather than friendly dogs (philosophers). They portray themselves as knowing everything (233) when the genuine philosopher (Socrates, of course) acknowledges that he knows nothing.

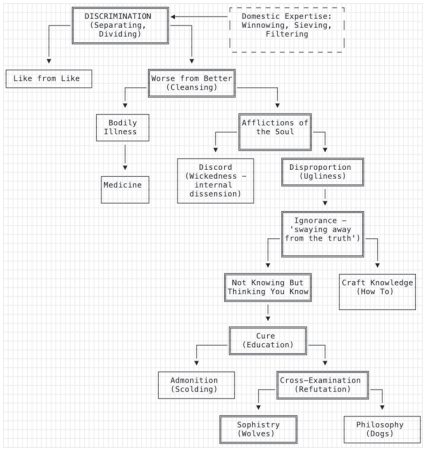

Fig. 7. Sophistry as (wolfish) discrimination.

12

LULL 1

L.1

A lull is not quite a day and not quite a night. It might be a single afternoon or several days (and nights). A lull occurs either when I am busy doing other things or when I cannot think what to write. I may be stuck, caught reading and re-reading perhaps, unable to adequately comprehend and summarise things - and unwilling simply to pass over them. Unsure how many lulls there will be, but hoping only a handful.

L.2

I need to think longer about whatever the *Sophist* is saying. The early taxonomic portion of the dialogue is ok, but the target subsequently shifts from defining sophistry as such to the difficulty of delineating its specific falsehood. This involves offering a critique of Parmenides' metaphysics - particularly his notion that it is impossible to speak cogently about non-being. Plato can only pinpoint how sophistry goes astray by refuting this position - that once can, without self-contradiction, speak falsely. Apart from the complexity of Plato's argument, there is also the rich opacity of Parmenides' argument. Hence the lull...

L.3

I also need to clean out the garage.

L.4

This lull is followed by another delaying manoeuvre - a digression to consider Parmenides.

13

DIGRESSION A

Part A

DPA.1

While other Pre-Socratics had proposed natural substances as the basis/beginning (*arche*) of all things - water, fire, earth, air, etc. - Parmenides asserts the primacy of being itself, which is determined logically - and more specifically, through arguing the impossibility of conceiving anything other than being. All that remains of his philosophy are fragments from a hexameter poem, *On Nature*.[1] The poem has three parts:

1. a mythological introduction (proem), explaining how the knowledge in the poem was obtained from a goddess;
2. a philosophical argument about the nature of being (the way of truth);

1. A very useful translation by Rose Cherubin is available here: https://mason.gmu.edu/

3. a cosmological account of the universe (the way of opinion).

The second and third parts are contrasted as the 'way of truth' and the 'way of opinion' - the former involves metaphysical enquiry and the latter speculation on the natural world.

DPA.2

It is worth reviewing these three sections of the poem in greater detail.

1. P*roem*

Parmenides recounts travelling on a burning chariot drawn by mares and led by the daughters of the Sun to the gates of night and day. The gates are presided over by Justice. They open to provide access to a goddess (who will explain the pathways of truth and opinion). Barnes describes this introduction as of 'little philosophical importance'.[2] Yet, alongside the philosophical relevance of linking access to wisdom to the passage to the afterlife (a conceit also, as we have seen, employed by Plato), there is also the interesting sense it which the events of the proem contrast to the specific conditions of the way of truth. The section is replete with multiplicity ('many-voiced road') motion (spinning chariot wheels, 'Sun-maidens hastening', opening gates), contrasts and oppositions (night/day, bottom/top, open/closed) and plays of presence and absence (the pushed veils, the 'spreading' 'yawning gap' as the gates open). The possibility of the true philosophical path, which involves sameness and seamless continuity, is framed by circumstances that align closely with the deceptive way of opinion.

2. The way of truth

2. Barnes, Jonathon (1979) *Early Greek Philosophy*, p.156

Adopting a lofty, metaphysical perspective, the goddess explains the genuine nature of being. After distinguishing the two main paths of truth and opinion - the first associated with the intellect (immutable truth) and the other with sensory perception (ephemeral experience and mortal belief) - the goddess distinguishes two subsidiary paths within the way of truth. The first (A), which she explains is the only credible way, is an assertion of being ('that it is and cannot not be'). The second (B), the 'way beyond all tidings', is a misguided pathway - a logical alternative to the way of truth that asserts non-being ('that it is not and must not be'). In rendering a void, in positioning 'it' as non-being, it can say nothing at all about anything. It provides no basis for cogent thought or speech. The goddess proceeds to consider the positive character of being in greater detail, enumerating its particular features and explaining its relation to rational thought.

3. The way of opinion

The longest but now very fragmentary section considers a third option - a worldly and illogical pathway (C), in which absorption in the flux of perceptual experience suggests a multiplicity of particular things and a close intermingling of aspects of being and non-being. Adopting this flawed, mortal perspective, the goddess explains how the opposition between darkness and light provides the basis for the motion of the cosmos, while love provides the motive force for animated life. However, very little remains, as I say, of this more characteristically pre-Socratic cosmological account.

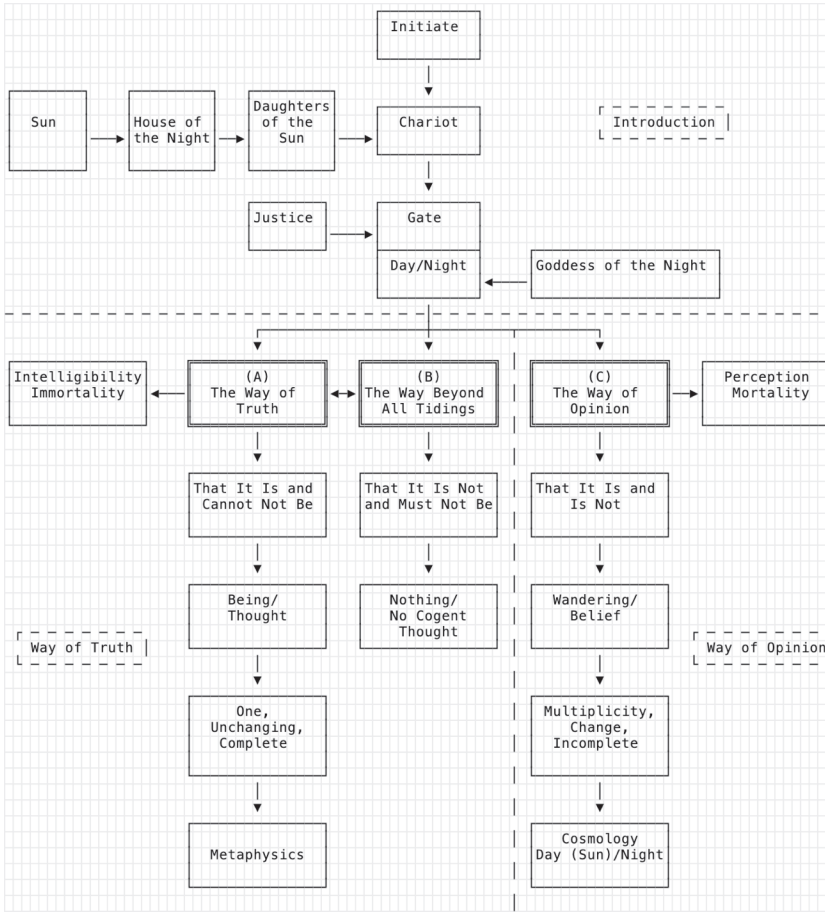

Fig. 8. Parmenides, On Nature - an overview

DPA.3

It is worth returning to the metaphysical section (B) and working more closely through the main points:

Being

Parmenides asserts the primacy of being. 'It is and it necessarily must be' identifies a dimension of abstract being that affects everything. Non-being is literally excluded as a coherent option (for

thought and speech). It seems ironic, nonetheless, that the notion of negation provides the logical means for framing the necessity of positive being.

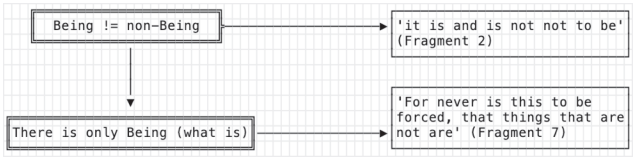

Fig. 9. Only being.

The One

On the basis of the ineluctable character of being and its pertinence to everything, various features of 'it' are deduced: 'it' is singular (One), continuous, whole, indivisible, unmoving, immutable and infinite. If 'it' were moving, for instance, then 'it' would be in one place but not another, which would involve an untenable aspect of non-being. In its relentless being, 'it' can permit nothing whatsoever to divide itself from itself.

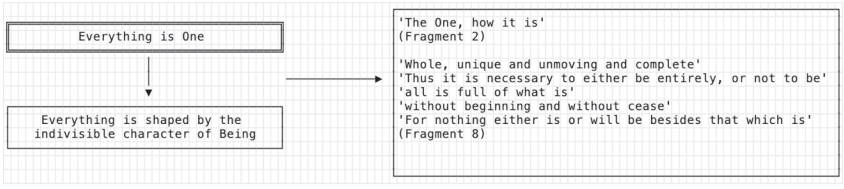

Fig. 10. The One

Thought

A close relation between thought and being is proposed. It is difficult, however, to precisely determine what this means. Arguably being and rationally lucid thought are positioned as identical, yet the sense of a residual gap remains - indicated, for instance, in the last

quote in the diagram below that describes a relation of dependence rather than strict equivalence. In any case, this conception of a close relation between being and thought can be regarded as fundamental to the entire field of metaphysics and its notion of intelligibly inscribed truth.

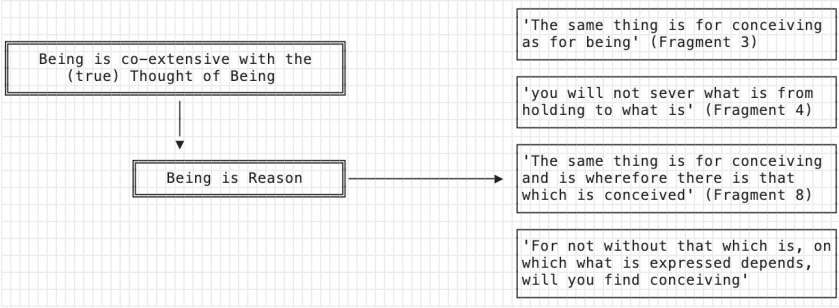

Fig. 11. Being/Intelligibility

Reason

Parmenides argues that the true thinking of being stems not from perceptual engagement with the world but from rationally based metaphysical reflection. Yet notice the last two quotes. How can the play of the 'absent and present' be recognised when there is nothing but being? How can the intellect be so removed from the body when the limbs preserve the same nature (form) as the 'thing that thinks' (apprehends)?

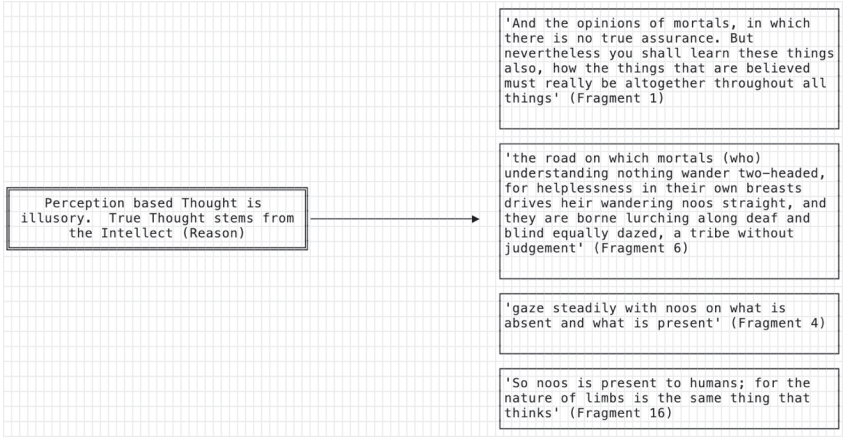

Fig. 12. Reason versus perception

DPA.4

This will have to do as a summary of Parmenides' overall philosophy. Now to consider the arguments more critically and speculatively. Of course, there is a vast secondary literature on Parmenides that deserves consideration. However, my major focus is Plato, not Parmenides. Within this context, better that I risk superficiality than digress even further.

Part B

DPB.1

For Parmenides, everything is one, indivisible, unmoving and infinite. This conception emerges not from the evidence of sensible experience, but more from austerely logical reflection. If we acknowledge, as Parmenides contends, that being and non-being are logically incompatible, if we recognise that there is no possibility that they can co-exist, many implications follow. For a start, there is only being because being cannot contain non-being and non-being cannot logi-

cally be. There can be no thought of non-being because that would be to think of nothing - and nothing can scarcely coherently exist. Furthermore, If there is only being there cannot be many things but only one. Otherwise, being would be composed of all kinds of other things that are not the same as it, providing instances of its own non-being. Similarly, being cannot be divided up into separate things because this would project an interior field of non-being as distinct parts necessarily discover their particular identity through what they are not. Nor finally can 'the One' be born, grow, move or die. All motion and change are refused because they involve a thinking of spaces and occasions in which being is not. Overall, being can only be coherently thought in terms of its singular, continuous, changeless and infinite character.

DPB.2

The dilemma with this conception is that it affects everything and is itself ultimately unthinkable and unsayable. Parmenides argues most basically that 'it is' but what is 'it' precisely. The notion of 'it' assumes something that can be recognised - something identifiable (even as a shadowy figure at the door) - but if 'it' can permit nothing that literally distinguishes it, if 'it' is utterly singular, continuous and extensive then it can hardly represent any kind of particular thing. Its entire identity is determined in terms of its resistance to coherent apprehension as anything finite and specific. In the same manner that non-being cannot be thought as in any way being, so too being cannot be thought in terms of the dimensions of non-being that would allow it to take coherent shape as any kind of 'it'. The simple logic of an entirely exclusive relationship between being and non-being renders both being and non-being incoherent, especially when there is an effort to privilege just one of the two terms - and, more particularly, to excise non-being altogether. These implications push the overall schema towards logical collapse.

DPB.3

For example, if what is thought must be then non-being must also somehow be - in that it is at least negatively conceived. Parmenides would like to exclude non-being, but this implies that non-being is

being thought (in order to be excluded). In becoming a focus of thought, it plainly accords with the conditions of being. Arguably, Parmenides excludes non-being less strictly logically than in terms of the ordinary conditions of presence - as something perceptibly evident (the way of opinion). A more strictly logical analysis surely demands the being of both terms. They are given as a logical pair, not entirely on their own. Being without the thought of non-being is literally unthinkable.

DPB.4

The features that Parmenides determines in the 'it' lack any exclusively positive character. Singularity avoids (but also depends upon) the thinking of number and multiplicity. Continuity avoids (but depends upon) the thinking of division. Changelessness avoids (but very plainly depends upon) the thinking of change. Infinitude avoids (but depends upon) the thinking of finitude. In any case, these features certainly do not identify any specific 'it'. Most obviously, these features could just as easily be 'identified' with non-being. They provide no useful means of distinguishing being from non-being.

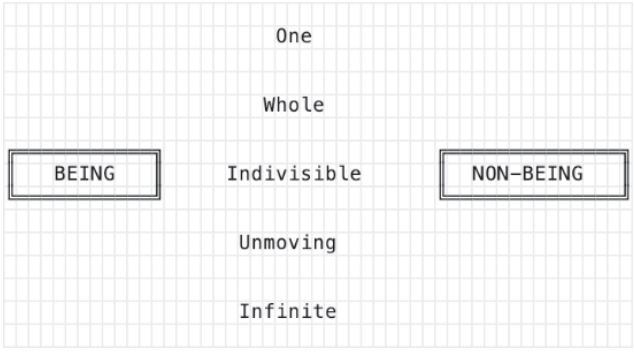

Fig.13. Being/Non-Being

DPB.5

Parmenides' 'it' is hard to fathom. Let's try a formula:

it = being (= everything)

But I have just argued the paradoxical character of the 'it', as well as its essential feature of non-being:

it != it
non-being = being

This would imply logically and illogically:

it = non-being
being = non-being

We are left in confusion. One way out of this dilemma may be to think less exclusively:

it = the conjunction of being and non-being

This is useful, but it still tends to conceive being and non-being as separable. There is a need to stress that they always come as a pair *'k'*:

k = (being/non-being)
it = the mobilisation of k

DPB.6
I avoid saying more simply:

it = k

Because this would categorise 'it' in entirely metaphysical terms, losing sight of any specific identifiable features.

In any case, k is not quite a thing in the ordinary sense. Inasmuch as it is simply the logical pair (being/non-being), it does not seem sufficient to represent an 'it' except metaphorically as a means of

representing this concept as though it were a thing. We do this in order to think and speak, but I am not sure that we can apply the thingness of the abstraction to the thinking of thingness itself - particularly when the abstraction is regarded as coextensive with the thing, when it lends it all its distinguishing features. This suggests that the thing is manifest in only its being/non-being. In these terms, we end up conceiving the thing in terms of its subsequent logical abstraction - losing sight in this manner of both the thing and our abstractions - both their difference from one another and their meaningful relation.

DPB.7

The circularity of this conception is worth emphasising. It as though we said 'a frog is green' and on this basis asserted that the frog = green. The frog certainly has the property green but that hardly encompasses its identity altogether. It represents one among any number of properties of the frog. More specifically, it represents an additional qualification of the frog - so that we can distinguish it from a frog that is orange or blue. However, 'it is' or 'it = being' conceives being not simply as a malleable property of 'it' but as a constitutive existential feature. In this way there is blurring of the difference between entities and properties. The logic of Parmenides scheme plays on a confusion between 'itness' and the property of being.

DPB.8

While Parmenides recognises the exclusive relation between being/non-being and the excluded middle of coincident being+non-being, he does not consider another logical option: neither being nor non-being. The latter is relevant because it opens up the possibility that whatever it is that can be thought (the 'it') may either have or **not** have the property of being. While this can appear illogical in terms of our ordinary understanding of being, it is not illogical at the level in which being is being conceived - that is as a full logical set of options. The neither/nor option is logical and fundamentally affects any sense that things must simply be.

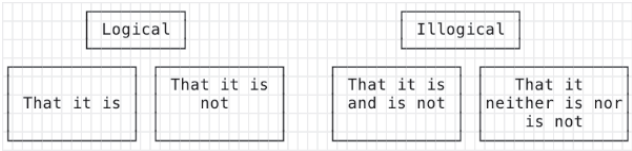

Fig. 14. Logical/Illogical options

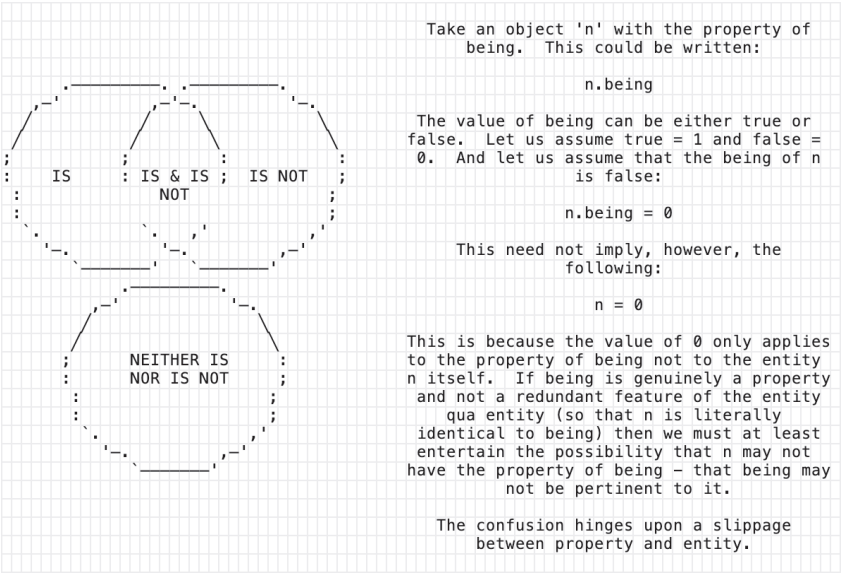

Fig. 15. Neither-nor.

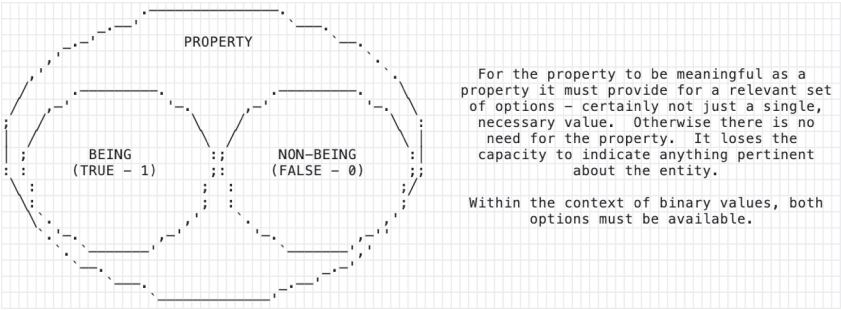

Fig. 16. Being as property.

Part C

DPC.1

A FEW ADDITIONAL thoughts on Parmenides.

The goddess begins by explaining the need to attend to 'everything', including 'both the un-shaking heart of well-rounded truth and the opinions of mortals, in which there is no true assurance' (Fragment 1). We then, following the privileged pathway of truth, learn of 'the one, how it is and how it is not not to be' (Fragment 2). What is the relationship between the initial 'everything', which includes both truth and opinion and the second 'one', which is conceived as just one of two pathways within the way of truth (the other is, of course, is 'how it is not and how it is necessary for it not to be' (Fragment 2). How can the('the one' be a subset of the 'everything'? Is a wider view required to take 'everything' in - one more extensive than just recognising 'it' and 'being' itself? But this would seem to render 'it' and 'being' as no longer precisely co-extensive with thought. Thought would appear to conceive things more broadly. Yet this also makes no sense because the the notion of being's indivisible and infinite sway depends precisely upon the integral conditions of thought - upon insisting upon the absolute, notional (logical) priority of being-thought.

DPC.2

It is worth observing that although Plato argues that Parmenides denies the possibility of falsehood altogether, this is only true if we restrict our gaze to the secondary infinity of indivisible being. If we consider Parmenides' scheme more generally, he plainly does acknowledge falsehood. It is associated with the way of opinion. It figures in the broader universe of everything that must be attended to and known.

DPC.3

The ways of truth and of opinion involve a common work of

apprehension (holding) and discrimination ('picking out'). The way of opinion attends to perceptual differences (dark/light, high/low, etc.), while the way of truth attends to logical antinomies (being/non-being). Nonetheless, a profound parting of ways is conceived between these modes of thinking and knowing. Why? I guess, in order to conceive the integral ground of metaphysical truth? But how is this tenable, especially when any 'picking out' necessarily involves differentiation - and hence a play of presence and absence, being and non-being? Wouldn't this indicate an aspect of logical thought within our experience of the tangible world and the trace of tangible difference within metaphysics?

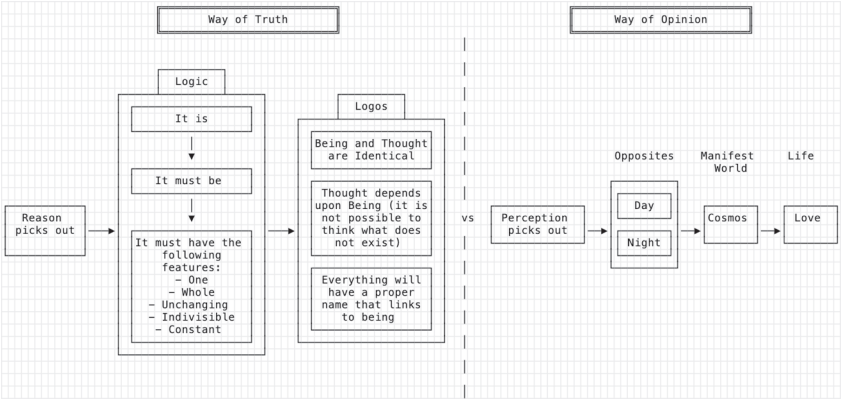

Fig. 17. Way of Truth/Way of Opinion

DPC.4

If there is a symmetry between the way of truth and the way of opinion then what place does love play within metaphysics? If love is the motive force for animate life (within the way of opinion) then what is the motive force for motionless thought (within the way of truth)? Perhaps love corresponds to the logical set of being/non-being? How, however, does love relate to the solitude of metaphysics - its wish to subsist entirely on its own, purely and integrally composed, utterly separate from the field of ordinary experience?

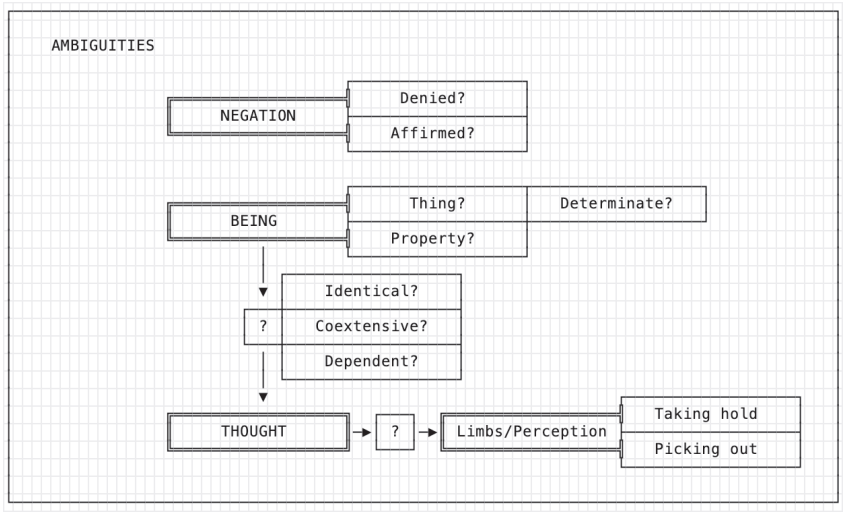

Fig. 18. Layers of Ambiguity

DPC.5

The argument against falsehood goes like this. A falsehood indicates something that does not exist. Something that does not exist is effectively nothing. To say something is nothing makes no sense (in the sense that something and nothing are exclusive states). In these terms, any statement of falsehood is constitutively illogical. While strangely beguiling, this argument is counter-intuitive and itself falls apart on closer inspection. More particularly, it ignores the positive character of any falsehood. A falsehood does not correspond to nothing but rather manifests a positive untruth.

DPC.6

Falsehoods exist. A falsehood does not make something that is nothing exist. It plays on the gap between statements and existential reality. In their semantic character, statements clearly draw from aspects of cultural meaning, which includes reference to features of wider reality, but this hardly establishes any necessary relation between a statement and the existence of any particular thing. Statements need not even be made by a person. Countless statements can be generated within a fraction of a second by a computer (a server

script generating, for instance, a stack of scam emails). They can be generated stochastically from the random permutation of language features. They can be generated to appear human from AI systems. Statements add to the stock of existing things - and typically pass out of existence just as quickly - but they need not have any wider existential implications. In their proliferation they need not manifest any literal non-being.

DPC.7

When faced with the choice between logical consistency and expressive capability, far better to choose the latter. This is relevant to everything from zero and negative numbers to the term 'not' itself. How else are we to explain that we do 'not' have a gun in our pocket or did 'not' steal a chicken? How else can be communicate that we do 'not' have any money or there is 'nothing' there?

DPC.8

Thinking about the overall structure of Parmenides' poem, perhaps philosophy has its basis less in metaphysical insight or close consideration of the natural world than in the determination ('picking out') of a gap between truth and opinion - rendering some, very few, people wise and the rest ignorant?

14

SOPHIST (CONT.)

Day 14

- pp.254-271
- Stephanus: 234-249

14.1

I finally feel more confident in returning to the *Sophist*. I have lost my place and need to briefly backtrack. We can recall that the dialogue aims to identify the specific expertise of sophistry. A method of division is employed to demonstrate that sophistry is difficult to pin down, appearing in multiple places across multiple efforts at precise identification. This is regarded as a sign of its impropriety. Sophistry is a portrayed as a shape shifter, putting on airs of 'knowing everything' and playing a 'game' of imitation (234). On this basis, a key feature of its expertise is clarified. Sophistry involves deceiving people, 'make(ing) them believe) by providing 'spoken copies of everything'. The sophist is 'a kind of cheat who imitates real things' (234c).

14.2

As a good philosophical hunter, the Visitor sets out to snare the sophist 'beast'. Employing his skills in division, he examines the issue of imitation. He distinguishes two different types: the first adheres to the true proportions of the thing copied (producing a 'likeness'); the second veers away from truth in order to fashion something appealing to the eye (an 'appearance') (235e). Sophistry is associated with the latter but either way the notion of imitation is recognised as problematic. It represents a novel and confused plane of existence - 'seeming but not being' (236d). In Parmenides' terms, representation manifests the contradiction, 'that which is not is'. The awkward existential status of the copy pinpoints the fundamental question for the dialogue. How is falsehood possible? How can sophistry be coherently identified and named?

14.3

As discussed in my digression, Parmenides' metaphysics provides no means of conceiving the possibility of falsehood, because falsehood is associated with non-being and non-being is regarded as logically untenable. I should qualify this, however, because Parmenides' wider philosophical scheme does acknowledge falsehood (the way of opinion) but Plato leaves aside this more inclusive conception. Following the strictly logical Parmenides, the Visitor argues that it is not even possible to coherently speak falsely. The Visitor recognises an intimate relation between language (naming), thought and being that suggests the impossibility of designating that which is not: 'What should the name, *that which is not*, be applied to?' (237c). Overall, Parmenides' logic makes it difficult to identify sophistry - to define it as the thinking and expression of falsehood. It also provides no means of comprehending the phenomenon of the copy, which seems to partake of truth and falsity at once (240).

14.4

If the first gesture of philosophy involves a differentiation between the few who know and the wider realm of common opinion (ignorance), the second distinguishes within philosophy itself. Philosophy is integrally disrupted in order to lend it life. Philosophy demands a constant effort of 'patricide'. In order to delineate and

critique sophistry, the Visitor recognises the need to refute Parmenides' metaphysics - to 'insist by brute force both that that which is not somehow is, and then again that that which is somehow is not' (241d). This critique of the father is ambivalent. It represents both an intimate murder and an expression of filial relation (a confirmation of the system of patriarchal lineage). What of the sophists? How do they figure in this family drama? Inasmuch as they are unreliable doubles, they occupy the position of false relations and rival lovers. They require criticism and dismissal.

14.5

After briefly summarising how the PreSocratic tradition differs from Parmenides - how in emphasising flux and opposition it conceived an ill-conceived relation between what is and is not - the Visitor begins his refutation. He argues boldly that the positive character of Parmenides' conception, the notion of being, is just as incoherent as the notion of non-being. Assuming once again a close relation between thought, language and being, in which all the various ways we speak of being must align with things that actually are (244d), he argues that each name we employ is properly distinct and corresponds to some particular aspect of being. There is no possibility from this perspective for either exact synonyms or the general blurry imprecision of language. If we refer to being as 'the One', 'everything' and 'the whole' we are referring to three different things. In this sense, these various names demonstrate a thinking of multiplicity at the outset, as well as the non-being entailed in each term's difference from one another.

14.6

The Visitor focuses on the tension between thinking the One, which involves continuous self-identity, and the thinking of a whole, which involves composition from a set of parts. He demonstrates the confusion of attempting to think these two ideas simultaneously. If we set the composed (whole) identity of being aside then that which **is** (in the form of the One) must somehow be less than everything, which includes the thinking of both the One and the whole: hence 'everything will be more than one' (245c), which makes no sense. We

encounter yet again confusion. We are left with no coherent sense of what being or non-being means.

14.7

The next portion of the refutation involves an imaginary interrogation of both the traditional Pre-Socratic argument that there is nothing like any kind of immutable being but only the flux of conflicting elements, and Parmenides' metaphysical position that there is only being without multiplicity, motion or any interplay of being and non-being. The former is associated with a rude empiricism that insists upon tangible bodies (246), while the latter, which holds to the higher reality of intangible form, is regarded as 'gentler' and more reasonable (246c).

14.8

Without going into detail, the Visitor's aim is to make each party admit to some aspect of what the other argues. The empiricists are pushed to admit that there can be things without bodies. Taking up their emphasis on interaction and change, the Visitor argues that they must accept a notion of 'capacity', which is an abstract, disembodied representation of doing and being affected (247d-e). The metaphysicians, on the other hand are pushed to accept the bodily features of the soul, specifically its life and intelligence, which must have the capacity to discover justice, knowledge, etc. rather than simply, motionlessly, being in possession of them. In this manner, change must be accepted as a feature of the being of the soul. The whole possibility of philosophy - of being becoming known (248d) - depends upon conceiving a motion from ignorance (the non-being of wisdom) to knowledge.

Day 15

- pp.271-293
- Stephanus: 249d-268d

15.1

The remaining portion of the dialogue continues the refutation of Parmenides, develops a more nuanced account of being as differentiation (the blending of contraries) and concludes with a final effort to categorise sophistry. I can offer only a brief summary of the discussion.

15.2

The Visitor argues that being is more complex than Parmenides envisages. Being is not entirely binary in nature. Nor is it simply identical with the various features that are relevant to it but rather presides over these features in their varying modes of interaction. Being is neither change nor rest, difference nor sameness, but demonstrates a blending together of these contraries. It is the role of the philosopher, through their capacity for reason and dialectical analysis, to recognise how the various 'kinds' (260) correspond and interact. Unlike the sophist, who delights in childish word games (259d), the philosopher attends to 'the weaving together of forms' (259e).

15.3

More specifically, the Visitor argues that the negative term 'not' signals less the non-existence of any particular thing than its difference - its other being. For example, if we say something is not beautiful, we are not (illogically) speaking of 'nothing' but rather indicating that something is, for instance, clumsy, inelegant or ugly (257c). Similarly, if we lie, we are not saying 'nothing' but rather expressing an untruth. Parmenides's purely negative conception of 'that which is not' is replaced by one that emphasises the positive character of difference (259).

15.4

The Visitor describes 'that which is not' as 'scattered over all those which are' (260b). In this sense, for instance, falsity is not utterly separate from speech, as 'nothing' is distinguished from 'something' but rather blends with it to manifest a positively existing space of imitation and deception. False speech is woven together in

the same manner as true speech but has the quality of being false (263d). It can stem, for instance, from thought that is beguiled by appearance. Lying can be regarded as an expression of the soul's misalignment (injustice) inasmuch as 'the stream of sound from the soul that goes through the mouth is called speech' (263e).

15.5

The Visitor makes one final effort of division to clarify the expertise of sophistry. Instead of being linked to mercenary ('acquisitive') interest, it is now identified as a specific mode of production. The sophist produces mortal (rather than divine) imitations that are geared towards appearance. These imitations stem not from any genuine understanding of things but represent a '"belief mimicry"' (267e) that is insincere and employs short speeches to convince people within the context of 'private conversation' (268b). This can be distinguished from the expertise of the statesman, who employs long, public speeches to cast a similarly deceptive spell.

15.6

The Visitor appears to argue that there is only a single proper name for any thing: 'If he supposes that a thing is different from its name, then surely he's mentioning two things' (244d). Yet only a few pages later, he says, 'Let's give an account of how we call the very same thing, whatever it may be, by several names' (251). This leaves me confused about the nature of names and things. Is there a single name for each thing or can it have multiple names? And what is this thing precisely? A proper name normally denotes a particular individual - 'this is Theaetetus'. Yet is Theaetetus a thing in the sense that the Visitor intends? How is this thingness to be designated except redundantly through the proper name? How is it amenable to any rational work of identification through the work of division? Of course, Theaetetus can be identified in rationally divisible terms - he is young, a man, a mathematician, etc. but his name itself lacks this general currency. It has currency as a name *per se* but does not seem to closely accord with a thingness that discovers the particular via means of generality.

15.7

So, a name can be:

1. The proper name for a particular thing ('this is Theaetetus');
2. The general name for a particular or general thing ('this is a person', 'a person is a human being');
3. An associated property of the particular or general thing ('this person is good', 'people are evil').

The final sense indicates that a name may not be simply co-extensive with the thing. It can be added to the thing in order that it can be more clearly identified. Yet, perhaps this is the wrong way to think about the relationship. It is less that the associated property is added to the thing than that the work of naming demonstrates there is no inherent 'thingness' as such. Thingness emerges from multiple dimensions of potential identification (naming). If so, then surely this contradicts the notion that a thing can have just a single name (apart from any proper name that is not susceptible to rational division)? Indeed, the Visitor himself argues, 'Surely we are speaking of a man when we name him several things, that is, when we apply colors to him and shapes, sizes, defects and virtues' (251).

15.8

And what of the thing that is less an independent thing than a copy of something else? How is this to be named? Certainly as a copy, but can it have any proper name when its whole identity hinges on a relation to another? It is not as though the Visitor represents imitation as any very specialised domain of humanly corrupt being. All things are ultimately copies - either divinely created ones that adhere to some absolutely knowing model, or natural copies that are existentially linked to this original work of imitation (shadows of things, glimmers of sunlight on the surface of water) or human copies (mental representations) based on varying levels of understanding of the true nature of things. So, once again, how are these copies to be properly named, especially as human names for things are not the

same as the divine name for things - as they are already distant from any proper process of naming?

15.9

The complex being of names and their association with things that are already copies of other things suggest any number of awkward dilemmas. I have no scope to elaborate them adequately here. Instead, I will make just one final observation. Brought up on deconstruction, I had always thought that Plato supported a simple model of presence and of the intimate relation between things, thoughts and lucid philosophical speech. Instead, I discover that his work complicates any notion of simply being, introduces an integral thinking of difference and describes an uncertain play of imitation and naming. Despite his efforts to bracket the missteps of sophistry from the proper field of philosophical thought, Plato's conception is hardly reducible to its caricatured contemporary representation. Being is by no means simple. It is devious, elusive and affected by endless processes of mediation.

15

STATESMAN

Day 16

- pp.295-309
- Stephanus: 257-268c

16.1

The second of three dialogues that focus on identifying and distinguishing the sophist, statesman and philosopher. The third of these was never written, although a consideration of the nature of philosophy is implicit in the first two and also informs the overall method employed throughout *Sophist* and *Statesman*. The Visitor models a method of inquiry that demonstrates how philosophy should properly undertake its task of clarifying the true nature of things. Philosophical analysis involves a rational, incisive and lucid work of division.

16.2

The dialogue involves a discussion between the Visitor and 'Younger Socrates'. The latter is not the Socrates we know but a younger man with the same name who replaces Theaetetus as inter-

locutor. Ordinary Socrates is in attendance and acknowledges 'a certain relatedness' to his younger namesake (258). But how can this relationship be characterised? Especially as each thing must apparently have its own distinct name? How can proper names be shared without reconsidering the nature of identity - the specific named identity of a thing? But then again possibly Socrates elder and younger are not quite things - not only because they are people but because they lack sufficient generality to be specifically named. Their shared proper name is not a fully-fledged general name and therefore can be shared between individuals. Yet it it is precisely this characteristic of sharing that lends general names their identity - their capacity to be applied to any number of instances of the one thing. So what does a name designate precisely? Very confusingly, it appears to be particular at a general level and general only in its association with something particular.

16.3

The Visitor does not describe the 'expertise' (*techne*) of the statesman but his 'expert knowledge' (258b). This is based upon a distinction between practical and theoretical knowledge. Nonetheless, the model for the latter still remains the former. What is an expert after all except one who has no time for anything else? This lack of time is associated with the particular requirements of obtaining expertise - dedicated focus, immersion in a particular material-processual field. Despite their lack of manual engagement with social materials, the 'expert knowledge' of the statesman is bound by similar temporal constraints. They must be devoted to their 'craft'. They cannot permit any distractions from their 'labour'.

16.4

Constantly attentive to the potential for division, the Visitor declares, 'I see a cut' (258b). The capacity to divide well is associated with philosophy. But what does it mean to 'see a cut' precisely? What does it mean to look attentively at things and yet not simply see them but recognise their capacity to be divided? The thing is recognised not as itself but as divided. Indeed, the thing only obtains coherent shape as it splits apart. Yet what does it mean to look at the cut

directly? Is it simply to see two additional things or can a cut literally be seen in its cutting - in its breaching of the notional integrity of some given thing? And how can this cutting ever stop? How can some proper state of the thing appear that plainly requires no more cutting? How also can the cut itself be cut?

16.5

The Visitor distinguishes between a good and a bad effort of cutting. Proper cutting is deep and thorough. It attends to the true nature of things (262b). It is very easy, he argues, to make thin and ill-considered cuts. For instance, the distinction Greeks/barbarians is a poor one (262d-e). A division is made between the positive identity of Greeks and the alien character of all others, yet the latter is hardly anything consistent. It can take any number of forms. Here, we have a division of two parts but not the coherent delineation of two analytically useful classes. In this manner, there is a need to distinguish between parts and classes and to recognise that parts need not correspond to conceptually lucid classes (263b). For example, a similarly weak division is made between humans and other animals (263d-e). The latter is nothing like a clearly identified class - simply the left-over portion once an initial class (humanity) is identified.

16.6

But if this is the case, then what of all those philosophical distinctions that depend upon the presence or absence of something - being or non-being, truth or falsity, justice or injustice? Are the negative terms here all useless identifiers? In a sense, perhaps, yes. We recall that the Visitor argues in the *Sophist* that non-being is better conceived as indicating a relation of difference than non-existence per se. In that case, everything that appears merely negative simply awaits better, more thoughtfully considered division. Yet positive-negative style division retains its pertinence - if only in terms of revealing the character of a knife in which things are divided two ways (a knife does not typically cut one thing into any number of parts at any instant). But also because the positive terms are always privileged and preferred. For example, although the Visitor questions the being/non-being binary, he ends up regarding non-being as an

aspect of a more complex being. He certainly does not follow Parmenides forbidden path of integrally conceiving non-being - of conceiving being as an aspect of a more inclusive non-being. In any case, the thin, ill-considered cut - the recognition of parts that are not properly classes - would seem to remain fundamental to philosophy.

16.7

I have focused on the meta-philosophical aspects of the dialogue. The Visitor also makes a practical effort to identify the statesman - to characterise their expert knowledge as involving, for example, a theoretical understanding of how to rear the collective social 'herd' (261e). The question then emerges: how is this mode of 'herding' to be distinguished from other modes of taking care of a living, two-footed, hoof-less throng? How are statesman to be distinguished from teachers, doctors, etc., who are also in the business of taking care of people (268-c)?

Day 17

- pp.310-319
- Stephanus: 268d-276e

17.1

In order to further clarify the expert knowledge of the statesman - and more specifically to distinguish it from other modes of taking care of the human 'herd' - the Visitor proposes a different strategy. Setting aside, for the moment, the serious work of division, he proposes 'an element of play' - the consideration of a 'great story' (268d-e). This use of story-telling represents a distinct dialectical technique - another arrow in the philosopher's quiver. This story, which involves an account of the overall cosmos and the various ages of mankind, is at once digressive (only marginally contributing to the identification of the statesman) and also richly pertinent and illumi-

nating (linking politics to a particular conception of risky human autonomy and freedom).

17.2

Despite its association with 'childish games' and the Visitor's insistence that Young Socrates 'pay close attention to my story, as children do' (268e) the mythical account is by no means simple to follow. It is ambiguous and confusing (perhaps deliberately so). The cosmos, according to the Visitor, has ideal qualities but is also embodied - and on this basis is necessarily subject to change (269e). In its near perfection, it is a sphere. As a body, however, this sphere must move. It spins first one way and then the other. Yet, although its motion has a corporeal origin, it also depends upon divine agency (only the motionless can generate motion infinitely). Presumably, in this sense, the initial motion of the cosmos, and its direction of spin, depends upon a minor divine shove. It also involves regular interventions of divine steering. However, the Visitor explains, this divine agency is limited. It cannot alter the direction of spin. Instead the cosmos adheres to its own natural limits determined by its 'huge size, perfect balance, and its resting on the smallest of bases'. Once it reaches the limits of its rotation in one direction then it rotates back the other way. This moment of profound change is associated with a divine withdrawal - a dropping of the tiller, a letting go of divine agency (269e-270b).

17.3

So does the divine withdrawal from steering cause the cosmos to reach its limit and reverse its direction or does the reversal manifest the limits of divine authority? However we make sense of this relation, an ambiguous dimension of autonomy is conceived in which the cosmos and all things within the cosmos, including human society, are suddenly forced to take control of their own being and motion.

17.4

This profound cosmic change is associated initially with destruction (270d). Here, it is not just that the cosmos spins in reverse but that time itself is reversed, which alters the fundamental conditions of life. People are no longer born (via sexual reproduction), grow up

and die, but instead dead people rise up from the earth, become alive again and gradually become younger until they disappear. This undermines the conventional bases of society, which no longer involves the need for families or 'political constitutions'. Very confusingly, this upheaval, which is associated with cosmic autonomy, precipitates another intervention by the gods - both to steer the new mode of rotation and to take care of a vastly reduced and precarious human society (271d-e). This period of divine herdsmanship is associated with the autochthonous period of the rule of Cronus (the abundant simplicity of the 'Golden Age').

17.5

So, in terms of my most likely imperfect reading, the autonomy of the first reversal is annulled because the gods return to take full control of everything. It is only once this period has ended, now that the cosmos has spun all the way back in the other direction and 'all the earth-born race has been used up', that another reversal occurs,. This involves, yet again, a withdrawal of the gods (272e), but now the cosmos spins in the ordinary direction and time moves consistently forward. This provides scope, after another period of destructive upheaval, for the cosmos to achieve a more genuine (although still limited) autonomy and for human society to gradually evolve relevant social forms on the basis of sexual reproduction and political society. In relation to the latter, this depends upon some more minor intervention from the gods - the gift of fire (Prometheus), crafts (Hephaestus) and seeds and plants for agriculture (other deities) (274).

17.6

All of this is difficult to arrange in any coherent chronological order. What kinds of people and social order, for instance, were associated with the initial spinning of the cosmos? Were they a divinely created people or no people at all? The latter is scarcely possible in that the first known people - the autochthonous people of the 'Golden Age', who only emerged when the cosmos initially changed direction - were 'born' from the dead. Clearly, their existence only makes sense if another people preceded them. In any case, I suppose we could represent the period of Zeus (and up until the present) as a

third stage in which the ordinary motion of the cosmos returns and human society discovers a genuine autonomy and freedom - but, in this respect, also drifts away from the model of divine stewardship and risks all manner of corrupted social and political outcomes.

The following slide maps my rough understanding of the chronology.

17.7

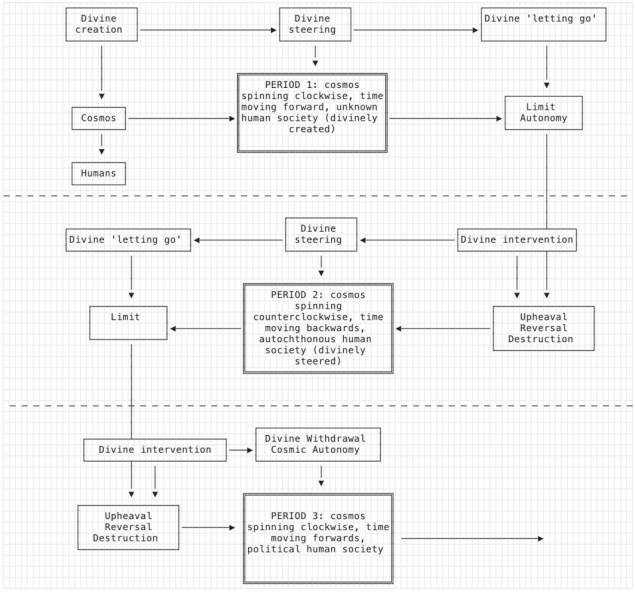

Fig. 19. Statesman myth.

17.8

Leaving all this complexity aside, the whole point of the myth for the Visitor is to clarify that conceiving the statesman as good shepherd of the human flock tends towards a very benign notion of political rule that draws upon a model of divine care and nurturing. Instead there is a need to recognise that humans rule as subjects identical to their herd and in a variety of particular ways. Most obviously, they can force people to submit via tyranny or obtain popular consent via statesmanship.

17.9

The distinction between divine and human rule is well taken but scarcely seems to require such an elaborate scaffold of elaboration. The additional branch of division appears as a moment of bathos in the light of the drama and intricacies of the 'great story' that has led up to it. Nonetheless, the latter is very interesting in terms of charting a pre-history of political society and in conceiving a distinctly human realm of political responsibility. The care of the statesman is a mode of care in the absence of any context of wider care - any sense that the gods are closely watching over us and may beneficially intervene.

Day 18

- pp. 319-330
- Stephanus: 277-287

18.1

IT IS AS NOT AS THOUGH the bathos of telling a 'great story' in order to make a relatively minor qualification to the identity of the statesman happens accidentally. The Visitor acknowledged his excess, which he likens to a sculptor employing too much clay in a hurried effort to fashion a likeness (277b). But the excess is motivated less by any actual hurrying than by an overall meta-philosophical aim: to clarify the techniques of proper philosophical argument (division, narrative story-telling, etc.). This clarification is for the benefit of Young Socrates (and anybody attending to the argument), who must learn to discriminate between sound and poorly made argument, not only so that they can think and argue philosophically themselves but so that they can avoid the wiles of sophistry.

18.2

The issue here, the awkward complexity, is that philosophy is likened to that which it typically resists and suspects - imitation. The

discourse of philosophical truth, which produces proper likenesses, is constantly at risk of fashioning beguiling appearances (277c) .

18.3

The notion of likeness relates to another vital philosophical technique - the use of models to clarify concepts. Models mobilise imitation in reverse. Rather than discerning (sketching or sculpting) key features of a concept to establish an abstract, philosophical likeness, the philosopher employs an existing likeness - an analogical model - to reveal the nature of an abstraction. Without the use of models 'each of us knows everything in a kind of dreamlike way' without any aspect of lucid, conscious knowledge. The Visitor explains that the 'idea of a model' must itself have 'a model to demonstrate it' (277d). And once again, the model of language is employed. Just as the learning of letters provides a basis for learning syllables (and more elaborate language constructs), so too analogical models provide a means of comprehending more complex philosophical concepts.

18.4

An 'insignificant' model is proposed to make sense of statesmanship, the craft of weaving wool, so that the expert knowledge of political rule 'may be present to us in our waking state instead of in a dream' (277e). Weaving is first precisely distinguished through a work of division. Yet this proves complex because weaving itself is complex. What parts of the overall process of transforming an fleece into a piece of clothing (or similar) are relevant to weaving? Especially if we consider all the associated tools and processes that are required? This suggests a pertinent division between contributory and direct causes in any work of manifesting being (281e). On this basis, all the associated crafts are set aside (for instance, the carpentry involved in constructing looms), as well as those aspects of the process that involve separating the fleece into useful constituent parts (the carding and spinning of wool). Finally, the twining of the warp is distin-

guished from the intertwining of warp and weft that identifies weaving itself. [1]

18.5

The Visitor questions his own recourse to such complexity (283b). Why not have defined weaving more simply without becoming absorbed in all the various technical details? Despite the obvious relevance of some of these technicalities - and that statesmanship must itself be distinguished from any number of ancillary aspects of community care and rearing - the meta-philosophical point here is that Young Socrates is summoned to attend to how models are developed and described. Models should be fashioned in due proportion to the needs of any specific rational argument - not deficiently or in excess. In all too readily assenting to the Visitor's long story and complex analysis of weaving, Young Socrates demonstrates a potential lack of judgement. The Visitor turns to this issue of judgement.

18.6

The Visitor argues that judgement ('measurement') cannot be reduced to simply relative features of identity - as though the 'greater' is simply that which is not 'less' and the 'less' is that which is not 'greater'. Against this Parmenidean conception, the Visitor explains that we also judge in due proportion - 'not as something which is not, but as something which is'. This is vital to the way that judgements are made within specific fields of expertise. The latter have coherent existence and identity precisely in their capacity to recognise and manifest justly composed instances of being ('preserving measure in this way they produce all good and fine things') (284). Similarly, philosophy involves an attention to the properly featured and proportioned character of an argument. Within this context, the Visitor emphasises that the overall point of the dialogue is to enable the participants (and wider readers) to extrapolate from the analysis of the statesman to become 'better dialecticians in relation to all subjects' (285d).

---

1. See 'Handweavers' website for an excellent account of weaving: **https://www.handweavers.com/the-wool-process**

18.7

The problem is that philosophical concepts have no immediate access to sensible clarity (which also represents a potent basis for illusion). They 'have no image at all'. Examples can be employed, but the key thing is to attend to proper practices of verbal argument. There is a need to 'practice at being able to give and receive an account of each thing; for the things that are without body, which are finest and greatest, are shown only by verbal means and nothing else' (286).

18.8

Overall, the dialogue is a proportional play - stretching portions of argument to the point of excess in order to demonstrate the value and pertinence of a relevant philosophical mean.

Day 19

- pp. 330-344
- Stephanus: 287b-299e

19.1

Having discussed the value of models and proportional judgement, the Visitor turns back to the matter of statesmanship. There is a need, just as with the example of weaving, to distinguish the contributory causes for the coming to be of the city from the key expertise of political rule. Here, the division is more complex. Instead of just, as usual, dividing by two, one must divide 'limb from limb' (in the manner of a 'sacrificial animal') (287c). This involves recognising various orders of ancillary activity that provide the basis for any ordered social and political life: material acquisition; physical nurturing; constructive, preservative and enabling crafts; as well as self-defence and entertainment. These relate to the sphere of 'possessions'. Accompanying this is another dimension of contributory cause, which relates to the various types of people in the city.

19.2

In the same manner that spinners and carders must be distinguished from actual weavers (289c), the Visitor considers how various portions of society are excluded from statesmanship. Leaving aside the citizens who directly contribute to the sphere of possessions, he considers how the 'subordinate' classes (289d) can be easily distinguished from statesmen. Slaves, he argues, can plainly 'least pretend to kingly expertise' (289e). Similarly, day labourers, who hire themselves out, can hardly make any claims to have any expertise in managing and controlling 'tame living creatures (289). The class of 'free men' who perform services - '"money-changers", "merchants", "ship-owners" and "retailers" (290) are also excluded. However, Young Socrates is uncertain about this last exclusion, roughly anticipating a tension between commercial and political judgement that obtains greater clarity in our own time; within the context of a capitalism that maintains its distance from politics in order to more forcefully maintain its political influence.

19.3

One other sphere of subordinates is identified - the group of heralds, public administrators and priestly seers (290d). The Visitor describes a more complex relation to statesmanship for the latter, with kings preserving a traditional association with the priestly class - with its aspects of divination, sacrifice and shape-shifting magic. It is within the latter context particularly that the statesman risks becoming confused with the sophist (291c).

19.4

The Visitor makes an abrupt shift to consider three basic types of government:

1. Monarchy
2. Oligarchy
3. Democracy

The first two, he suggests, are conventionally distinguished according to features of coercion, lawfulness and wealth (291e):

monarchy can be genuinely 'kingly' or tyrannical; oligarchy can be regarded as acceptably aristocratic or an unlawful, plutocratic imposition. Democracy alone cannot be further divided. Still, he wonders about the relevance of these different conceptions of how the polis is constituted - these different parameters of force, law and wealth. Why should these provide the basis for conceiving political rule when the dialogue has heretofore established that statesmanship properly depends upon 'expert knowledge' (292c)?

19.5

Taking a step back for a moment. Statesmanship is conceived in terms of various models drawn from traditional practices and crafts - tending a flock of animals, steering a ship, curing a patient and weaving cloth. These appear as primary social phenomena that can be straightforwardly understood, yet it is worth noting that they also involve an aspect of imitation. In the same manner that humans must take over when the gods release control of the cosmos, so too, these primary activities refer to and duplicate even more fundamental ones. The shepherd duplicates (and augments) the natural capacity of herds of animals to find their way and guard against danger. The weaver mimics the natural process of growing a fleece. More specifically, the weaver accomplishes this through a work of artifice that involves breaking down (analysing) the natural thing and then reconstructing it as a useful piece of clothing. In this sense, the primary models for making sense of philosophical concepts are themselves models.

19.6

However, leaving aside the opacity of any primary and directly apprehensible sphere for modelling philosophical thought, my interest here relates to the political implications of this focus on areas of tangible expertise. It involves a cunning persuasive strategy in which those who might question ceding political control to others are convinced to do so precisely in terms of their own claims to coherent identity. Just as ordinary citizens are expert in their particular crafts, so too politics requires dedicated skill and focus. Better to leave polit-

ical rule to those with relevant expertise, just as nobody should interfere in our particular business of farming, baking, weaving, doctoring or whatever. Expertise based social identity and differentiation provides the basis for condemning any inclination towards democracy.

19.7

The Visitor insists that criterion for political rule must be expert knowledge of how to preserve the city (293c). Just like sport, only very few people can ever be champions at this (292e). The political validity of democracy is instantly discounted due to its egalitarianism. Similarly, we are hardly willing to entrust our health to people that are not expert doctors. We accept a doctor's interventions, no matter how painful, on the basis that they have the best knowledge of how to cure us. The issue of how political leadership is arranged - its coercive force or ready acceptance, its socially invidious or equitable character, its legality or otherwise - is irrelevant. All that matters is that statesmanship has its basis in genuinely expert knowledge (293d-e).

19.8

The ruler's proper capacity to act beyond the constraints of existing law is argued at length. Laws, the Visitor argues, are simply crude and inflexible imitations of judgements that stem properly from kingly authority. The law generalises and cannot deal with complex particulars (294b). Only a king can judge individually with proper nuance (295b). In pursuing their work of preserving the city, the statesman need not even bother with persuading citizens. They should simply act, with the performance of their expertise serving as the proper, literal basis of law (297). Written law is positioned as 'second-choice' for political judgement - a fallback option when the king (or faith in the possibility of a king) is unavailable (297c). Efforts to constrain kingly authority by law and courts of public accountability and appeal simply compromise the exercise of kingly expertise. They reduce its proper autonomy and scope for innovation (299c).

19.9

The critique of law is extended beyond the expert knowledge of

the statesman to relate to expertise generally. No field of expertise can be subservient to legislated authority. If expertise is entirely externalised in inanimate material then it is, according to the Visitor, thoroughly undermined (299b-e). In this sense, an over-regard for legislated knowledge and action threatens to destroy the social field altogether.

16

NIGHT C

NC.1

I'm at day 19 of something like 100 days, although I have been working on this since 25 August and it is now 16 October (2024). So it has actually been closer to 54 days altogether - acknowledging that I have also included a few 'nights', a 'lull' and an extended digression on the philosophy of Parmenides. I'm roughly a fifth of the way through the book (344 of 1,676 pages). I'm slowing down, reading less each 'day' and writing more. I've 16 followers but nobody is attending closely (or, most likely, reading at all). My initial posts received a couple of likes but there have been none since day 7. The only comments throughout are my own editorial corrections.

NC.2

Of course, it may be that *Instagram* is not the place for this kind of thing? Or perhaps my summaries and comments are simply uninteresting and opaque? Perhaps they need to be more concise? Perhaps they require a more dedicated use of images? Perhaps I need to rethink my diagrams and make them less dry and impersonal? Perhaps I need to highlight myself more somehow? Perhaps I need to link this process of reading more closely to something in the present?

More mundanely, perhaps I may simply need to play the game better - do more to secure a reasonable number of followers? But instead, all I can think to do is to continue - or perhaps stop.

NC.4

I wonder whether I am trying somehow to suspend time? Despite my strict attention to days, I'm allowing actual time to slip by. I'm representing my own time as luxurious, when it is not. I have limited time and need to be more careful where I devote my attention. But in allowing myself this excessive scope to read Plato, I act as though I have all the time in the world. I keep writing, superstitiously, in order to set aside the time that genuinely affects me and that I can only confront by disregarding.

NC.5

My initial interest in Plato stemmed from an (earlier) reading of *Republic*, where I was struck by his equation of justice with 'minding one's own business'. The justice of the *polis* hinges on each person maintaining a focused attention on their own area of expertise. This can be regarded as an alibi for oligarchy; a means of discounting the viability of democracy (as we see in *Statesman*). Yet Plato also seems to genuinely hold to this notion - not only on the basis of conceiving society as a differentiated complex of production, reproduction and innovation but also in terms of his overall concern to offer a proper and proportional division and account of things. At the same time, the socially estranged and alien labour of philosophy, which can only playfully entertain its capacity to perform the role of statesman, appears, at least partly, to disregard the logic of the city. It maintains a general focus. It recognises an holistic justice that is never manifest at the level of ordinary (myopically inclined) experience.

NC.6

Plato plainly defends political expertise in a very different historical context from our own. During his life, Greece was subject to significant political and social upheaval. The political options of democracy and tyranny seemed equally dangerous and ineffective and the weight of traditional custom appeared stultifying and oppressive. Still, Plato's conception seems disturbing when trans-

posed to the present. It can be employed, for instance, as a defence of neoliberal managerialism, in which leadership (political or otherwise) appears merely as a functional skill. The whole question of value is suspended in order to support a notion of impartial and instrumental managerial expertise.

NC.7

More generally, the notion that expertise provides the crucial basis for ordered society render society itself questionable. There is no aspect of association that extends beyond dedicated absorption in 'one's own business'. Even in its own narrow terms, this conception ignores that the functional complex hardly exists *ex nihilo*. It must be negotiated and the expert's experience of their own expertise has to occur with reference to other areas of expertise - with some sense of a wider field. Plato's conception certainly ignores how areas of specialised activity demonstrate and incorporate aspects of value that must necessarily have social currency and vitally depend upon social elaboration and justification.

NC.8

Drawing upon the modern tradition of critique of instrumental social relations, I am suspicious of any primary emphasis on expertise. It is not that expertise must be altogether disregarded but rather that general and holistic concern and activity deserve greater emphasis, particularly in terms of informing contexts for addressing questions of social value and priority. The critique of the notion of society as little more than an assemblage of differentiated expertise offers a means of thinking beyond a narrowly labouring, productive and acquisitive conception of social and environmental being.

NC.9

However, I have no wish to simply condemn Plato. I am more interested in his ambivalent implications - both encouraging an exclusive and invidious social justice while also, partly through the very form of playful, holistically inclined philosophical dialogue, suggesting other modes of thought and being.

17

STATESMAN (CONT.)

Day 20

- pp. 344-358
- Stephanus: 300-311c

20.1

Despite the intrinsic weakness of written laws, inasmuch as they provide a second-hand imitation of genuinely kingly authority, the Visitor argues that the community should do nothing to contravene them. Very simply, the community lacks the expert knowledge to do so justly and competently. Most obviously, no large group of people can possibly acquire any kind of dedicated specific expertise (300e) - and, most especially, anything like the superior judgement that statesmanship involves.

20.2

The dilemma is that the gods are no longer in control. The statesman is not clearly manifest as anything divine: 'a king does not come to be in cities as a king-bee is born in a hive, one individual immediately superior in body and mind'. Instead cities depend upon

written laws, 'chasing after the traces of the truest constitution' (301e). In this respect, cities are both weak and surprisingly resilient (302).

20.3

The Visitor considers which of the imitative forms of government is best. He recognises that the issue of law is vital to making this determination (302e). Here is his list from best to worst governments:

1. True King (embodiment of law)
2. Monarchy (with a system of laws in place)
3. Democracy (in a context of lawlessness)
4. Aristocracy (with a system of laws in place)
5. Oligarchy (in a context of lawlessness)
6. Democracy (with a system of laws in place)
7. Tyranny (in a context of lawlessness)

Note the split in the two evaluations of democracy. Democracy in a context of lawlessness is valued because it provides a safeguard for individual autonomy and expertise. However, in the context of a law governed society, it lends the mass of people a political expertise that is properly unavailable to them (303-303b).

20.4

After a brief condemnation of sophistic pretensions to statesmanship, the Visitor moves on to distinguish the statesman from other figures of virtuous authority - judges, military leaders and rhetoricians. The analogy of smelting gold is employed to suggest how a single precious metal can be separated from others that are closely combined with it. These other figures are conceived as subordinate roles that manually enact directives that have a more practical and hands-on character. The statesman takes a superior and holistic view. They are concerned with the overall health and weaving together of the community (305e).

20.5

A return to the metaphor of weaving. The weaving of the statesman has a divine character. It is a weaving together of souls (309c). More specifically, it involves an intertwining of the potentially

divergent virtues of courage and moderation. The community is made up different dispositions - some bold and swiftly acting, others more soft, orderly and circumspect. Both dispositions (and virtues) are valuable but are also prone to excess (rashness on the one hand vs timidity on the other). The statesman, through the agency of teachers, cultivates and 'intertwines' both dispositions, harnessing them appropriately to meet the exigencies (*kairos*) of particular circumstances.

20.6

This kingly interweaving of divergent virtuous dispositions works against the grain of more mortal frameworks of social association. Whereas the social reproductive form of marriage and intermarriage tends to foster bonds between like and like (the bold attracting the bold and the moderate the moderate), the king establishes the 'more divine' bonds of the soul (310). His role is to combine the warp of courage with the woof of moderation (309b) to produce an integral woven pattern - a 'happy' (311c) and justly configured social fabric.

20.7

There is no return at the end of the dialogue to the meta-philosophical theme of how to properly conduct a philosophical argument. The holistic view of the statesman and his primary expertise in judgement has obvious links to the Visitor's conception of philosophy but the point is not explicitly made.

Afterthought

A.1

The notion of 'expert knowledge' suggests something that can be taught and learned. In terms of the role of statesman, it suggests a set of practical skills and experience in aspects of management, negotiation, persuasion, etc. In contemporary terms, for example, we can recognise a particular emphasis on skills of 'responsible' financial

management and the promotion and implementation of either 'conservative' or 'progressive' social agendas. The dimension of value that informs the latter tends be played down as an aspect of 'expert knowledge'. It is a less a feature of the professional competence of the statesman than of their extra-professional political 'vision' (however limited, however marked by blindness and compromise).

A.2

Plato conceives all of this differently. Leadership is stripped of any particular technical and professional character. While still instrumental in focus, its expertise has much more the quality of an 'art'. Aspects of holistic view and judgement are stressed, as well as a semi-divine capacity to foster relevant dispositions of the soul.

A.3

It is not as though we are not equally prone to mystify the quality of leadership - to regard it as both a natural attribute and as something that can be morally cultivated - but we would hardly describe this as form of 'expert knowledge'. It is separated from the theoretical knowledge of political science and the practical skills of 'sound' management to represent a distinct sphere of value and intuition.

A.4

This emphasis on the intangible capacity of moral judgement subtly contradicts the analogy of weaving. More particularly, it misrecognises the expertise of weaving in order to lend statesmanship a more coherently expert character. Weaving is cast as a technical work of intertwining warp and weft, yet plainly there is also a 'higher art' of weaving which involves judgements related to pattern, colour, texture and the like. Plato mentions nothing of the latter in order to focus on the coherent, instrumentally geared expertise of weaving. However, when applied to statesmanship, the analogy of 'intertwining' slips free of the technical and gains an intuitive, artful character. In this manner the analogy of practical craft grounds the social differentiation entailed in the conception of morally superior leadership.

A.5

It seems odd that there is no return to the theme of meta-philosophy at the end of *Statesman*. I guess that I'm constantly expecting

more ordinary forms of philosophical argument and coherence. At the same time, the openness of Plato's dialogues - their tendency to change tack, digress and vary in aspects of tone and voice - is very appealing. If Plato can say so much that is philosophically interesting, it is just as much due to his expository 'excesses' and 'shortfalls' as his capacity for consistent and focused analysis.

18

PARMENIDES

Day 21

- pp.360-370
- Stephanus: 126-135c

21.1

I have been looking forward to and dreading this dialogue. It has a reputation for difficulty. It stages an (almost certainly) fictional conversation between Parmenides, Zeno and Socrates about the theory of forms. Parmenides appears as a philosophical master, Zeno as his middle-aged student and Socrates as an emerging but inexperienced philosopher. A young 'Aristotle' also participates - however, not the 'Aristotle' we know, who was not even born at this time. Plato's distance from the dialogue is emphasised. The discussion is portrayed as having occurred some decades earlier, recalled in impressive detail by Antiphon.

21.2

The dialogue interrogates the integral possibility of metaphysics. Parmenides' philosophy is mobilised in terms of its critical character,

which questions both common belief and the complacent foundations of existing philosophy. Plato conceives scope for Parmenides to criticise not only Pre-Socratic notions of change and difference but also strands of his own philosophy - specifically, a nascent version of his theory of forms. The latter is portrayed as juvenile, reactive and ill-considered. Parmenides highlights the shortcomings of this theory and sketches the contours of a more mature, suspicious and coherent metaphysics. I tend to read the dialogue as a paranoid fantasy: a respected mentor (Parmenides) gives voice to Plato's own philosophical doubts.

21.3

The conversation begins with Socrates raising an objection to an argument that Zeno makes. The latter argues that the notion of the many assumes a set of like and unlike things. Logically, however, nothing (no sphere of 'things') can be at once like and unlike. For Zeno, this contradiction signals that the notion of the many is unsustainable. Socrates objects that this confuses the character of the many with the forms that shape its intelligible identity. It is not that the 'like' and 'unlike', as 'things grasped by reasoning' (130), are directly coincident and contradicted within things. Things 'partake' of the rational forms of 'likeness' and 'unlikeness' (129b). The forms themselves are distinct, 'separate' and singular entities that never mingle or disagree with one another. They are only combined within the complex identity of things, not as entities themselves. In this manner, Socrates defends a metaphysical basis for intelligible reality. Parmenides intervenes to question this confident faith in an autonomous and objectified realm of form.

21.4

Parmenides identifies that Socrates believes there are both distinct forms and separate things that partake of them. He then asks Socrates to clarify what order of things are appropriate to forms (130b). Socrates accepts that there are forms for the 'just, and beautiful, and good', but is more uncertain about such things as 'human-being, or fire, or water' and is very little inclined to acknowledge forms for 'worthless' stuff such as hair, and mud and

dirt (130b-c). While this may appear a weakly conceived hierarchical scheme, with 'undignified' matter cast out of any participation in the ideality of form, Socrates provides a cogent explanation. The forms have a reasonable character, whereas matter itself appears to have no need for form. It is given, he argues, within the frame of perception - 'just as we see' (130d). Nonetheless, Parmenides, disregards this defence as a 'youthful' and uncritical attention to what is ordinarily thought (conventional conceptions of being aligned with the sensibly inclined and illusory 'way of opinion').

21.5

Having identified the uncertain pertinence of form to every aspect of being, Parmenides considers the ambiguity of how things 'partake' of forms. This hinges on the representation of forms as primary and independently existing things (entities). Conceived in these terms, forms are expected to adhere to ordinary principles of being but plainly don't. Parmenides pursues three specific lines of questioning:

1. **Part-whole conundrum**. How does the form as a singular whole manage its distributed identity across a range of particular things? Doesn't this risk dividing the form - separating itself from itself and undermining its putative unity? (131b)
2. **Infinite regress of form**. If there is form itself (eg. 'the large') and form in things (large things) then surely there must be another form that links these two (a concept of largeness that incorporates the thinking of both largeness itself and large things), as well as another form again that encompasses this wider set, etc. (132-132b)
3. **Unknowability**. If form is utterly separate from things then we as human things can scarcely know form as such. Correspondingly, god, as a figure ideally coincident with form, cannot possible know the many. An absolute gap opens up between knowledge and human being.

Let's consider each of these in greater detail.

21.6

Part-whole conundrum

In order to defend the wholeness of forms, Socrates employs the analogy of a single day, which is in multiple places at the same time (131b). Parmenides sidesteps this figure of durational integrity by insisting upon a spatial metaphor. The day analogy, he argues, is comparable to the analogy of single sail covering an entire people, with only a portion of the sail covering any particular person. This analogical sleight of hand - this representation of the thinking of holistic temporality as similar to the thinking of portioned space - scarcely seems fair, serving simply to render forms logically divisible (not whole). Parmenides ignores how a property of something can retain its integrity across a range of things, which entails precisely that the property not be thought in strictly substantive and spatial terms. On the other hand, Parmenides also identifies the absurdity of conceiving things as partaking of only parts of forms because this would imply, for example, that something large (which partakes of a part of the large) is smaller than largeness itself. The relation of partaking is portrayed as problematic. It resists being coherently conceived either as a whole or as a part (131e).

Infinite regress of form

This objection would seem to relate to the issue of mathematical set theory. How are we to conceive the set composed not only of large things and the notion of largeness itself, but also of the largeness of these two 'things' thought together. I wonder, however, if it is appropriate for the form of the large to be included in the set of large things or should it be excluded? Is it implicit within the definition of the set itself and on this basis not properly a member subsumable within it? Leaving aside this difficult theoretical-mathematical ques-

tion, Socrates generally fails to shift Parmenides' thinking of forms away from solid and countable things. Refusing to acknowledge their exceptional identity as 'thoughts' (132b) or 'models' (132d), Parmenides doggedly insists upon the aporetic consequences of conceiving them as ordinary objects. Parmenides argues that the notion of an infinite regress signals an endless prospect of conceptual difficulty 'if one marks things off as forms, themselves by themselves' (133).

Unknowability

According to Parmenides, the forms - in their separateness and singularity - act less as effective bridges between human rationality and divine order than as signs of the impossibility of metaphysics altogether. Nonetheless, despite their rash positing by Socrates, Parmenides acknowledges their philosophical necessity so that 'for each thing there is a character that is always the same' (135b). Having listened to Parmenides' devastating critique, Socrates can conceive no solution: 'I don't think I have anything clearly in view, at least not at present' (135c).

21.7

The whole notion of a realm of ideal form is likely to appear outdated to us - the notion, for instance, that 'justice' is nothing culturally established but has a separate and universal character, or that essential forms of 'largeness' and 'smallness' underlie all loosely approximate and socially negotiated evaluations of relative size. Plato lends intangible form greater reality than the perceptible world. The realm of form is portrayed as divinely constituted and autonomous. Parmenides' criticisms make sense to us in deflating these metaphysical pretensions but hardly undermine the relevance of form altogether. We have no difficulty in recognising, for example, a consistent notion of justice applying across particular instances, or allowing

that 'largeness' and 'smallness' have pertinent meaning beyond any specific context of magnitude.

21.8

Our questioning of form is inconsistent. We readily accept that features of the natural world are shaped by universal principles (mathematical, physical, chemical, biological, etc.) while also insisting upon an exceptional, contingent and historical space of specifically human truth.

Day 22

- pp.371-395
- Stephanus: 136-164b

22.1

Parmenides aims to demonstrate a better form of philosophical reflection and argumentation - one that is not fixed upon a particular conception of being but explores the full set of permutational possibilities. Although elderly now and 'trembling' before 'love's game', Parmenides sets out to review the set of hypotheses concerning the 'one'; the nature of its identity, how it partakes or does not partake of being, and its relation to various predicative properties. He calls upon the youngest interlocutor, 'Aristotle', to assist. The remainder of the dialogue proceeds like an arduous, paired gymnastic routine, with Parmenides making rapid-fire logical propositions and Aristotle keenly supporting him with appropriate questions and expressions of uncertainty or assent.

22.2

On a first reading of Parmenides' demonstration, I experience something similar to lying awake at night, trying and failing to make sense of some issue. Thinking produces no clarity, only a relentless, ineffectual churn. Plato is much more coherent, of course, but the

remainder of the dialogue still reads like a delirious reflection on Parmenides' poem - an insane mulling over its logical possibilities.

22.3

Philosophical difficulty is not quite the issue. The argument proceeds as a rapid, tiresome and unbroken flow, with few clear landmarks or instances of helpful summary.

22.4

Remembering any of the dialogues would be challenging, but this one defies capacity for straightforward recall. Veering from any credible scene of oral memory, philosophy discovers its potential here in a loss of immediacy - in the necessity of writing. Nonetheless, features of speech are still simulated - evident in its grimly energetic back and forth pattern, limited repertoire of concepts and strongly iterative character. Parmenides' demonstration renders philosophy an unmusical music - a curious field of embodied effort and alienation.

22.5

The 'world' for Parmenides is not something to be empirically discovered, or investigated via an *a priori* frame, or represented in terms of a particular historical-conventional interpretive lens. Instead, the nature of things is integrally rational. It is evident as deduction. Yet deduction hardly describes a certain ground. It leads instead to aporia.[1]

22.6

Parmenides begins with the most basic stuff - notions of existence and 'thingness' specifically. Yet fundamental ideas appear unstable and equivocal. What does the term 'one' indicate, for instance? Is it something experienced or only logically manifest? Is it the number 1? Is it an abstract antidote to the thinking of multiplicity? Is it the intuition of some essential cosmic field? Why, especially, does the 'one' get treated as though it were a literal substance, as though it should obey ordinary material conditions of being (148d-e)? Rather than aiming to restrict this equivocal potential, Parmenides plays upon it, discerning endless paradoxical implications.

---

1. Or at least this is how Plato portrays Parmenides' thought.

22.7

For example - and without any effort to reference a particular passage in this convoluted flow - Parmenides considers the consequences of the hypothesis that the 'one is' and that there are many particular things. Each thing is itself singular, so therefore a 'one'. This implies that there is a 'one' that is greater than any particular 'one', which demonstrates the mathematical paradox that 'one' is not equal to itself. A slippage then between various meanings of the term 'one' - as cosmic existential condition, as numerical entity, as indicator of unique being - serves to unsettle any received sense of a coherent relation between the 'one' and the many.

22.8

Parmenides seems to describe an exhaustive, logically rigorous system but in fact considers something very different. The various deductions indicate the limits of language and conceptual thought. They establish less a calm ontological foundation than a field of questioning and uncertainty.

22.9

I still have a couple of pages left to read in the dialogue. Perhaps these pages will help clarify Parmenides' argument and Plato's stance in relation to it.

Day 23

- pp.371-397
- Stephanus: 136-166c

23.1

I HAVE READ another 3 pages, but not made any significant progress. Instead I have retraced my steps - making my way more carefully through Parmenides' deductions. Although consulting the odd 'map'

[2], I have mainly walked the route on my own, picking up on whatever features of the argument that I can. The following image is a phenomenological diagram of my approach, with the rough path identified as an arrow and the features (a clump of grass, a possible rock, some vague thing in the distance) shown as numbered items.

23.2

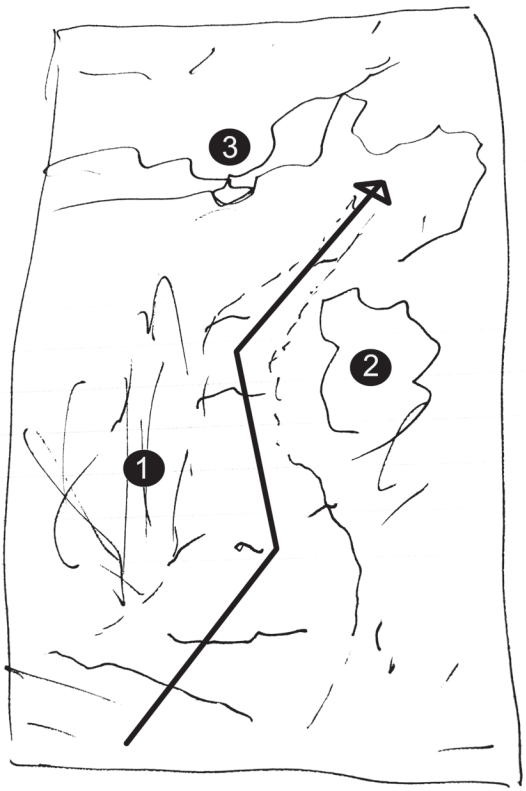

Fig. 20. My approach.

23.3

But I must resist an altogether subjective view. The following

2. *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* entry on *Parmenides*: https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/plato-parmenides/

diagram conveys my general understanding of the deductions. I represent 5 stages in a binary conceptual machine, labelled from A to E. Each of the hypotheses relate to decision-making nodes within the apparatus:

A) The one either 'is' or 'is not' ('!" indicates not).
B) The one, which either 'is' or 'is not', can either be regarded as something in itself (one = one) or something that has the property of 'being' (the '.' symbol indicates 'has the property of').
C) The one (however configured) is considered in relation to the others (everything other than the one). The others change shape but are most easily conceived as a diverse multitude.
D) The one is examined in terms of how it 'partakes' or not of specific properties.
E). The properties are pairs of (apparently) mutually exclusive options.

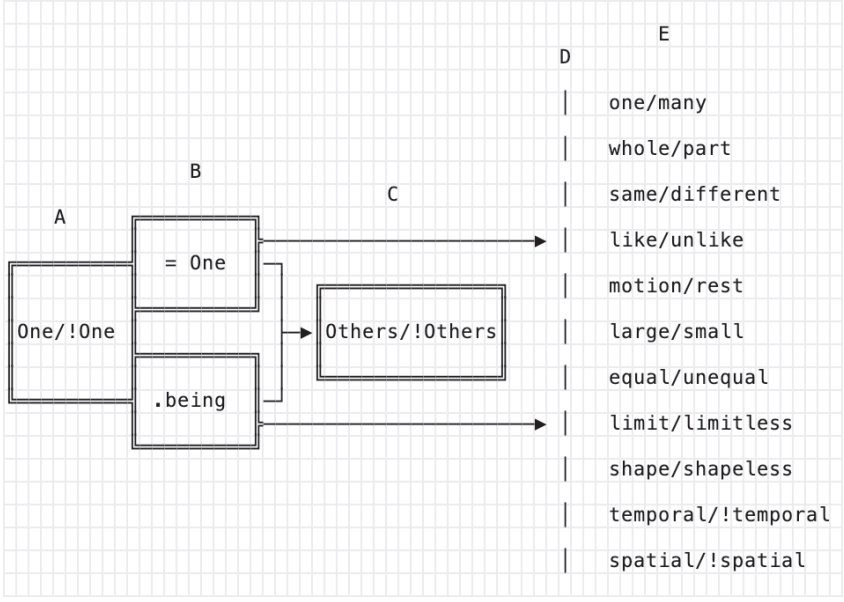

Fig. 21. Parmenides' deductions.

23.4

Both of the first two hypotheses assume that the one 'is'. The first hypothesis adheres to the metaphysical argument of Parmenides' poem - the one simply 'is', there is nothing but the self-identity of the one (one = one). Plato's Parmenides, however, demonstrates the unsettling consequences of this view - specifically that nothing can be coherently said of it. Any pure thought of the one actually compromises the thinking of one and many, whole and part, same and different, etc. It is only when the second hypothesis is pursued - that one has the property of being - that any coherent thinking of the one is possible. This hypothesis enables the thinking of both the one and many, the whole and part, the same and different. An appendix to this hypothesis posits that the one has the property of both being and non-being, which allows the possibility of becoming. This argument appears closely aligned with Plato's position in the *Sophist*.

23.5

Here is a diagram of the overall set of hypotheses (with Stephanus references). It is worth noting that the hypotheses are considered at different lengths, with the first two occupying most of the demonstration and the rest receiving more brief discussion. Note, as well, that each of the hypotheses affirm the relevance of either neither or both of the pairs of mutually exclusive properties (E in fig.21).

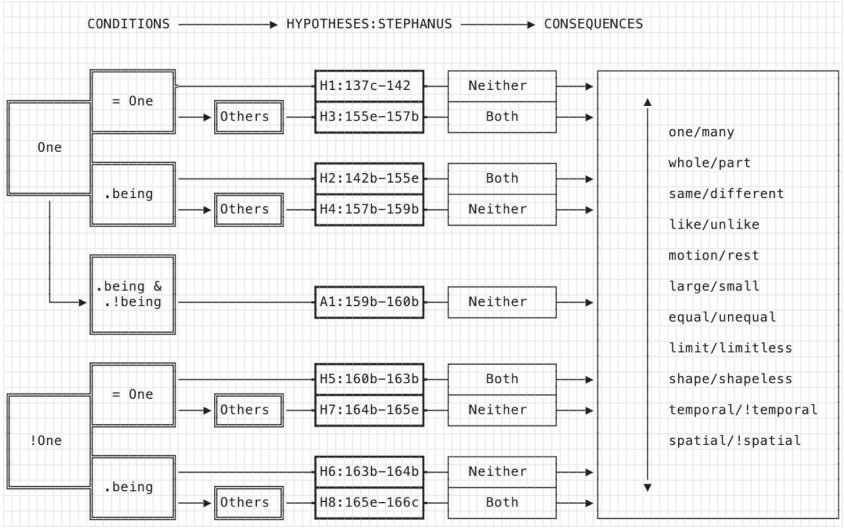

Fig. 22. Parmenides' deductions (detail)

23.6

Overall, the demonstration describes the implication of a range of incompatible conceptions of the one. Although it includes many interesting philosophical observations, particularly about the uncertainty of what self-identity, being, partaking and the various properties involve, it is perhaps most interesting in its relentless, shape-changing motion, which appears at once flexibly open and repetitively mechanical, endlessly returning to the same logical figures (contradiction, number, etc.) as well as the same metaphors (for example, the spatial character of abstract things). In this sense, the demonstration manifests both the dialectical energy of philosophy and its rote, self-absorbed (circling) quality. For me, it reads less as a coherent ontological system than as an exercise in philosophical gymnastics - as well as a critical meditation on the various aporia entailed in Parmenides's conception of the being of the one.

23.7

I suspect that I may need to return to this dialogue at some stage. I don't feel that I've considered it sufficiently. Apart from my misgivings about the equivocal character of many of the arguments, I'm not

entirely confident about the schematic overview that I have provided. For example, I'm unsure that the two hypotheses dealing with the 'others' can be so neatly distinguished between a self-identical and 'being' based perspective. But I will set these uncertainties aside for now in the interests of continuing.

19

PHILEBUS

Day 24

- pp.399-407
- Stephanus: 11-19b

24.1

I had anticipated my path getting a bit easier now that I'd made my way across the mountainous region of *Sophist*, *Statesman* and *Parmenides*. I expected a flatter track through the valleys. I expected *Philebus* to focus on the relative benefits of pleasure and thought towards achieving the good life. While this topic is certainly evident, so too are the ontological, epistemological and meta-philosophical concerns of the previous dialogues.

24.2

We begin in the midst of a discussion. Philebus has been arguing that pleasure is the greatest good; a 'state of the soul' 'that can render life happy for all human beings' (11d). Socrates has been arguing on the contrary that knowing, understanding, and remembering' are more beneficial and agreeable (11b-c). Philebus gives up on the

discussion, passing his thesis to Protarchus to take in whatever directions seems appropriate. Philebus 'absolves' himself of all responsibility and calls upon Aphrodite as his 'witness' (12b). Socrates recognises that Philebus names Aphrodite because of her association with pleasure but suggests that pleasure is nothing simple. It has many, varied and often contradictory forms (12c-d). Protarchus argues that all pleasurable things, however apparently opposed, share an underlying identity in that they are all pleasurable. Hence the question of the one and its self-identity, which we may have hoped to have left behind, reveals its continuing pertinence.

24.3

These days, however, Socrates is less beguiled by the logical strategies of Parmenidean monism. Straight away he provides an example of how a single concept can readily incorporate features of difference. The concept of colour incorporates a variety of particular shades that are scarcely identical to one another (and, for example, like black and white, often opposed). Similar, two things can be categorised as pleasurable without both being necessarily beneficial and good. More broadly, this indicates that Socrates follows something corresponding to the second deductive path described in *Parmenides*; the one 'is' via the property of being, which enables the thinking of both the one and the many, as well as processes of becoming generally. In this manner, both terms in the current argument - both pleasure and knowledge - are conceived not only in terms of their overall unity and coherence (oneness) but also in their capacity to incorporate a differentiated plurality (the many). Socrates highlights the 'childish' (13d) and 'commonplace' (14d) 'absurdity' (14) of insisting either upon the one versus the many (Parmenides) or the many versus the one (Heraclitus) (15b).

24.4

Socrates argues that all these puzzles of the relation between the one and the many have their basis in 'discourse', which allows things to 'flit around' - with one idea flowing into its contrary, hence dissolving and confusing concepts altogether (15d). This is portrayed as a temptation of the young thinker: 'he is quite beside himself with

pleasure and revels in moving every statement, now turning it to one side and rolling it all up into one, then again unrolling it and dividing it up' (15e-16). This is portrayed as an improper pleasure within thought - within a field that appears constitutively opposed to ordinary pleasure. More particularly, this impropriety has its basis not only in sensible pleasure but in its association with an improper dialectics. I wonder, is this mode of thinking (or sophistry) distinct from or integral to philosophy - even just as a compelling temptation?

24.5

Socrates offers a corrective to an immaturely antagonistic dialectics that simply rapidly and disruptively shifts between the one and the many without allowing anything at all to properly cohere. This more mature position is represented as a gift from the gods and involves our capacity to integrally recognise the one and the many, the limited and the unlimited (16d). This corrective gift enables us to attend closely to things - particularly to their number, which always necessarily falls between the self-identity of the one and the multiplicity of the infinite. Actual being - the actual form of things - emerges in the gap between these crudely dialectical poles. Socrates provides two examples:

1. Spoken letters, which are unified as sound, but equally infinitely differentiated in particular moments of speech. What counts in terms of knowing about letters is neither remaining focused on their overall unity or their infinite multiplicity. Instead there is a need to attend to the particular set of differentiated letter sounds. Recognising these 'kinds' makes us literate (17-b).
2. Music, where the overall unity of sound, as well as the binary poles of high or low pitch, are of less importance than the actual system of finitely enumerable musical intervals.

24.6

After some uncertainty, Protarchus realises what Socrates is

saying; there is a need to consider 'kinds' of pleasure and knowledge (19b), not simply their self-identity, multiplicity or intrinsic opposition. To modern eyes, this suggests a shift beyond neatly abstract dialectics towards a recognition of the complex phenomenal identity of things. Yet Socrates is not focused on anything concrete or tangible. Rather, he identifies features of intelligible being that involve aspects of number, measure and proportion.

Day 25

- pp.407-415
- Stephanus: 19b-27

25.1

Although Socrates does not celebrate the tangible as such, he moves well beyond any simply deductive philosophical scheme. Instead of just speaking generally, as Parmenides does, about inherent logical conditions, Socrates is concerned with the positive nature of things. The 'kinds' of letters or musical notes are not accessible as *a priori* philosophical things but emerge from curious and enquiring interaction with complex reality. Phenomena are not simply cast in terms of an abstract metaphysics of presence and absence (the 'is" and 'is not'), or as an alternation between absolute unity and infinite multiplicity, or as entirely comprehensible in terms of a system of binary differences, but instead are examined in terms of their actual character, which emerges from an outward looking engagement with mathematically determinate things.

25.2

The strange use of dreams to argue something simple and straightforward. Socrates explains that he learnt from a dream that neither pleasure nor knowledge is sufficient for human happiness (20b). Some 'third' thing is required, which is the properly propor-

tional (limited) combination of the two. But prior to specifying this third option, Socrates clarifies why pleasure on its own is empty and meaningless. Without thought (reason, knowledge and memory) we are ignorant of our own pleasure. Our pleasure may as well not occur if we have no means of being conscious of it - not only as it occurs but as it is anticipated and remembered. Socrates argues you would 'not live a human life but the life of a mollusk or one of those creatures that lives in shell in the sea' (21c).

25.3

There are two human mollusks perhaps: the one entirely wrapped up in thought (the logical dialectician) and the other absorbed in pleasure (the sensualist, hedonist and masochist). Socrates argues that some middle ground is needed for human beings to escape equally claustrophobic conditions. This is the realm of determinable number, measure and proportion - in which pleasure and knowledge enter into correspondence and discover their proper material and limits.

25.4

At one level, pleasure and thought are counterposed. They are placed in competition. At another level, their integral relationship is considered. What do they each mean precisely? Does pleasure denote blindly sensibility or is it necessarily mediated by thought? Is thought divine and eternal or inevitably mortal and affected by the world of pleasure and pain? Nonetheless - retaining a sense of their conflict and competition - Socrates and Protarchus agree that neither pleasure nor thought can win the prize on their own? First prize is awarded to their just combination. Attention then shifts to second prize. Which of the two on its own is better? This hinges on determining which is better as a 'cause for the good'. Socrates argues that reason is 'more choiceworthy and good', while pleasure is unlikely even to be awarded third prize (22d-e).

25.5

Protarchus accepts the superior value of reason but questions such a strong diminution of the beneficial role of pleasure (23). He calls on Socrates to explain his position more fully (23b). Socrates

responds not with a further condemnation of pleasure but with a renewed ontological account of the nature of things. He integrates themes within the tradition of Pre-Socratic philosophy to conceive four different aspects of being:

1. Infinite
2. Limited
3. Combination of the infinite and limited
4. Cause of the combination

25.6

Infinite

The notion of the infinite instantly suggests Anaximander's *apeiron* - the well of undifferentiated being from which all things emerge and (justly) return. It can also be related to Ancient Greek cosmogony - for example, Hesiod's conception of Chaos as the origin of the universe. Further, it engages with the thinking of difference and multiplicity in Heraclitus and with notion of the illusory sphere of mortal opinion in Parmenides. More particularly, in the context of this dialogue, the infinite relates to the thinking of the many, which exceeds features of coherent being, measure and number.

Limited

The notion of the limit responds both to the thinking of undifferentiated flux (Heraclitus) and simple unity (Parmenides). To the first, it proposes underlying regularity and order. To the second, it proposes number and differentiation. The notion of the limit can be conceived as a corrective to Parmenides' notion of the one. Parmenides shifts beyond the contemplation of a diverse flux of mortal experience to recognise an abstractly determined sphere of consistent, coherent and unified being. This is positive for Plato but also has profound dilemmas. It renders the one as thoroughly para-

doxical and unthinkable - without number and shape - undermining all thought of motion, multiplicity and time. Plato's notion of the limit represents number, measure and proportion as the key features of being. The realm of eternal truth is not the singular *per se* but rather emerges in terms of justly determined, mathematically adducible aspects of form.

Combination

However, the limit is not sufficient on it own. It must operate on something in order to constitute actual and manifest being. Infinite and limit must be thought together. The two must be effectively combined. Socrates describes this as 'a coming-into-being created through the measures imposed by the limit' (26d). This can be likened to Anaximander's conception of the economy of being as an exchange between the undifferentiated *apeiron* and the determinate manifestation of things. Yet here the relationship is conceived in less paradoxical terms. It is less about discerning an inexplicable relation between protean chaos and distinct being than about envisaging a positively cast terrain of mediation - the wide and enumerable space of actual things.

Cause

The final aspect of being, according to Socrates, is the cause that enables any coming to be. It is lent a distinct ontological status. Causes produce things and are different from consequences (27). But what is a cause as such? Can it be observed? Is it any kind of particular thing or is it simply a mode of explanation - a construct by which we make sense of things? As Hume argues, a cause may be little more than a coincidence - two things happen, we project a cause to link them. Alternatively, struggling to remain within Plato's mode of thinking, the cause can be conceived as another aspect of the limit - the recognition, perhaps, of the play of the limit within the field of the infinite?

25.7

I will stop here today, but can already expect that pleasure will align with the infinite and thinking with the limit and cause, but who knows? I guess we will discover tomorrow.

Day 26

- *pp.416-456*
- *Stephanus: 27b-67b*

26.1

IT IS LATE EVENING (50E). Socrates and Protarchus persevere with their efforts to distinguish the relative merits of pleasure and thought. Their model, of course, is the good, which, according to Socrates, involves the combination of three forms: beauty; proportion; and truth (65). While resisting any effort to entirely demonise pleasure, Socrates argues that reason is much closer to the good than pleasure. Gentle and moderate varieties of pleasure are permitted but anything excessive is condemned as incompatible with good and harmonious being.

26.2

As expected, Socrates associates pleasure and pain with the infinite - a state of being that restlessly shifts between the more and the less, repletion and lack. Conceived on its own, it represents a dangerous and irrational flux. Any scope for this haze of confused affect to contribute to lucid and healthy being depends upon it discovering a relevant limit. In contrast, thought (and reason) are linked to the cause - the underlying system of cosmic order that structures the interaction of infinite and limit (30-31). Since the good has its basis in this justly composed system, and since thought partakes of this order, it is necessarily to be preferred to pleasure.

26.3

I cannot hope to summarise the whole discussion. It has both an at once insistent and meandering character. Strangely, the notions of pleasure and thought are never precisely defined. While it is acknowledged that they are inevitably mingled within mortal life - and indeed that their proportional combination is the best possible state of being - Socrates, as I mentioned earlier (25.4), makes a constant effort to oppose them and to discover their purified, neatly distinct identity and implications.

26.4

Pleasure reveals itself as nothing entirely sensible. The soul participates in pleasure (and pain) just as much as the body. The soul anticipates pleasures and recollects them. Desire, particularly, is cast as properly of the soul (35c). Nonetheless, this inner field of perturbation, which subtly combines pleasure and pain, is conceived in legibly sensible terms. It involves thirst, hunger and lack (31d-e, 34c). The organism only experiences desire when painfully empty (of the desired thing) and lacks desire when sated. Pleasure and pain, then, are nothing entirely antagonistic to mental experience. They are constituted within thought and yet represent a dangerous tendency towards the infinite. In this sense, pleasure and pain represent less anything altogether alien to thought than an inherent and excessive risk within thought itself. They also plainly demonstrate the untenable nature of thought's autonomy.

26.5

Pleasure and pain appear as aspects of constitutional disequilibrium. Socrates conceives a third state that is neither strongly marked by pleasure nor pain, neither over-full nor empty (32c). This state of internal balance, harmony and motionlessness (42d) is linked to a moderate and reasonable mode of being. It represents another pleasure - a pleasure lifted up beyond the vicissitudes of desire and lack (and lifted up as well above the spectre of illusion). This purified realm of pleasure contemplates things directly, not as phantasms. Socrates argues that true pleasure is linked to a contemplation of the beautiful - colours, shape, sounds, smells, etc (51b). This involves a

rational pleasure in 'regularity' (51c). Clearly, this notion of pleasure aligns closely with the interests and self-image of thought.

26.6

Proper pleasure, as the erasure of distinctly experienced (excessive) pleasure and pain, is conceived as pure. Just as the colour white is purely evident by its colour alone, requiring no need for any strong emphasis or vast scale, so too pleasure is most purely evident in the calm contemplation of the regularity of simple things (53). This contemplation is self-sufficient. It involves no experience of lack and no illusory projection into the past or future. It recognises the eternal in the here and now. Socrates' conception of a third realm of pleasure plainly anticipates key features of modern philosophical aesthetics (Kant's notion, for instance, of disinterested pleasure). Socrates describes an experience of pleasure that is separate from desire and the senses. Instead it is contemplative and formally absorbed. Also relevant to the modern notion of aesthetics, the focus on the beautiful demonstrates an absorption in a key feature of the good. It has clear ethical value without itself adopting a strongly ethical character.

26.7

The issue, however, is that this 'aesthetic' pleasure does not correspond to pleasure generally. Pleasure typically - pleasure that partakes of the more and the less and the infinite - is focused less on reflection on the beautiful (as a sign of cosmic order) than upon the flux of becoming (53c). Common pleasure is wrapped up in the play of generation and destruction. It is tied to the means and motion of actuality (and illusion), never discovering its true identity (as the immutable and self-sufficient good). Beneficial (purified) pleasure can never align with its more typical and degraded forms. The latter are categorically excluded as damaging figures of disharmony and excess.

26.8

Reason, on the other hand, which is most purely realised in mathematics and dialectics, has no intrinsic opposition to its more impure forms (tacit and sensorily embedded forms of knowledge

(55c-59c). Reason is not affected by any fundamental antagonism. It can permit any variety of combinations. In contrast, species of pleasure must be scrupulously separated and kept apart.

26.9

Finally, thought is crowned the victor and beneficial, painless pleasure' is ranked a distant fifth. Ordinary pleasure is not even ranked sixth. Socrates hopes this will bring the discussion to an end but Protarchus remains dissatisfied. He would like to continue, explaining that 'there is still a little missing'. This seems apt given the long tradition of subsequent debate concerning the relationship between rational and affective aspects of human identity.

20

SYMPOSIUM

Day 27

- *pp.458-476*
- *Stephanus: 172-193d*

27.1

The dialogue begins in the middle of a conversation between Apollodorus and an unnamed friend. Apollodorus explains that he is 'not unprepared' by a question his friend has posed to him (172). We never hear the question itself but Apollodorus' response suggests that it must have concerned the topic of Love (incarnated in the gods Eros and Aphrodite). Apollodorus recalls another recent conversation in which Glaucon had asked about a famous party in which Love was discussed. Apollodorus had stressed to Glaucon that he knew nothing about the party directly, which had occurred a long time ago, well before he had known Socrates. Returning to the present, at his friend's urging, he offers to recount what he has been told of the events that happened that night.

27.2

Apollodorus acknowledges his own (lovestruck?) mania (173c). Prior to meeting Socrates and discovering philosophy he had simply 'drifted aimlessly' (173). Since then his priorities have changed. He has lost all interest in practical affairs and is focused entirely on obtaining wisdom.

27.3

The *Symposium* portrays philosophy as a scene of lust, intoxication, boisterous banter and friendship. It is also a strongly delineated male space, in which women are excluded (176e) on the basis of their merely reproductive purpose and putatively inferior intellectual capacities (181d). Eryximachus proposes that the participants moderate their drinking, since they are hungover from the night before, and each give a speech in honour of the god of Love. This is met with general approval. Socrates, who arrives late, having become distracted along the way, explains that he could hardly object to the theme since 'the only thing I say I understand is the art of love' (177e).

27.4

Phaedrus gives the first speech. He provides a customary account of Love. He explains that Love is a very ancient god, emerging just after primary Chaos. Love, he argues, provides 'the greatest goods'. Phaedrus conceives this good not only in erotic and pederastic terms ('I cannot say what greater good there is for a young boy than a gentle lover, or for a lover than a boy to love' (178c)) but also as morally educative, establishing a foundation for private and civic virtue. Phaedrus explains, for instance, that a lover will do everything not to be shamed before his beloved. Overall, Phaedrus draws upon the heritage of traditional wisdom (myth) to conceive Love as an inspiration for societal good.

27.5

After some forgotten speeches (180c), Pausanias suggests that Love is no single, consistently good thing. Everything depends 'on how it is performed' (181). This in turn depends upon which god is offering inspiration. Pausanias distinguishes between 'Common' and 'Heavenly' Aphrodite (180d-e). Common Aphrodite is associated with 'vulgar' erotic love (181b). It is bodily, impulsive and indiscriminately

oriented both towards boys and women. In contrast, Heavenly Aphrodite has an exclusively male character. It is directed to the soul and 'free from the lewdness of youth' (182c). Pausanias argues that it is disgraceful to pursue very young boys, but appropriate to fall in love with 'older ones who are showing the first sign of a beard'. Signs of adolescence indicate a developing (male) intelligence (in need of moral guidance) . This love - the love of the older man for an adolescent boy - is a committed love, in which the lover is 'eager' 'to spend the rest of his own life with him' (180d). One wonders, however, how this love will endure the vicissitudes of the beloved's physical transition to adulthood?

27.6

Pausanias goes on to explain the complex amatory customs of Athens in terms of an overall societal effort to winnow out good cerebral love from bad erotic love (184). The suitor is encouraged to make every effort to pursue their object of affection, while the beloved is encouraged to resist as long as possible in order to ensure their suitor has noble intentions. What could have been regarded as contradictory and hypocritical state of affairs is conceived as an effective means of distinguishing the two different identities of love. Pausanias argues that Athens weaves a nuanced and enlightened middle path between absolutist regimes that prohibit love altogether and the indiscriminate permissiveness of 'inarticulate' societies. (182b-d). Ultimately, love is good when it is pursued 'for the sake of virtue' - either in the interests of imparting or obtaining wisdom (184c).

27.7

The playwright Aristophanes is meant to speak next but suffers from hiccups. He passes the mantle to Eriyximachus, a physician. Eriyximachus acknowledges the distinction between two kinds of love but proposes extending the discussion beyond a narrowly human (legal and customary) frame. Rather than focusing on the ethical implications of good or bad love, he conceives their broader systemic and cosmological conditions. Good love is linked to the health of bodies and systems, while bad love is associated with disease and collapse (186b). More specifically, the former indicates a

'concord between opposites' (186e), a state of harmony and integral being, whereas the latter is associated with destructive conflict and excess (plague, natural disasters (188b) and 'debauchery' (187e)). Eriyximachus argues that Love represents an 'absolute' force in whatever mode it adopts but it is best when it 'is directed, in temperance and justice, towards the good' (188d).

27.8

Having recovered from his hiccups (and having lightly mocked Eriyximachus), Aristophanes speaks. He returns the discussion to the human domain, arguing that Love 'loves the human race more than any other god', curing 'those ills we are most happy to have mended' (189d). Aristophanes provides a mythical account of how the human race was once more complex, with three distinct sexes - male, female and androgynous. Each had double the number of limbs they currently have and, in the case of the androgynous humans, two sets of sexual organs. This integral, self-sufficient nature lent them tremendous power. Feeling threatened, Zeus cut them all in half so that they were weaker, incomplete and more numerous (189d-191). Those who had been split from women became lesbians, those split from men homosexuals and those split from the androgynous heterosexuals. On this basis, love represents an effort to recover our lost 'wholeness' (193). We long to 'melt together' with our lover, which is both a sexual and spiritual (soul-focused) impulse (192d). The path to our reconciled state is not only by pursuing a loving relationship but also by paying due 'reverence' to the gods so that they may heal the division that they have wrought within us (193d).

27.9

The speeches are at once serious and humorous. Humour is evident as either a deliberate strategy or manifest through layers of gentle irony - for example, praise for virtuous love that preserves an elemental and lustful aspect. This demonstrates a key value of Plato's dialogic approach. Philosophical arguments are represented as the views of particular characters, which must be evaluated in terms of their tone, coherence and context. In this manner, they maintain a light and critically open character.

Day 28

- *pp. 476-505*
- *Stephanus: 193e-223d*

28.1

Agathon speaks next. The whole evening, it is worth noting, aims to celebrate his recent victory in a dramatic poetry competition. Young and handsome, Agathon explains that the earlier speakers have focused on the benefit of Love to humans, whereas he will praise 'the god of Love himself'. Contrary to Phaedrus, Agathon contends that Love is not an old god but rather young and necessarily so (195). Love is associated with the grace and beauty of first blooming, not at all with age or decay. The old world (as described in Hesiod' cosmology) was one of elemental conflict and grim 'Necessity' (197c). Love had no place during that period, only emerging within more refined, elegant and luxurious circumstances (197d). Love is 'delicate', 'fluid and supple', virtuous, moderate and wise (195d-196e). Love is the 'happiest' of all gods and the 'most beautiful and best' (195).

28.2

It is Socrates' turn. He praises Agathon's speech, but also identifies its hyperbolic and strongly rhetorical character. He argues that Agathon speaks well but with little regard for the truth. Socrates aims to speak more plainly and truthfully (199b). He avoids the ordinary strategies of speech-making, preferring, as always, a dialogical form. He begins by questioning Agathon. Can Love be identical to the good and the beautiful? Surely Love is always directed towards something - toward something that it lacks, that is not itself? Agathon is forced to admit that Love is not coincident with beauty or the good but rather desires them (201).

28.3

Avoiding any sense of engaging in ordinary argumentative exposi-

tion, Socrates represents the remainder of his speech as a conversation that he had with an expert in divination, Diotima of Mantinea. It was she who taught him everything he knows about 'the art of love' (201d). She clarified to him initially that Love is neither beautiful or ugly, good nor bad, but rather 'something in between'. However, this does not imply that Love is neutrally attractive or lukewarmly good but rather that it represents a sphere of mediation. Love mediates between 'mortal and immortal'. Its role is to 'round out the whole' and 'bind fast the all to the all' (202d). It is not a god (natively beautiful and good) nor an earthly 'mechanic' (manually fashioning beautiful and good things) but a daemon - a spirit that motivates and animates our efforts towards happiness and flourishing life (204d).

28.4

Love is portrayed as an impulse to the good. It is not restricted to erotic life but rather affects all human activities and efforts (205d). Our desire for the good is not only for anything presently and immediately available, but also for a good that endures - that is ageless and immortal. Here, a tension emerges. Love is about the manifestation, reproduction and preservation of the good (and the beautiful) but this necessarily involves leaving things behind, forgetting stuff and allowing things to die (207d). Biological and cultural processes, as well as the trajectories of individual souls, demand a complex interaction between preservation and renewal. Love is conceived as embroiled in living transformation but oriented towards immortality. Socrates recalls that Diotima described Love as pregnant - 'giving birth in beauty' (206b).

28.5

Finally, Diotima spoke of the 'highest mystery'. The 'rites of Love' involve making an ascent beyond an absorption in particular bodies and the bodily itself to the realm of the soul. We begin with the pursuit of Love in human activities, customs and laws, then in efforts to seek knowledge and ultimately in the contemplation of the beautiful itself - 'absolute, pure, unmixed, not polluted by human flesh or colours or any other great nonsense of mortality' (211e).

28.6

A clamour of cheers for Socrates' speech. This is followed by even more noise' - the rattling of the courtyard door, 'the shrieks of some flute girl', a drunken Alcibiades loudly entering (212c). It is almost as though Socrates (via Diotima) has literally summoned the spirit world. Love has arrived in all its complexity - not only as the humorous bathos of the jealous Alcibiades - but as something vibrantly intervening within the context of philosophy. Love appears not only as the neatly domesticated desire for wisdom (safely aligned with philosophy) but rather as the very mystery of things - the disruption of drunken revellers at the door and the spontaneous wonder of the night itself, which has been lying all the while quietly outside.

28.7

Alcibiades is drunk and encourages everybody else to drink. He is funny, passionate and jealous (of Socrates). When he learns that speeches have been made in praise of love, he contrasts his own 'drunken ramblings' to the party's civilised context of 'sober orations' (214c). Eventually, he agrees to speak, with Eryximachus charging him with delivering an 'encomium to Socrates' (214c). Like Socrates, Alcibiades proposes 'aiming at the truth'. He offers two analogies. Socrates, he suggests, resembles two musicians - lute-playing Silenus and the satyr Marsyas. Both had the capacity to enchant their listeners, to arouse passions and possess souls. Socrates differs only in that he employs ordinary words. He makes arguments that seem 'common' and 'ridiculous' but that 'are bursting with figures of virtue' (222). Socrates is portrayed as at once 'impudent, contemptuous and vile' (215b) - 'a snake' that bites on the 'most sensitive part' (218) - and 'godlike' within ('so bright and beautiful, so utterly amazing' (217)).

28.8

Alcibiades recognises in the person of Socrates two sides of philosophy - its 'madness' and 'Bacchic frenzy' (218b) and its 'sober and temperate' "inside"' (216d). He had been seduced by Socrates and imagined that Socrates wished to seduce him, only to later discover that Socrates had no interest in his body - in any mortal 'semblance of beauty' - but was fixated on 'beauty itself (218d). Socrates plays a

public 'game of irony' (216e) to disguise his real and far more noble intentions.

28.9

Amongst all his 'unique' (221c) features - his bravery (221) and his imperviousness to hunger, cold or the effects of alcohol (19c-220) - one feature stands out - actually a notable incident. Alcibiades recalls that Socrates, absorbed in some difficult philosophical conundrum, stopped in one spot and stood thinking for a whole day and night. Nobody knew what to make of it. This demonstrates his different mode of being and fundamentally different sense of value (220c-d). Alcibiades concludes by emphasising Socrates' work of 'deception' - you imagine that he is in love with you, only to discover that you are in love with him (222d). Maintaining his typical humility, Socrates cannot resist bringing things back down to Earth, insisting that Alcibiades is simply trying to come between himself and his current flame Agathon. It is by now very late. Most of the partygoers leave or fall asleep. Socrates remains awake and in conversation throughout the night. He pursues his ordinary activities the next day and only returns home to rest the following evening.

21

PHAEDRUS

Day 29

- *pp.507-534*
- *Stephanus: 227-257b*

29.1

Socrates joins Phaedrus on a rural walk. This is a rare and uncharacteristic event as Socrates scarcely ever leaves Athens. Phaedrus has tempted him by promising to recount a speech by Lysias. The speech concerns the benefits of seduction. It argues that boys should allow themselves to be seduced by men who do not love them (rather than by those who do). Struck by the rhetorical eloquence of the speech, Phaedrus is keen to summarise it for Socrates. Socrates recognises, however, that Phaedrus holds a concealed copy of the speech beneath his cloak. There is no need for a summary - Phaedrus can simply read it. They stop to rest beneath a large plane tree. Socrates praises the tree's beauty, but also acknowledges that this is an alien context for him: 'I am devoted to learning;

landscapes and trees have nothing to teach me - only the people in the city can do that' (230d).

29.2

Phaedrus reads the speech of Lysias. It is addressed from an older man to a boy, explaining why the boy should give in to his seductions precisely on the basis that he (the older man and suitor) does **not** love him. In very brief terms, Lysias argues that a lover is fickle and out of control, whereas a friend (unloving suitor) is focused on pleasure and mutual benefit. The reading finished, Socrates feigns great enthusiasm ('I'm in ecstasy' (234d)). Phaedrus rebukes him for his tone of irony. Socrates confesses that he finds the speech superficially stylish but vacuous. In his view, it is repetitive, lacking any precise insight and plainly geared towards the instrumental goal of seduction (235). He claims that he has 'heard better somewhere' (235c) and can provide a different and superior speech. Phaedrus insists that he does so.

29.3

Socrates acknowledges that he agrees with some of Lysias' arguments. There is value, for instance, in the lover retaining his 'wits' rather losing control altogether' (236). He expresses his discomfort, however, with rhetorical exposition, explaining that he refuses to give a 'fancier speech' (236b), even playfully suggesting that he may cover his head while speaking to avoid embarrassment. Despite these qualifications, Socrates launches into the speech in a lofty and very evidently parodic poetic style ('Come to me, O you clear-voiced Muses' (237)). Like Lysias, Socrates portrays the older man speaking to the boy. The mature suitor encourages the boy to make the best decision concerning who should be allowed to win his favours. He argues for the need to carefully evaluate the benefits or otherwise of the relationship. This hinges on recognising the kind of love that is on offer, whether it is motivated by 'our inborn desire for pleasures' (*eros*) or 'our acquired judgement that pursues what is best' (237d).

29.4

These two principles are portrayed as at war inside us. Erotic love is a compelling force inclined towards 'outrageousness'. It is diverse,

multi-formed and focused on selfish satisfaction (238), whereas rational love experiences beauty differently - not as something to be consumed (in pleasure) but as an absorbing sign of the good. Socrates positions this distinction between two kinds of love as a key improvement upon Lysias' argument, in that it defines the issue precisely (238e). It provides a proper basis for identifying the dangers of succumbing to an older man who is in the throes of erotic love. Plainly, such a lover will have little care for the welfare of his beloved. His advances are best sternly resisted as he is simply a 'wolf' aiming to 'sate hunger' (241d).

29.5

Socrates moves on to consider the contrary case. So far he has followed in the footsteps of Lysias, making what he acknowledges to be a 'horrible' and 'close to impious' argument (242d). He has condemned love and ignored its wonderful and beneficial implications. Even more strongly, he has told 'false stories about matters divine' (243). In order to purify himself, he undertakes now to provide a 'Palinode to Love'. Socrates speaks again to the 'beautiful boy', explaining that it is far better that he gives himself to someone who loves him than not. Love, as 'the 'madness (mania) from a god', 'is finer than self-control of human origin' (244d). The lover's madness is divinely inspired and exemplifies the higher potential of the human soul. This conception of a noble *amor fou* precipitates an elucidation of the nature and structure of the human soul.

29.6

Socrates explains that the soul provides a vital link to divinity. It is the self-moving and immortal portion of human being, while the body is passive, transient and corruptible. It is the role of the soul to look after the mortal body ('all that lacks a soul'). However, the soul is no simple thing. Socrates likens it to charioteer and two winged horses. Mortal chariot driving is described as a 'painfully difficult business' because one horse is beautiful and inclined toward the good, while 'the other is the opposite' (246-b). Each horse pulls in different directions - the one ascending towards the realm of divine truth, the other ('noisy, very sweaty, disorderly'

(248)) descending into the 'murky' realm of sense and mortal opinion (250). Socrates' emphasises the horse's wings - the potential for the wings not only to grow and be nourished (in order to 'raise them aloft where the gods all dwell') but to 'shrink and disappear' (246d-e).

29.7

Unlike humans, the souls of gods have two good horses and can contemplate the truth eternally. Socrates describes this scene of truth as 'the place beyond heaven' (247c). Why 'beyond'? Perhaps because contemplation requires an object that is not entirely self-identical - an order of being that exceeds even the self-collection of the gods. Human souls find it much harder to obtain and preserve any clear eye on the truth. While they can ascend and be 'nourished by the best pastures', they also regularly fall into 'forgetfulness and wrong-doing' (248c). Socrates explains a hierarchy of the human soul, with philosophers at the top, statesman and doctors a bit further below, manual labourers and sophists much lower again and tyrants at the very bottom (248de-e).

29.8

Returning to the metaphor of the charioteer and his winged horses, Socrates describes the battle within the soul when the lover sees his beloved. One horse pulls chastely away from the boy, while the other rushes towards seduction. The best kind of love is associated with the superior soul 'whose memory is good enough to recall travelling with gods' (250). More particularly, when the good lover, 'as if by a bolt of lightning', sees the face of his beloved 'his memory is carried back to the real nature of Beauty' (254b). The boy reciprocates this love as the 'mirror image' of this potent memory (255d).

29.9

According to Socrates, the best form of love abstains from mortal pleasure altogether. However, love that is less pure can still provide an intimation of higher beauty and goodness (256b-c). Socrates describes a 'tingling' of the 'stump of each feather' (251d) as the boy discovers his soul's fledgling trajectory and purpose. Overall, love - the love of an older man for a boy - provides the very basis for the

ascent of the soul. It is a divine gift that must respected and celebrated.

Midthought

M.1

I COVERED a lot of territory yesterday, but only provided a rough summary of what I read - certainly no considered reflection. I'm not sure that I can offer anything like the latter, but can at least ask some questions. They centre on the issue of intoxication - its propriety or otherwise. In the *Symposium*, Alcibiades portrays Socrates as a deceptive figure, appearing to be carried away by love but actually moderate and sober. Similarly, he contends that philosophy appears (publicly) as 'madness' and 'Bacchic frenzy' (218b) but is actually deeply rational. How are love, intoxication and madness at once aligned with and opposed to rationality?

M.2

Socrates suggests that divinely inspired intoxication provides a vision of truth that is vital to rational and beneficial being. Intoxication, on the other hand, is antithetical to rationality and the good. It is instead associated with the perturbations and chimera of mortal identity. Arrayed on one side are the forces of the eternal soul. On the other, the various corrupting ruses of the senses.

M.3

However, if the soul is self-moving then why does it require any inspiration from a god? According to Socrates, this need hinges upon the soul's association with a body, which leads it into forgetfulness and corruption. Yet, very evidently, the relationship of soul to body resembles that of divine intoxication. In the same way that a god aids a fallen soul by reminding them of their eternal nature, souls are attracted to - and aim to assist - 'all that lacks a soul' (246). In this respect, souls at once reveal a divine benevolence and a passive

aspect. They not only inspire mortal beings but are themselves infused, animated and intoxicated by a higher assisting power. While gods are unaffected by their work of intervention, souls, it seems, are susceptible to corruption. They are guided by contrary horses. Their course can easily go awry, requiring many thousands of years of life, afterlife and reincarnation to be remedied.

M.4

Why should souls assist bodies? What possible good can there be in this uncertain and risky endeavour - especially as the body itself is irredeemable and only the soul can ascend to its former state? In these terms, souls appear as self-sacrificing things, embracing mortality when their better destiny is to leave it behind. Regarded slightly differently, however, their capacity to ascend depends precisely upon engaging with all that is alien to them, but less in order to transform the latter's existential conditions than to provide a framework for ascent beyond a corrupt foundation. In these terms, the relationship has a reciprocal character. The soul inclines the body to the practical goal of achieving the greatest proportion of mortal good possible, while the body provides the necessary context in which the soul can demonstrate its wisdom and worth.

M.5

Returning to the issue of intoxication. Intoxication hardly simply represents a loss of rational faculties. Indeed, on the contrary, it involves the recollection of something rational that has been lost to us. Rather than dissolving the capacity to coherently see, intoxication - in this higher philosophical form - indicates a superior mode of seeing that involves sudden and wondrous insight. The contemplation of Beauty involves a withdrawal from ordinary sensible contexts of visibility. It involves a recognition and recall of an inherently and resplendently formal truth. In this respect, intoxication demonstrates an intimate relation to philosophical rationality.

M.6

Intoxication is associated with recollection (and divination). At its highest level it is directed towards recognising and preserving truth. However, the field of remembered truth is not only formal and philo-

sophical. Socrates also conceives intoxication as a key vehicle for preserving and communicating features of cultural tradition. Socrates describes the madness of being possessed by the Muses - 'a Bacchic frenzy of songs and poetry that glorifies the achievements of the past and teaches them to future generations' (245). This may seem inconsistent - especially in the light of Socrates' regular condemnation of poetry and the representational arts. Yet, although he condemns poetry's arousal of intemperate emotion, his main objection is less that poetry intoxicates than it shapes illusions. Whereas intoxication, at its best, is a gift from the gods, illusion misleads. It is the product of mortal opinion, blind fears and sensible artistry.

M.7

Still, Socrates' (and Plato's) stance is hardly fixed and entirely consistent. While Socrates carefully distinguishes different kinds of intoxication (sensible, divinatory, poetically inspired and philosophical), and always prefers divine to earthly influence, there is still the sense that even higher intoxication is uncertainly positioned - appearing at once intimately proximate and distant from beneficial, rationally informed life. Socrates may at times advocate the divinely inspired character of intoxication, but more often he prefers deliberate dialectical discussion to rash and sudden leaps towards wisdom. Moreover, his general disposition (for instance, his imperviousness to pain, alcohol or unbridled enthusiasm) suggests less intoxication than sobriety.

M.8

Socrates' notion of a recollected truth may appear dubious to us. Beauty, in our view, is typically regarded as no eternally existing thing but as the product of human, and specifically cultural, experience. It is a historically evolved and changeable concept. However, we are not only historical beings. We are also instances of more slowly evolving and changeable genetic code. While we can hardly make instinctive migrations, like the humpback whale from Antarctica to temperate latitudes, we still demonstrate all manner of affordances that are biologically shaped (our capacity for language, for instance, or to walk upright). I wonder whether beauty too, despite its cultural vari-

ability, may also have some aspect of native determination? While we can hardly associate beauty with any specific set of universal features, we can perhaps recognise across various particular cultural standards and modes of aesthetic engagement, a common experience of being struck by beauty - as though it were something that we inherently recognise and recollect.

M.9

We can recall that in *Symposium* Alcibiades describes a time that Socrates stood for a whole day and night in a single place to reflect on a difficult philosophical problem. This is mentioned as an illustration of Socrates' unique character. Despite arguing that 'landscapes and trees have nothing to teach me' (230d), Socrates regularly adopts the manner of a tree. It is also woth noting that he sits beneath a large plane tree to properly listen to and reflect upon the speech of Lysias. While preoccupied with the city and the world of men, his uniquely philosophical character hinges on a capacity to stop and engage a contemplative mode of being. In this sense, Socrates' identity has a vegetative quality. He is closer to the trees than he imagines - and trees may provide a better model for human being (and political society) than he envisages.

Day 30

- *pp.534-557*
- *Stephanus: 257c-279c*

30.1

The second half of the dialogue shifts away from the theme of Love to focus more soberly on issues of speech and writing. The speeches of Lysias and Socrates provide models for considering the nature and propriety of forms of communication. Phaedrus and Socrates consider the ambivalent implications of the expertise of speech-

writing - at one level appearing shameful (open to the charge of sophistry, lack of eloquence and mis-guided self-importance) while at another level providing a pathway to honour and immortal fame' (258b-c). Socrates argues that speech and writing are not either shameful or honourable as such. Everything depends upon how they are done - and more particularly whether or not these practices are informed by genuine understanding and truth.

30.2

Phaedrus and Socrates consider whether they are wasting time lying beneath a tree discussing speech and writing? Of course not. After all, they are hardly slaves (259). It seems they are like the cicadas, who rising above the ground 'instantly burst into song' with no consideration of practical exigencies - the ordinary mortal need to drink or eat (259c). Socrates argues that their leisured conversation pays homage to the muses Calliope and Urania, 'who preside over the heavens and all discourse, human and divine' (259d). Their activity would only be a waste if succumbing to more base inclinationsthey were to fall asleep (259).

30.3

A discussion of rhetoric follows. Socrates defines rhetoric as 'a way of directing the soul by means of speech' (261). He argues that rhetoric has legitimate value only when guided by the interests of truth, certainly not as some independent art of persuasion that argues one way or another depending upon circumstances. The model for malleable and manipulative speech is legal debate in which truth and untruth, just and unjust, are cast adrift within a scene of opposition and framed however necessary to advocate some particular case (261c). In this context, rhetoric regularly veers into deception, ignoring the truth and replacing it with the merely credible and 'likely' (272e). It plays upon the similar and dissimilar, 'chases opinions' and is very often 'a ridiculous thing' (262c).

30.4

Socrates moves on to consider the faults of Lysias' speech, explaining that it does not define its terms adequately, is randomly assembled and fails to 'cut up each kind' 'along its natural joints'

(265c). However much the speech may have superficial rhetorical appeal, it is dialectically weak. He condemns rhetoric as a catalogue of 'preliminary' techniques (269) ('potions' (268c)) that are fruitless and freely wandering (263b) unless guided by genuine philosophical thought. Philosophy attends to truth, the nature of the whole, issues of form and kind (273e), and the proper relationship of parts. Socrates employs the metaphor of medicine. A doctor does not simply learn some 'isolated' techniques for making us vomit or shit (268b). If they are genuine they demonstrate a coherent understanding of our overall physical nature as a means of attending to and preserving our health. Similarly, the good rhetorician demonstrates an understanding of the world (270c) and human souls (271) if they are to have any capacity to speak well and beneficially.

30.5

Having relegated rhetoric to its properly subsidiary role, Socrates and Phaedrus consider the issue of writing - how it is legitimately undertaken and how it can (very often) stray from the path of truth. Socrates offers a mythical account of the medium, explaining how the Egyptian god Theuth invented writing and promoted its benefits to the Egyptian king Thamus. Theuth, who was also the inventor of number and calculation, geometry, astronomy and games of chance, argues that writing is 'a potion for memory and wisdom''. Thamus is unconvinced, responding that writing is an external aid that corrupts our internal capacity to remember and undermines wisdom by enabling us 'to hear many things without being properly taught' (275).

30.6

Phaedrus lightly mocks Socrates for 'making up stories'. Socrates answers strangely and indirectly, indicating that 'the first prophecies were the words of an oak'. Everyone at the time 'found it rewarding enough in their simplicity to listen to an oak or even a stone' (275b). Once again, the metaphor of a tree - here as a sign of divine inspiration and wisdom. Despite its similarity to writing, despite its apparent muteness and material identity as plant matter (or stone), the oak exemplifies a genuine lucidity. This can hardly involve any ordinary eloquence or any capacity to communicate

soul to soul. Instead, Socrates suggests, it involves a relation between features of simplicity and truth. Earlier, when condemning the art of rhetoric, Socrates had argued that rhetoricians confuse simple and complex concepts - those that provide a readily agreed upon indication of truth (the words '"iron" or "silver"') and those that we disagree about and that require definition and analysis ('"just" or "good"') (263). Within this context, writing has an awkward status for Socrates. A papyrus scroll or inscribed stone not only partakes of the simplicity of the object realm but is shot through with artifice and complexity. Writing is an exteriority that has nothing to say to us.

30.7

French philosopher Jacques Derrida has written extensively about Socrates' (and Plato's) suspicion of writing, so I will avoid pursuing the paradoxes of this suspicion too closely. Socrates criticises writing for its silent and non-dialogical character, 'roaming about everywhere' (communicating with 'those who have no business with it'). At the same time he also criticises it for being weakly unable to defend itself against attack (275d-e). Writing is likened to a practice of poor and wasteful farming that casts seeds willy nilly about the place - more for 'amusement' than any sense of obtaining a productive crop (276b). As the dead 'image' of 'living, breathing, discourse', writing should properly provide a reminder of what has been already said and serve as pleasant pastime for those who have withdrawn from ordinary active life and are experiencing 'forgetful old age' (276b-d). According to Socrates, it is only within the context of dialectical speech that 'legitimate', fecund and immortal communication between souls can occur. Still, as Derrida argues, the metaphor of writing persists. Genuine speech, Socrates claims, is 'written in the soul' (278).

30.8

I wonder, however, if Plato is writing entirely seriously? Could his tone be less grim than playful? If he is 'amusing himself' (276d) writing these dialogues then surely this corresponds to the character of philosophy itself, which like the cicadas song occurs against the

grain of practical life. Recognising that writing 'is of little worth' may be the very key to its philosophical possibility and value.

30.9

The dialogue ends with Socrates offering a prayer to 'Pan and all the other gods of this place' (279b). It is not, however, a prayer to Love or rural nature, but 'that I may be beautiful inside'. More particularly, Socrates prays that his 'external possessions be in friendly harmony with what is within'. He requests a materially modest life that is 'rich' with wisdom (279c).

22

ALCIBIADES

Day 31

- *pp.558-575*
- *Stephanus: 103-118b*

31.1

For many centuries - particularly during the Middle Ages - *Alcibiades* was regarded as the best introduction to Platonic thought - as well as to the field of philosophy generally. However, since the mid-19th century there has been suspicion that Plato may not have written the dialogue. Certainly, it lacks Plato's ordinary literary sophistication. There is little evidence of dramatic finesse, deft characterisation or the subtle interplay of seriousness and irony. It reads as a scholastic recapitulation of ideas from other, more interesting Platonic dialogues. Nonetheless, it is not altogether uninteresting. *Alcibiades* distills key messages of Plato's philosophy in revealing ways. Additionally, in representing this philosophy in summary and prescriptive terms, the dialogue highlights areas of paradox that may otherwise prove less evident.

31.2

Alcibiades has an awkward, expository start. Having silently observed Alcibiades for many years, Socrates finally speaks to him. He describes his many fine qualities but also his arrogance and complacent sense of superiority (103). Socrates argues that Alcibiades will never achieve his ambitions without his assistance. Alcibiades is dubious of this account (and of this offer of help) but agrees to answer a question that Socrates poses to him. Socrates suspects that Alcibiades, if he were asked by the Athenians to advise them, would be prepared to do so on the basis he can provide good advice and knows 'better than they do' (106c). Alcibiades accepts this description, prompting Socrates to demonstrate that Alcibiades has a misplaced faith in his capacity to advise the Athenians. He is ignorant and requires extensive self-cultivation (education) before he can make any kind of worthwhile political contribution.

31.3

Socrates establishes that a good adviser is knowledgeable and that knowledge must come from somewhere. You are either taught it or learn it yourself. Most importantly, the process of learning necessarily entails an earlier time in which you did not know what you now know. The issue hinges on when and how learning occurs. Socrates identifies that Alcibiades is well trained in writing, lyre-playing and wrestling. However, this is hardly the knowledge needed to advise the Athenians on issues of war and peace (on what its best done politically). Instead, an understanding of the just and the unjust is required. So, Socrates inquires, when and how did Alcibiades learn this? Can he even ever recall not knowing about these things? Even as a child 'playing knucklebones', he was acutely sensitive to fairness and cheating (110b). There seems to have been no time in his life that he did not know about justice? Yet if he never learned it then how can he possibly know it?

31.4

As usual, the notion of ordinary professional expertise provides the model for knowledge (107). A shoe maker knows about shoes (and how to make them). A ship's captain knows how to guide a ship

through a stormy sea. A doctor knows about the body and how to cure it. These professions neatly combine knowledge, expertise and identity. Despite his various shortcomings, Alcibiades reveals a more flexible nature. He is not a writer, lyre-player or wrestler as such. He has all these skills, but they do not define him. In this respect, Socrates positions ordinary expertise as at once exemplary and limited. The focused dedication of the shoe maker, ship's captain and doctor is at once impressive and indicative of a social division between those restricted to their field of expertise and those with the freedom to know more generally.[1]

31.5

Of course, the social-hierarchical divisions are more plentiful and nuanced. Leaving aside issues of gender and ethnicity, there are at least four distinct strata evident.

1. At the bottom, are slaves. They are represented as lacking in knowledge altogether. They are little more than bodies with no capacity to knowledgeably orient their activities. Instead they must be guided by others.
2. Then there are those whose knowledge relates to particular fields of discrete and manually oriented expertise (farmers, tradespeople, etc.).
3. Above them are those who expertly direct activities without manually performing tasks (managers, traders, military commanders, etc.). The latter, although more abstractly knowledgeable, are still focused on material processes and things.
4. At the highest level, are the genuinely free men, who possess the means or philosophical disposition to exist unconcerned with practical affairs and to consider the welfare of the whole. Despite (and via) their attitude of leisure, they are charged with caring for all things. This

1. See the work of French philosopher Jacques Ranciere for an extensive consideration of the political implications of this division

entails pursuing knowledge for its own sake (as an aspect of the good).

31.6

Returning to the issue of how Alcibiades learnt about justice and injustice, Alcibiades posits that he most likely learned it from 'people in general' (110c). Socrates, of course, has little time for any notion of popular wisdom. He poses questions that undermine any scope for knowledge of justice to have a popular basis. Socrates claims that only 'trivial' things such as the knowledge of one's native language can be learned in this way, certainly not 'serious' things such as justice (110c-111). The difference, he argues, is that language trades in 'simple' concepts - things we directly know and agree upon, such as stone and wood - whereas the notion of justice is more complex (111b). People do not agree about justice and this is a sign they are confused about the notion and do not know it adequately. On this basis, they can hardly provide good teachers of what is just and unjust (112d).

31.7

Socrates casts snares for Alcibiades, leading him to believe the opposite of what he ordinarily believes. Most importantly, Socrates establishes that Alcibiades is ignorant about justice and therefore cannot credibly advise the Athenians. Alcibiades recognises these entrapments but is powerless to resist them. Socrates even makes him admit that the various arguments against his capacity to wisely advise are his own - that the person answering questions is the one saying something, not the person who poses the questions (113b). This is hardly convincing. Modern sociolinguistics teaches us that questions are scarcely innocent and powerless things. They are commands. They demand that someone answer. A line of questioning can determine the direction and purpose of a discussion. Very evidently, Socrates directs the discussion. On the whole, Alcibiades is permitted to do little more than agree or disagree. When he does attempt to say anything more, his arguments are swiftly subject to criticism.

31.8

For instance, Alcibiades argues at one point that the discussion

has started on the wrong foot. The issue for the Athenians is not the justice or injustice of particular efforts at war or peace but rather whether or not the efforts are 'advantageous' (114b). Instead of acknowledging that Alcibiades has a point - that a distinction can be made between considerations of ethical propriety and practical benefit - Socrates argues strongly that the 'advantageous', when adequately conceived, is logically and necessarily aligned with justice. Justice is good, hence 'advantageous'. Considerations of justice and advantage can never properly diverge. While a worthy and high-minded criticism, this appears politically naive and fails to respond to Alcibiades' point that political debates concerning war and peace can have a different nature - their focus can be less on evaluating issues of justice *per se* than securing particular practical ends.

31.9

Alcibiades admits confusion. Socrates interprets this as evidence of his ignorance of justice. If Alcibiades 'wavers' it is because he does not know; and on this basis he is likely to 'make mistakes' and to advise the Athenians poorly (117-e). Socrates argues that his ignorance is particularly dangerous because he thinks he knows when he does not. Alcibiades can only acknowledge that he is 'wedded to stupidity' and should certainly not, as Socrates puts it, go 'rushing into politics before you've had an education' (118b).

Day 32

Alcibiades

- *pp.575-595*
- *Stephanus: 118c-135e*

32.1

Despite being exposed as ignorant and unready for politics,

Alcibiades remains unworried. Why should he bother pursuing any specific training when his peers are equally uneducated? He can simply rely upon his natural superiority (119b). Socrates is critical of this attitude, arguing that Alcibiades should not compare himself to 'Midias the cockfighter' or those 'people who try to run the city's affairs with their "slave-boy hairstyles"' but to his genuine competitors - the aristocratic kings of Sparta and Persia (120-b). They possess excellent native qualities, are far wealthier and better trained. Hence they pose a 'formidable' existential threat to Athens (120d). Socrates imagines the opinion of Amestris, the mother of the king of Persia. He expects she would likely recognise that the Greeks have no hope, except via means of their 'diligence and wisdom' (123d). If Greece is to defeat its formidable enemies, it is vital that Alcibiades focus on the words of the Delphic oracle, 'know thyself'.

32.2

Alcibiades accepts the need for 'self-cultivation' and asks Socrates to 'show me the way' (124b). Socrates agrees to be Alcibiades' teacher but admits that he is also in need of education. His advantage, however, is that, whereas Alcibiades is guided by the statesman and founder of Greek democracy Pericles, Socrate is guided by a 'better and wiser' 'guardian' - 'god' (124c). In these terms, it seems evident why this dialogue was well-regarded in the Middle Ages. It conceives political authority as having its basis in divine authority. This may also also partly explain modern doubt concerning Plato's authorship. For us, Socrates appears more typically focused on human frames of philosophical and political enquiry. Plato usually conceives a complex, mediated and ultimately unknowable relation to divine agency and truth. This stance also corresponds better to modern (Western) political perspectives that insist upon a proper division between church and state.

32.3

The dialogue changes pace. Relatively long sections of speech are replaced by rapid-fire questions and answers as Socrates and Alcibiades seek to clarify the self-cultivation required to foster worthwhile political leadership. They work backwards initially, considering what

a good politician aims to accomplish. They agree that the fundamental political task is to 'take care of things' (124e) and, more specifically, to rule 'over the men in the city who take part in citizenship and who make a mutual contribution' (125d). This involves establishing conditions for social agreement ('mutual friendship', in Alcibiades terms (126c). Twin questions emerge, what is social agreement and what skill precisely is required to cultivate it? Socrates recognises that the issue of agreement has public and private implications: 'doesn't the same skill make both a city and private citizen agree, both with themselves and with others?' (126d).

32.4

A troubling dilemma is recognised. Agreement and friendship are only possible if people share a common understanding. However the city is composed of people with differing expertise. They are all engaged in specialised activities based on varied frames of expert knowledge and lack any common context in which agreement and friendship can occur. On this basis - because agreement and friendship are compromised - Socrates draws the logical conclusion that cities are not 'well governed when the different groups each do their own work'. Opposing this view, Alcibiades asserts the paradox that 'when each person does his own work' 'mutual friendship results' (127b). Socrates insists, however, that this can scarcely be friendship as such. The justice of the city - the notion that the whole is an assemblage of differentiated parts - undermines any scope for agreement and friendship (127c). In this manner, these political goals suddenly appear aporetic. Alcibiades admits that 'I don't even know what I mean' and that he has been 'in an appalling state' 'without being aware of it' (127d).

32.5

They return to the question of self-cultivation. This time, instead of beginning with political goals, they consider the essential nature of self-cultivation. Like politics, it involves taking care of things - but here not the overall citizenry but the self. More particularly, Socrates distinguishes between taking care of things that belong to the self - repairing our shoes, for instance, or attending to the health of our

bodies - and taking care of the self proper. Shoe repair is the work of shoe-makers. Bodily cultivation requires the expertise of physical trainers or doctors. Cultivation of the self 'itself' (129b), rather than of the things that simply 'belong to it', is another skill again (128d). What is this essential self? Socrates clarifies that it is the soul - and the soul alone. He argues that the basic identity of a person is not any combination of body and soul: 'a man' (129c) is 'nothing other than his soul' (130c).

32.6

Political self-cultivation begins with introspection. The aim is literally to see 'that region in which what makes a soul good, wisdom, occurs' (133b). This act of internal seeing involves the paradox of vision seeing itself - a 'mirror' vision in which mirrors mirror one another (133). The notion of vision as philosophical self-reflection and insight depends upon the metaphor of corporeal vision and yet can have no reliance on the eyes. We must somehow conceive a vision without seeing of an invisible sight.

32.7

The capacity for self-cultivation is not available to everyone. Most citizens care simply for what belongs to them (their bodies and their field of expertise) or worse still what belongs to their belongings (their property). The curious implication is that the very models for expert knowing - the shoe-makers, ship-builders and doctors - are adrift without any genuine basis for knowledge. With no capacity to know themselves, 'they don't even know what belongs to them': 'they only know what belongs to the body and how to take care of it' (131-c). Their welfare depends upon a superior individual who will look after them: it is the 'job of one man, and one skill, to know all these things: himself, his belongings, and his belongings' belongings' (133e).

32.8

Knowledge of the self provides the basis for political authority. Only by understanding his own soul - recognising an internal justice - can the political leader obtain the capacity to 'impart virtue to the citizens' (134c). The essence of political power is not power itself but

'justice and self-control', which entails recognising that one is subject to a higher power - the ultimate authority of 'God' (135d).

32.9

The dialogue ends on a pessimistic note. Socrates and Alcibiades have agreed on what is required (and established their friendship), but Socrates fears that the power of the city 'might get the better of both you and me' (135e). This anticipates the various travails that beset the historical Alcibiades - his military ups and downs, shifting allegiances and ultimate political failure.

23

SECOND ALCIBIADES

Day 33

- *pp.597-658*
- *Stephanus: 138-151c*

33.1

Another brief and very likely apocryphal dialogue. In discussion with Alcibiades, Socrates argues be careful what you wish for. The dialogue deals with prayer and the question of how a person (or a people) can prayer beneficially. It suggests that prayer and sacrifice are likely useless and can have adverse consequences if not aligned with wisdom and justice.

33.2

Alcibiades is on his way to prayers. Socrates notices that he looks 'depressed and downcast' (138) and guesses that he is preoccupied with the question of prayer itself - the dilemma that the gods sometimes grant wishes and other times decline them. Even worse, people very often pray badly - they wish for things that end up causing harm. Socrates mentions the example of King Oedipus, who prayed

that 'his sons may take arms to settle their inheritance' (138c). His prayers were answered, but not in the way he expected. His sons ended up warring amongst themselves with tragic results. While Socrates imputes these doubts concerning prayer to Alcibiades, they are plainly his own.

33.3

Alcibiades objects that King Oedipus hardly provides a representative example - he was a 'madman'(138c). Socrates counters that madness is simply a strongly pronounced species of a more general imprudence ('stupidity' (140d)) that affects most people. He argues that 'the wise are those who know what should be done and said' (140). Lacking this capacity, ordinary ''naive', 'simple' and big-hearted' (140d) people pray for all manner of things that they later regret (power, wealth, children, etc). In this sense, the shortcomings of prayer relate less to the fickleness of the gods than the failure of people to recognise what is best for them (141-142e). Socrates advocates the wisdom of the Palatine epigram, which encourages people to pray only for the good generally, not for specific things that they may get wrong (143).

33.4

Alcibiades agrees with Socrates and observes that 'ignorance' is the overall issue ('cause'). It 'deceives us into doing and - what is worse - praying for the greatest evils' (143b). Socrates offers a qualification. It is not ignorance as such that is detrimental. It is better, for instance, he argues, not to recognise the person you intend to murder if this means that you do not murder them. In such circumstances, it is better 'not to know than to know' (144c). Socrates explains that it is a particular ignorance that is problematic - the ignorance of 'what is best'. Interestingly, he extends this point beyond the context of prayer. The application of any skill is fundamentally compromised if not guided by an appropriate understanding of what is best (144d).

33.5

What is needed, Socrates recommends, both at the level of the individual soul and the political state, is a 'reliable counsellor' who recognises what is genuinely useful and beneficial. This should not

confused with any specific field of expertise, such as music, athletics or craft. Instead the expertise of the good counsellor has a more general cast. His wisdom demonstrates a meta-expertise that transcends the ordinary conditions of expertise (any absorption within, a specific form of productive activity). Immersion in expertise ('sphere of excellence') is associated with putting 'trust in mere seeming' (146). At the level of political decision-making, the diversity of limited perspectives shapes a 'hotbed of dissension and lawlessness' (146b).

33.6

We can recognise a typical Platonic condemnation of democracy. Specific expertise (modelled on the labour of traditional crafts) provides no basis for determining what is best at the level of the state. Political leadership is better left for those who have the time and superior intellectual capacities to provide wise and effective guidance. For most people 'it is an advantage neither to know nor to think they know anything' (146d). Far better they leave their overall welfare in the hands of those, who like doctors and ship-captains, are best positioned to cure our ills or navigate a ship safely across a stormy sea (147).

33.7

Returning more specifically to the issue of prayer and sacrifice, Socrates argues that the Spartans demonstrate wiser cultural traditions. Not only do they avoid praying for anything specific, preferring to pray for the good generally, they are also far more restrained with their sacrifices than the Athenians (149). This approach has benefitted them. The Spartan's preference for for '"terse utterance"' (149b) is admired by the gods, particularly in contrast to venal attempts by the Athenians to manipulate divinity through unwise prayers and 'vain gifts' (149e). The gods value wisdom and justice, Socrates asserts, above 'extravagant processions and sacrifices' (150).

33.8

Socrates advises Alcibiades to delay praying for now lest he pray unwisely. He should take 'time to learn how to behave towards gods and men' (150c-d). Alcibiades accepts that he is 'stupid' and asks Socrates to teach him. Socrates warns that he needs 'to get rid of the

fog which is wrapped around your soul' (150e). Alcibiades decides to hold off giving a garland to the gods and to place the garland instead on Socrates' head. Socrates is happy to receive this gift, but lightly mocks any sense that he is equivalent to a god. He explains that he is 'tempest-tossed' and self-interestedly looks forward to 'victory' over Alcibiades other lovers (151c).

Afterthought

AS.1

In summary, *Second Alcibiades* argues that people are individually and collectively stupid. Lacking the wisdom to envisage and pursue a beneficial future, they should wish for and do nothing until they can be guided by a 'reliable counsellor'. We recognise here an elitist and paternalistic rationale for monarchical or oligarchical rule.

AS.2

Wisdom, for Plato, demonstrates an integral understanding of the whole (the proper, proportional relation of things). Ordinary people, trapped within the frame of mortality and illusion, are regarded as unable to recognise and attend to the justice of the whole with sufficient breadth and disinterest - whether at the level of managing their inner dispositions, arranging society or comprehending the true nature of being and the wider cosmos.

AS.3

Wisdom is portrayed not as any simple state of knowing but as inherently prospective. It is linked to the possibility of prudent action. Wisdom gives pause, suspending action in order to provide scope for recognising and elaborating beneficial futures. Leaving aside our political objections, Plato's insistence upon the value of inaction and his emphasis on holistic reflection has continuing relevance. It offers a critique of contemporary human systems charac-

terised by furious and imprudent motion and producing nothing but accelerating social and environmental collapse.

AS.4

What is interesting for me is less the notion that thought (and education) should precede action but that action should be reshaped by the model of inaction. The inaction of Socrates, for instance, his tendency to stand still like a tree, his resistance to doing any useful work (charging for his services or demeaning himself within any ordinary absorption within expertise), represents at once an enlightened socially transformative possibility and evidence that things remain inequitably the same. His philosophical attitude, for all its social potential, represents a privileged mode of leisured activity. It depends upon the labour of others - whether in the indirect form of the accumulated wealth of his aristocratic benefactors, the industrious work of lesser citizens or the unthinking mechanical activity of slaves. Very evidently, if most people lack wisdom, it is because they lack the leisure to obtain it.

AS.5

Socrates' commitment to 'idle' conversation and enquiry is hardly completely dysfunctional. It is useful - like the modern notion of the aesthetic - precisely in its apparent freedom and uselessness. Falling outside the system of use per se, it provides the instrumental system's essential basis; except, of course, when that system goes astray, when it loses any inclination to integrally consider issues of fundamental value. At these times the dysfunctional mechanism of philosophy is at once disregarded and discovers a new sense of critical and political purpose.

AS.6

Socrates portrays labour as at once productive and imprudently thoughtless. Thought appears both essential and useless (and parasitical). Labour and thought appear at odds. Arguably, we have moved beyond this view. What is universal education, for instance, but the process of (thoughtfully) preparing citizens for lives of useful (and presumably prudent) action? Nonetheless, education also exacerbates the tension between thought and action. It makes prudence

preparatory rather than enmeshed within the texture of any knowledgeable activity. While we may pay lip-service to notions of continuing education and reflective practice, they are typically conceived in limited and restricted terms. They relate to specific contexts of instrumental activity. They represent focused and yet fragmented forms of learning and thought. Any genuine concern for the whole - any thinking of wisdom beyond local expertise - lacks any ready language and cultural frame. It is either bracketed as properly private or treated as some public conversation that has already occurred, with no scope to be repeated.

AS.7

If we are unable to foster collective wisdom and to act prudently, it is possibly because our very survival depends upon adherence to rash, 'stupid' and misconceived modes of being. This suggests the need, in Marxist terms, to transform the conditions for social and economic life. This transformation offers our best chance for discovering greater collective wisdom (as a form of prudence that is oriented towards establishing more enlightened social systems and more sustainable relations to the wider environment). Yet, how can society be beneficially altered without drawing upon a wisdom that itself depends upon a beneficially arranged society?

AS.8

Rather than regarding wisdom as some entirely elusive and superior prospect, we can recognise it as a latent potential within any social circumstance. Strands of care and prudence persist even within contexts of neglect and annihilation. The critical role is less to infuse wisdom from without than to discover it within the texture of even damaged social relations.

24

LULL 2

L2.1

I have read just over a third of *Plato: Complete Works* and written for 33 days (actually much longer). It may be a good time to stop for a while. I need to read over what I have written and see what I can distill from it. I had promised to consider the contemporary relevance of Plato's work, but have attempted very little in this regard. It is time that I step back, re-read my various summaries and observations, and make a focused effort to explain my sense of the continuing value of Plato's thinking - less perhaps simply philosophically than in terms of its political implications.

L2.2

I also need to consider carefully how I continue with this project. Clearly, nobody is following these posts. I'm no longer especially troubled by this, however, the various problems of posting to *Instagram* are becoming increasingly pressing for me: the tediousness of converting my text to images and the awkwardness of making supplementary edits. The project lends itself to long-form text. Even though I am writing numbered observations, they plainly connect as something more than an overall set. Should I really continue fashioning

discrete image-moments if this is only to persist with a protracted, unfunny and unreadable one-liner concerning the nature and failure of contemporary social media and communication?

L2.3

Still, it is worth acknowledging that the process of converting my writing to images has proven valuable. My sentences read differently when transferred into the image template. I quickly recognise things that need to be changed - awkward phrasing and overly long sentences.

L2.4

The Instagram format also forces me to be concise. I can only fit so many words into an image and no more than nine images in a single post. Additionally, the discrete nature of each component makes it less daunting to write stuff. There is no need to maintain any scrupulously organised thread of argument over multiple pages. I can allow my attention to be more particular. At the same time, however, I also somehow maintain a clearer sense of what has gone before and what needs to come next.

L2.5

So, I need to maintain an allegiance to my practice of discrete observation, even while no longer turning text into images in the manner that I am currently doing. Overall, I am unsure how to proceed. I need to consider more carefully.

L2.6

In any case, I feel the need to reflect upon what I have written, clarify strands of contemporary implication and decide where things go next. While I'm very tempted to abandon my current, spuriously public method - allowing my monastic practice its genuine silence - I'm uncertain this is the best thing to do.

L2.7

It is 9:16am, New Year's Eve 2024. But now, as I look at this sentence, as I recognise its inadequacy, I see that it is already 9:18am.

25

HIPPARCHUS

Day 34

- *pp.610-612*
- *Stephanus: 225-227b*

34.1

Another minor and probably apocryphal dialogue, but I would like to spend some time with it.

34.2

Socrates is conversing with a friend. He poses the questions 'what is greed?' and 'what are greedy people?' (225). The Greek term for greed is *philokerdes*, which literally means 'love of gain'. The dialogue plays upon the ambiguity between morally reprehensible greed and a more ethically neutral and beneficial notion of gain. Socrates argues that all people are 'greedy' because they all hope for increasing good. His friend remains unconvinced by this conceptual sleight of hand, although cannot quite pinpoint where the argument has gone wrong.

34.3

Considering how regularly Socrates encourages moderation and

condemns the materialist and acquisitive character of ordinary city life, the argument in this dialogue can appear anomalous. *Hipparchus* is typically regarded as either heavily ironic or as a historically subsequent rationale for emerging economic paradigms. Whether or not we reconcile it with the Platonic corpus or place it at the outer margins, the dialogue can easily appear a minor work of little philosophical interest. However, I am interested in the questions it poses about how greed, gain, profit, value and the good align.

34.4

The friend offers an initial definition of greed. Greed involves obtaining 'profit from things of no value' (225). This seems an odd, curiously oblique definition, indicating that we are not quite dealing with the notion of greed as we ordinarily understand it. Greed, for instance, could be more straightforwardly defined as wanting too much for oneself at the expense of others. But here it is represented in economic terms as taking undue profit in exchange and in inner-evaluative terms as a recognition that the stuff one is trading is worthless. Curiously, however, both the morally excessive character of greed and its unfair consequences for the other party are ignored.

34.5

So, what is this definition getting at? The real issue seems to be about the nature of profit - of how gain can be produced from something that is evidently nothing. An underlying question is evident. It has both an ontological and moral character. How can something be produced from nothing and should things be produced in this way? In this manner, an opposition can be recognised between the use value and exchange value of a thing, with greed highlighting groundless dimensions of exchange value that emerge from nothing useful whatsoever. How can this additional terrain of value emerge? What kind of substance is it? Is it even coextensive with being generally? Linked to this, the whole question of the possibility of gain takes shape. How can anything - the substance of being - actually increase? Certainly, from Parmenides perspective, the 'one' can scarcely be added to. Within this overall context of doubt concerning the nature, possibility and propriety of gain, it is unsur-

prising that (economic) profit can appear as a wicked and unscrupulous magic.

34.6

A traditional physics, which remains pertinent for most earthly things, holds that the essential stuff of matter is neither produced nor destroyed. The world is composed of a fixed set of atoms cycling through various chemical states and transformations. While quantum physics amends this view, demonstrating that the field of matter is not autonomous but is created and destroyed in its translation into energy, there is still the sense that everything is ecologically bound. Nothing is added. Nothing is lost (without becoming something else). Yet we still retain an essential faith that gain is possible - not only the black magic of financial profit but also the apparently white magic of overall beneficial increase. What are the consequences of this faith, both for ourselves and others? Quite simply, we demonstrate an imprudent disregard for the wider systems in which we participate and exist. Every moment of apparent gain must be conceived in terms of its implications, which necessarily also involves corresponding dimensions of loss.

34.7

But Socrates does not say this (certainly not here). He does not address the overall question of gain. Instead, he attends to just one part of the friend's definition - the notion that anyone would knowingly produce anything worthless. He argues that no expert producer would ever credibly produce anything worthless. The very notion of knowledgeable expertise militates against such a possibility (226). If producers are genuinely expert they cannot possibly 'know' they are profiting from anything worthless. Hence, producers (and people engaged in their ordinary industrious activities) are not greedy (226d) unless they are ignorant (which would clearly undermine their capacity pursue any activity with appropriate expertise) (226e).

34.8

The friend switches tack. He offers a new definition of greed that emphasises not the knowing profit from worthless stuff but the 'insatiable desire to profit even from things that are actually quite petty,

and of little or no value'. Socrates turns his attention to the notion of profit, leading the friend to acknowledge that profit can be defined as 'the opposite of loss' (226e). On this basis, profit is aligned with gain, gain is aligned with good (in that gain is good and loss is bad) and therefore profit itself must be good (227). A not altogether convincing train of logical equivalence but the friend lacks any effective means to resist.

34.9

Ignoring that one person's profit may entail another person's loss, insisting instead that just one side of the exchange can be regarded on its own, Socrates now reaches exactly opposite conclusions. Now, it is not that nobody is greedy because they are unable to knowingly produce anything worthless but that everybody is greedy (in a beneficial way) because they seek the good (which is aligned with and equivalent to profitable gain) (227b). The friend is forced to reconsider once again what greed means.

Day 35

- *pp.612-617*
- *Stephanus: 225-232c*

35.1

The friend decides to set aside the question of profitable value - to focus, instead, on the corrupt disposition of the greedy. He describes the moral harm of profiting from things that 'virtuous people would never dare profit from'. The vendor, he suggests, actually loses - suffers a moral loss - in the work of making their profits. Socrates, however, will not permit this ambiguity. Since profit is gain, not loss, and gain is necessarily good, it can hardly be associated with the badness of any form of harm. (A reassuring message for those selling oil, asbestos and guns.)

35.2

At the risk of repeating myself, it is surprising that the friend cannot come up with a better definition of greed - one that considers overall features of fair distribution. The greedy person is surely someone who pursues an excessive share; an unacceptably large portion that harms not only the sustainability of the resource itself but reduces the share available to others. Furthermore, at a moral level, this greed arguably manifests a materialistic and immoderate soul. If the friend misses these definitional opportunities, it is partly so that the dialogue can blur the relationship between greed, gain, profit and the good. It is also perhaps because distribution is never an easily calculable matter for Plato. Irreducible to any straightforward assessment of arithmetic equity, Plato's proportional approach to social distribution aims to consider overall features of capacity, expertise, truth, beauty and moral worth. If the dialogue develops an oddly unsatisfactory account of greed, it is, very legibly, to avoid saying anything about the greed that makes some people rich and others poor.

35.3

The friend knows that he is being deceived by Socrates' arguments, but cannot recognise any better way of defining greed and greedy people. Socrates rejects the accusation of deception, explaining that he is bound to 'obey a good and wise man', Hipparchus, who advocated, 'do not deceive a friend' (229b). However, since the reputation of the historical Hipparchus was not of a good and wise man but of a loathsome tyrant, Socrates compounds his playful deceit. He mentions that Hipparchus placed sayings of his own on roadside *herms*[1] between the city and the *deme* (countryside). His aim was to promote his superior wisdom to that of the Delphic inscriptions 'Know Thyself' and 'Nothing in Excess' (228e). The *faux* praise for Hipparchus provides the clearest evidence that Socrates is not at all committed to the truth of the arguments developed in this dialogue - not only does he take philosophical delight in bamboo-

1. Stone statues of the messenger (and trickster) god Hermes.

a confused friend but hardly regards greed (excess) as consistently good.

35.4

This suggests another reading of the dialogue, which emphasises less aspects of dubious equivalence and underlying social injustice than irony. The dialogue can be interpreted as an aporetic interrogation of a well-meaning but obviously inadequate account of greed. In this sense, the friend's various unsatisfactory definitions are less convenient mechanisms for Socrates to justify the 'love of gain' than manifestations of a failure to integrally conceive what greed entails. The friend is provoked less to accept Socrates' arguments than to acknowledge and reflect upon the failures of his own conceptions. From this perspective, Socrates deceives him precisely in order that he may recognise the truth - and think again.

35.5

So which is it? Is the dialogue richly infused with irony or does it seriously entertain a close relationship between greed, gain, profit and the good? Just possibly, it preserves both attitudes. It mobilises both a suspicion of greed and a consideration of what is potentially beneficial within it. For me, it seems less illuminating to demand a consistent meaning than to allow the dialogue an essential uncertainty. Arguably, this accords with the ambivalent social implications of Plato's philosophy, which at once mobilises a fundamental concern with justice and acknowledges the city's awkward motion of excess.

35.6

Socrates acknowledges that they are playing a 'friendly game of checkers' and allows the friend to take any particular move back as he likes to see whether he can produce a different outcome. The friend leaves in place the moves that entail that 'all men desire good things', that loss is bad and that 'profit and profiting are opposite to loss' but withdraws from the manoeuvre that represents profiting as unilaterally good (229e-230). Profit, he insists, can be both good and bad. Socrates resumes normal play and counters the friend's altered move. He demonstrates that inasmuch as all profit involves gain, and specifically beneficial (nourishing) gain, that it must be good (231b). While

still not persuaded, the friend is forced to accept that all people are greedy, 'both the virtuous and the wicked' (232c).

35.7

In the process of pursuing his end game, Socrates acknowledges that gain must be qualified. It is no easily discerned quantity. Profit is not simply about obtaining 'more' in an exchange. The 'more' must be conceived in terms of particular systems of economic value. In an exchange of gold and silver, one only profits if one receives better than the current exchange rate between these two metals (231d). This complicates the discussion about gain, lending it a plainly economic orientation and signalling the need to differentiate between aspects of use and exchange value.

35.8

How is the good of the soul and society to be thought alongside the sphere of economic exchange? The latter obeys its own logic of profit and loss, good and bad, which must somehow be included in the proportional evaluation of individual and social justice. The dialogue represents a tentative effort to address this dilemma - to consider the complex relation between features of moral and economic evaluation. Their considerable scope for divergence and misalignment represents, perhaps, the unstated aporia of the dialogue.

26

RIVAL LOVERS

Day 36

- *pp.619-626*
- *Stephanus: 132-139*

36.1

Socrates directly recounts this dialogue, which involves a discussion he has with two unnamed men, one a wrestler and the other more intellectually focused, who are competing for the affections of two young boys. The boys are engaged in animated debate about some abstruse topic. The wrestler is unimpressed - they are 'babbling about things up in the sky'. His rival, the advocate for 'liberal studies' (132d), is contemptuous of this attitude. The wrestler, he argues, spends his whole life 'wrestling, stuffing himself and sleeping' (132c), with no sense of the importance and admirable character of philosophy. Revealing his usual preference for people who acknowledge their ignorance rather than make false claims to wisdom, Socrates questions the defender of philosophy. Socrates demonstrates that he has no genuine understanding of what he is

defending and that the nature of philosophy is very different than he thinks.

36.2

The issue hinges initially on whether or not philosophy 'is an admirable pursuit' (133b). Admiration, of course, depends upon an external gaze. Philosophy can hardly be defended entirely in terms of any aspect of appearance. Hence Socrates suggests that philosophy is not only admirable but good (133d). But prior to this, he asks the intellectual lover to define philosophy. The latter explains that it involves learning 'as many things as possible in life' (133c). Socrates questions this focus on quantity, establishing that other fields, such as athletics, demand not a large quantity of training but rather a moderate amount (with the wrestler happy to confirm this view). On this basis, Socrates argues that the nourishment of the soul depends upon a modest amount of learning rather than an intemperate surplus (134b).

36.3

But how is this moderate amount of learning determined? There are trainers to advise on a moderate training schedule to become a good wrestler, and doctors to advise on an appropriately moderate diet to promote good health, but who can we look to advise on the moderate cultivation of the soul (134e)? Socrates accepts there is no ready answer. Changing tack, he asks, 'what are the main sorts of subject that a philosopher needs to learn, since he doesn't need to learn them all, or even a lot of them' (135)?

36.4

The intellectual lover specifies features of quantity and admiration. The proper subjects are those that provide 'the most fame as a philosopher'. This fame depends upon 'appearing to be an expert in all the skills'. However, he explains this requires qualification. Not all skills are relevant, only those that are appropriate for a 'free man' - not those of a slave or manual craftsperson. The emphasis, he argues, should be on 'theory' rather than 'practice' (135). Socrates cites the example of architecture, which can be contrasted to the more practical and manual skill of building.

36.5

Yet how can the philosopher know multiple skills 'thoroughly'? How can they become expert in so many things? We can recognise here a more general argument Plato makes about society: justice depends upon each person pursuing their dedicated field of expertise. The political form of democracy, for instance, is flawed because it envisages that citizens have sufficient scope to become expert both in their individual areas of activity and politics. The intellectual lover responds that there is no need to be expert in all things, simply knowledgeable enough to display erudition and to appear wiser than others generally. The philosopher is cast then, Socrates indicates, as a 'runner up' ('pentathlete') (135e), who is good at range of things but a champion of none of them specifically. The lover acknowledges this analogy, emphasising that the philosopher should not be 'enslaved by one thing' but instead pursue a moderate amount of expertise in all things (136b).

36.6

Socrates wonders then, what use is the philosopher? Since there are always experts around (since society is a tissue of dedicated expertise), the philosopher appears useless - a mere peacock, showing off his always inadequate knowledge of things, with no capacity to properly take the lead in any particular area of activity. The goodness of philosophy, Socrates argues, depends upon its usefulness. In failing to be useful, philosophy cannot escape being bad (136b-137).

36.7

Socrates does not wait for a reply, but launches into a defence of philosophy. He insists that it should be conceived in very different terms. He argues that 'philosophy does not consist in stooping to a concern with skills nor in learning many things', because that would be 'vulgar' and 'dishonourable' (137b). Philosophy is distinguished from the ordinary realm of expertise, which is absorbed in the particular and participates in multiplicity. Nonetheless, despite its superior, more general character, philosophy is also a 'skill' - a meta-level expertise that involves knowing how to discipline things to 'make

them better' (137c). This is the fundamental paradox of philosophy - it is at once expertise and an overcoming of expertise. It can be explained in terms that make sense to ordinary tradespeople but also utterly escapes their comprehension.

36.8

Discipline is conceived as knowing how to distinguish the good from the bad (137e). Within the context of a city, this expertise is linked to the institution of law and the punishment of wrong-doers. It designates a capacity to recognise and implement justice. Our capacity for justice, Socrates argues, depends upon understanding the nature of human being, which in turn entails first knowing oneself and the conditions of rationally organised life ('good sense') (138-b). Although not directly stated, philosophy is very evidently conceived as a crucial avenue towards self-knowledge and an understanding of the rational character of being. Philosophy is useful because it provides the fundamental basis for any wise implementation of societal justice.

36.9

Nonetheless, this 'skill' in distinguishing good from bad is not represented as strictly philosophical. Instead, it is represented as a 'political skill' (138b) that is pertinent to a many different disciplinary contexts - kingly rule, public administration, household management and individual self-control and common sense (138c). In relation to the anomalous context of justice, expertise is no longer focused and particular but general and widely applicable. Aristotle questions this view, arguing that justice is just as specific and contextually bound as any other area of expertise, but neglects how this risks undermining the philosopher's privileged position - his capacity to recognise a general justice that extends beyond particular circumstances.

27

NIGHT D

ND.1

Socrates encourages moderate training and learning in *Rival Lovers* . This seems counterintuitive. We know very well, for instance, that modern athletic training plays at the borders of excess. It subjects muscles and aerobic systems to extensive stress in order to make them stronger. Similarly, any aspect of intellectual learning/practice requires dedicated, seemingly excessive focus and effort. This excess must be finely calibrated, however, or risks undermining whatever it is that one sets out to learn and achieve. It must retain some aspect of moderation or itself become destructive. Nonetheless, I wonder if my effort to read the whole Platonic corpus is excessive? Or, quite the reverse - am I faking the immoderate and rendering excess in workmanlike terms? Both interpretations seem possible and pertinent.

ND.2

It is too much to attempt to read all of Plato and also falls very short. My real aim is less to dutifully read, summarise and comment on every dialogue, letter and poem than to pursue a process of following until it enables a looking away. There is, after all, no possi-

bility of genuinely exhausting Plato's philosophy - of methodically reading it to the end.

ND.3

So once again I am considering stopping.

ND.4

I am considering following Socrates' recommendation. I'm thinking that I should moderate my learning, abandoning, for now, my current process of reading, note-taking, summary and commentary.

ND.5

More particularly, I am thinking that I need to turn away from what I have been doing - endlessly aiming to learn more - and consider what can be said now.