

ON PLATO'S CONCEPT OF REASON

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ABSTRACT

What is reason? A number of contemporary philosophical schools of thought have sought, implicitly or explicitly, to answer the question. That an answer to the question be found is of utmost importance for the practice of philosophy, and yet none seems to be forthcoming. In this thesis, we propose to examine Plato's concept of reason. Our method in the thesis, however, is to proceed negatively: first, we examine the misology passage from the *Phaedo* 89d: why is the greatest evil to become a misologue (hater of reason)? What does this say about Plato's conception of reason? What is the connection between reason, pleasure, and pain? Next, we move to the *Phaedrus*, where a more constructive account is offered. Reason is a capacity, actuated by beauty, of receiving being. It thus involves a crucial moment of passivity. We will examine the consequences of such a conception, and offer our own commentary.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction 1

Chapter One Misology in the *Phaedo* 10

- I. Phaedo: the Reasonableness of the Good, the Goodness of Reason 11
- II. Socrates' Defeat of Misology 25
- III. Misology, Pleasure and Pain 32

Chapter Two Reason in the *Phaedrus* 47

- I. Reason as Openness 48
 - a. A Methodological Digression 52
 - b. Hierarchy and Transcendence 60
 - c. Madness and Mediation 65
 - d. Culture, History, and Prayer 69
- II. "Disinterested Interest": Philosophy, Sacrifice, and *Eros* 74
- III. Reason and Τέχνη 82

Conclusion 87

Appendix: On the Seventh Platonic Letter 94

Bibliography 104

Note on Text

All Greek citations of Plato are from the text provided by the editors of the Perseus project (www.perseus.tufts.edu). All English citations of Plato are from the *Complete Works*, edited by John Cooper (Indianapolis IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997).

List of Abbreviations

Phd. = *Phaedo*

Phdr. = *Phaedrus*

Rep. = *Republic*

Tht. = *Theaetetus*

L.VII = *Seventh Letter*

INTRODUCTION

Any work on the Platonic conception of reason has to wrestle with a few signal difficulties of the problem. The first is that Plato has no explicit theory of 'reason' as such in any of his works. There is, for example, no notion of λόγον ἔχον in Plato: a strictly and precisely defined principle of cogitative power that makes a human being to be what it essentially is. In its place, a wide and varied array of Greek terms is rendered by 'reason': νοῦς, λόγος, νόησις, and ἐπιστήμη all show up, at some point or another, as 'reason' in translation. Of all of these it is perhaps νοῦς, sometimes also translated 'mind', that comes closest to what we ordinarily understand by the term. This similarity, however, is deceptive. The problem with νοῦς is that it has its own register of meaning in the context of Ancient Greek philosophy more generally, through the influence of Anaxagoras, for whom νοῦς was the ἄπειρον principle of being¹. Νοῦς in the *Phaedo* (where Plato is explicitly referring to Anaxagoras) means something quite different from νοῦς in the *Phaedrus* (where it is the faculty by which human beings apprehend the truth in their journey around the heavens), and both of these instances of usage are quite different from the modern idea of 'reason'. Broadly speaking, however, we can say that these two dialogues use 'νοῦς' according to two different, and opposite, acceptations: 'subjective' and 'objective' νοῦς. There is νοῦς as principle of reality, and there is νοῦς as my capacity to apprehend the truth: objective and subjective νοῦς, respectively. Though we deal with this difference more thoroughly in the second

¹ M.R. Wright *The Presocratics: The Main Fragments in Greek*, Bristol: Bristol Classical Press, 1985, p. 36-38; 128-133. (DK B 12).

chapter of this work on the *Phaedrus*, we can say at the outset that ‘subjective’ νοῦς is closer in meaning to ‘reason’ than anything else in Plato.

There is, however, the further difficulty of what exactly we mean by ‘reason’ anyway. The answer to such a question evidently has far-reaching consequences in almost any area of philosophy that you like, from ethics (what is the reasonable thing to do) to aesthetics (what is the reason we find things beautiful) to metaphysics (what *are* things, anyway?). Thus any attempt to answer the question of what we mean by ‘reason’ will necessarily bring a host of consequences for thought in its train, consequences which can perhaps not be foreseen at the outset of such an attempt. This ambiguity or uncertainty that philosophy has about the nature of reason has obviously occasioned a tremendous amount of debate and criticism. To sketch the history of the debate over the nature and limits of reason would itself be the task of several lifetimes, but it should be possible to say a few words in outline of the problem. The first modern philosopher to take up the problem in the terms we use above, as a ‘critique’ of reason, is of course Kant. His critical project is in some ways paradigmatic of the characteristically modern striving after exact boundaries, carefully delimited realms of influence and meaning, and precise semantics. Plato, as is clear to anyone who has read him, is not concerned with such exactitude, almost at all². Various terms bleed into one another, just as the ‘noumenal’ and the ‘phenomenal’ could be said to do so in his metaphysics (an obvious problem, from Kant’s point of view). Plato tends to mix philosophy with

² Which is not to say that he is not concerned with exactitude *itself*. In point of fact, he clearly is, and we may safely assume that it was not for nothing that the students of his Academy were required to have mastered geometry before entering.

poetry, mythology, mathematics, rhetoric, and drama. As recent criticism has attempted to show, the dramatic aspects of Plato's dialogues are more than just philosophically germane – they can be read as the core and substance of his philosophy³. So anyone reading Plato in order to discern straightforwardly his concept of 'reason' will probably find himself disappointed, not merely by the anachronistic tone of such a search, but also by the almost jumbled, even impressionistic, overall tone of the dialogues vis-à-vis the precise concept of reason itself.

To continue our brief sketch of the fight over the limits of 'reason', the current status of the debate has been helpfully brought into focus by some feminist and postcolonial thinkers. To them, reason has chauvinistically been assumed by the philosophical tradition to be the domain of white European males, to which the female, non-European 'other' provides the necessary, non- or pre-rational foil⁴. The

³ This line of interpretation can perhaps be traced back to Leo Strauss, though it is by no means confined to him and his followers: "His [Plato's] dialogues supply us not so much with an answer to the riddle of being as with almost articulate "imitation" of that riddle. ... In the last analysis his writings can not be used for any purpose other than philosophizing." (351) L. Strauss, "On A New Interpretation of Plato's Political Philosophy," *Social Research*, 13:1, 326-367. For other examples, we would also mention H.-G. Gadamer, *Dialogue and Dialectic*, tr. P. Christopher Smith (New Haven: Yale University Press), 1980, and of course J. Derrida, "La Pharmacie de Platon," in *La dissemination* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil), 1972, pp. 69-198.

⁴ Consider H. Marcuse: "When philosophy conceives the essence of being as Logos, it is already the Logos of domination—commanding, mastering, directing reason to which man and nature are to be subjected." *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophic Inquiry into Freud*, New York: Vintage Books, 1962, p. 113. See also: G.C. Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Towards a History of the Vanishing Present*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1999, pp. 1-111; J. Russ "What can a Heroine do? Or Why Women can't Write" in *To Write Like a Woman: Essays in Feminism and Science Fiction*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995: "Our traditions, our books, our morals, our manners, our films, our speech, our economic organization, everything we have inherited tells us that to be a Man one must bend

distinction could even be said to go as far back as Aristotle, for whom women, slaves, and barbarians do not have an equal share in reason, compared to free Greek citizens⁵. Their project can be understood in some sense as in basic continuity with the wariness of the ‘masters of suspicion,’ Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, and their inheritors in the 20th century. These have done much to discredit reason’s claim to the absolute, to truth. Very crudely put, their view is that ‘reason’ is a name that some dominant groups have given to the instrument by which they dominate. Indeed had not reason itself been already (re)defined by Bacon, Ramus, Descartes, and Galileo as a power of domination *simpliciter*? Better to do away with reason entirely, and entrust philosophy to another, perhaps more inclusive, principle. Very broadly speaking, this seems to be the drift of much of what is called ‘Continental’

Nature to one’s will—or other men. This means ecological catastrophe in the first instance and war in the second. To be a Woman, one must be first and foremost a mother and after that a server of Men; this means overpopulation and the perpetuation of the first two disasters. The roles are deadly. The myths that serve them are fatal.” (93); C. Witt and L. Shapiro, "Feminist History of Philosophy", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, E. N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2016/entries/feminism-femhist/>. Witt and Shapiro’s entry captures the irony of many feminist approaches to the history of philosophy: “From the perspective of negative canon formation, the history of philosophy is a resource only in so far as it describes the theories and thinkers that were most deeply mistaken about women. Other feminist historians of philosophy have found important resources for feminism in canonical philosophers” (sec. 3), i.e. how can those “most deeply mistaken” about women furnish “important resources for feminism?”

⁵ A more creative and generous interpretation of Aristotle might be able to exculpate him of this charge, however. There is the fact, for example, that he says in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that friendship is possible between men and women, slaves, and foreigners. It is not clear how this could be possible, given his rich conception of friendship, unless he also thought these latter had a share in reason.

philosophy today, often carried out under the auspices of Comparative Literature departments⁶.

Again, in terribly oversimplified terms, things in so-called 'Analytic' philosophy are little better on this front. Reason in that tradition is usually interpreted according to the narrowest possible range of meaning as a cogitative force, as that which seeks for necessary and sufficient conditions. In the terms of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, it can be said that reason is that which states facts about the world, where the world is "all that is the case". Reason is not concerned, as he makes clear, with "things," but merely, and only, with "facts". Reason is an essentially discursive power, one that is perhaps the means by which we know facts about the world, but which is in itself a relatively unproblematic kind of thing. Despite a lively debate in moral philosophy, for example, over what "reason requires" that an agent do, there is comparatively little concern with what reason is *in seipsa*⁷. Before asking what a thing does or requires, it would seem more important to inquire into what it *is*, but this is precisely the kind of inquiry that is necessarily circumscribed in advance by a conception of reality that constrains

⁶ 'Continental' philosophy, however, is a term far too broad to be consistently applied to the general drift of what we refer to above. It can include under its aegis, for example, work as diverse as Kant's first *Critique*, to Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*. There is also the fact that many 'Analytic' feminist philosophers work in a spirit much nearer to Butler than to Kant. Any sweeping generalization about what 'Continental' philosophy is, including our own, should be taken with a generous heaping of salt.

⁷ Thus can a book entitled *The Architecture of Reason* concern itself primarily with "develop[ing] and defend[ing] the core of a comprehensive, full-scale theory of rationality, applicable to practical as well as theoretical reason." (vii). What is precisely missing is the basic Aristotelian question: τὶ ἔστί? There seems to be barely a hint of concern that rationality may not be the same thing as reason (See R. Audi, *The Architecture of Reason: The Structure and Substance of Rationality*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

reason to talking about the “facts”, and not the “things”; that thinks of rationality as a concordance between one’s beliefs and the facts that are the case (John acts rationally if and only if he acts in accordance with a rational belief, and a belief is rational if and only if it is informed by true facts, and so on). There seems to be an endemic problem within ‘Analytic’ philosophy of putting the cart before the horse. The *Oxford Handbook of Rationality* can thus begin by stating: “The domain of rationality is customarily divided into the theoretical and the practical.” (3)⁸ – but surely such an introduction takes for granted a fair deal about what reason *is*?

That, in broad terms, is the project of the present study: to try to talk about the things themselves. In particular, about that most mysterious non-thing, ‘reason’. We aim to do it without, however, giving a forensic history of a particular term in Plato’s use. First of all this is because any work which would attempt to give an account of νοῦς in Plato would have to take up the ‘subjective’ and ‘objective’ sides of the concept, which would require a huge study far beyond the ability and means of the author, and secondly because such a work would in any case fail to appeal to non-specialist readers of Plato. Failing an in-depth philological study of the terms listed above, how could anyone hope to give a satisfactory account of Plato’s conception of reason as a whole? Surely the task lies beyond the ability of any lone philosopher? Where, in any case, would the use of such a study lie?

⁸ *The Oxford Handbook of Rationality*, eds. A.R. Mele and P. Rawling, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004. To be fair, there is an extremely broad and nuanced range of thinkers in the ‘Analytic’ tradition, almost each of whom differ in minute shades of emphasis and agreement. However, they tend overwhelmingly to share a few basic presuppositions about the nature of reason, as well as a basic lack of curiosity about that nature itself. A good bibliography can be found in *Reasons for Belief*, eds. A. Reisner and A. Steglich-Petersen, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

In answer to the first question, the present study proposes to do just that. Its methodology, however, is at the antipodes of a philological-historical study. We shall use two very mysterious, very striking, dialogues generally concerned with the soul: the *Phaedo* and the *Phaedrus*. The first chapter discusses the passage at 89d in the *Phaedo* on misology. The second deals with the *Phaedrus*, considered as a whole. This approach has the benefit of limiting the scope of the work, in the first instance, to a very precisely delimited passage from a single one of Plato's works. The *Phaedo*'s passage on misology we take to be essential to understanding the urgent importance of reason, both within the context of Plato's work as a whole and for the contemporary context. In this sense, the first chapter has as its main (though implicit) target the 'Continental' tradition of philosophy's so-called 'postmodernist' offspring. Reason must not be abandoned for any subsidiary principle, since this would result in the unrestricted reign of power and violence. Despite the fact that 'reason' has often been invoked in the name of projects of domination, oppression, racism, or what have you, still reason itself is the only hope for an effective resistance *to* those projects. To give up on reason is to give up on the possibility of a more human world, and to submit to bestial thralldom. The study aims to show this by asking a few simple questions (among others): how can it be that there is nothing worse than to become a hater of reason? What, in any case, does it even *mean* to hate reason? The exposition of and answers to these questions form the principal concern of the first chapter. The second chapter has as its implicit target the 'Analytic' concept of reason. It aims to evoke the richness of Plato's conception of reason itself, using the *Phaedrus* as its source text. Rather than trying to get to the

bottom of what reason *does* or what *is reasonable*, we wish to show that reason is in the first place a receiving, not a doing; a power of contemplation before it is a faculty of action; a function of myth and poetry before it is a function of dialectics. However, we are extremely careful not to privilege an ‘irrationalist’ reading of the *Phaedrus*. The argument is more subtle: myth, poetry, and enthusiasm are *more* rational than discursive reason itself. Furthermore, if this is true, then what it is reasonable to do will, paradoxically perhaps, consist of madness, prayer, and erotic love.

The two chapters are not, however, intended as merely destructive arguments against reductive concepts of reason. They are that, but more importantly, they aim to reconcile two sets of emphases that are characteristic of the ‘Continental’ and ‘Analytic’ approaches. The ‘Continental’ approach has the tendency of valorizing myth, narrative, history, culture, and religion. The upshot of Plato’s conception of reason is that he takes these to be integral to reason itself⁹. The ‘Analytic’ approach has the tendency of valorizing precision, rigour, and clarity. Certainly these things are of primary importance to Plato and Socrates as well, and as much as possible we aim to be precise, rigorous, and clear in what follows. However, the positivist tendency within Analytic philosophy that refuses to acknowledge the interest (even, sometimes, the *existence*) of things that cannot be comprehensively explained in rational terms, and the resulting shallowness of thought that this produces, is totally alien to Plato.

⁹ Though not in the Hegelian sense, in which they constitute the raw material that must be taken up within the Concept and drawn from mere representation to conscious, philosophical, awareness. This would indeed be a ‘colonizing’ conception of reason, in which reason’s others are alternately devoured and ejected (cf. S. Zizek, “Hegel and Shitting: The Idea’s Constipation,” *Hegel and the Infinite*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2011, pp. 221-232).

Throughout the work, the reader will notice that a certain amount of creativity is present in our reading of Plato. We do not intend to give the only, or the authoritative, reading of Plato to which all others must defer. We frequently draw out elements of Plato's philosophy which Plato himself would perhaps have been surprised to discover. The present study is thus, in that sense, not a 'doctrinaire' reading of Plato. The aim is in some sense to be more of a Platonist than Plato himself: to carry to their τέλοι some implicit and undeveloped aspects of his philosophy. That said, every interpretive move is backed up by a careful attention to the precise text of the dialogues, using the Greek where necessary. Certainly, we believe our own reading to be the one that is best able to account for the eccentricities present within the dialogues themselves, as we attempt to show by contrasting our interpretation with some others, but that by no means excludes the possibility of openness to certain other ways of reading the texts. Like any masterpiece of art, Plato's dialogues seethe with detail and fascination – the more one is content to contemplate what they say, the more they in turn reveal. They are a well of indefinite depth which we do not presume to have fathomed entirely, and therefore we advance each of our arguments and interpretations in all humility, happy to be corrected – thinking, as Plato writes, but little for ourselves, but much more for the truth¹⁰.

¹⁰ *Phaedo*, 91b.

CHAPTER ONE: MISOLOGY IN THE PHAEDO

In this chapter, we aim to understand Plato's concept of reason in the *Phaedo*. We approach this topic as it were from the underside, aiming first to understand and interpret Socrates' stern admonition that we not become misologists, haters of reason. According to Socrates, becoming haters of reason is the greatest evil that could befall us (*Phd.* 89c-d), and so just as an "unexamined life is not worth living" (*Apol.* 38a) so too a life lived in hatred of reason is one that is miserable in an absolute sense. The question of why this is the case will occupy most of our concern in this chapter. Why would Socrates depict the hatred of reason in such strong, uncompromising terms? What kind of a thing is reason that our turning away from its claim on us amounts to a kind of psychic suicide? Why should we be more afraid to suffer to become misologists than anything else? Another question we shall attempt to broach is the connection between reason, pleasure, and pain. Socrates identifies the "greatest evil," in fact, not only with misology, but also with the suffering wrought by being afflicted with "violent pleasures and pains" (*Phd.* 83b-c). On their faces, misology and violent pleasures and pains seem to have little to do with one another. However, as we shall see, Plato's anthropology is such that these two "greatest evils" are opposite sides of the same coin. Reason is what constitutes the humanity of the human soul, and to abandon it is necessarily to abandon oneself to the ever-shifting tides of carnal pain and pleasure.

PHAEDO: THE REASONABLENESS OF THE GOOD, THE GOODNESS OF REASON

Plato's *Phaedo* contains a puzzling passage about halfway through. After his arguments in favour of the soul's immortality have been defeated, and his party has fallen into "depression" (88c), Socrates makes the puzzling claim that they must all strive at all costs to avoid becoming haters of "reasonable discourse" (89d) since "there is no greater evil one can suffer [οὐκ ἔστιν [...] μεῖζον [...] κακὸν]" than this. Besides the puzzling fact that Socrates had just prior described the "greatest and most extreme" evil¹¹ as being the result of "violent pleasure and pains," (83 b-c) thereby seeming to contradict himself further on in the dialogue, there is the more fundamental problem posed by the incongruity of the terms being compared. How and in what sense is it true that the hatred of reasonable discourse is the greatest evil one can suffer? Surely we can imagine greater evils that one might suffer than merely to become a hater of a certain kind of discourse. Another complication is the sense in English given by the phrase "reasonable discourse," which translates λόγος. "Reasonable discourse" seems to give the picture of something rather tame, rather more like a dinner conversation than that thing without which one's life is effectively ruined.

The interpretative problem at the outset is therefore concerned with the incommensurability of the terms in question. How can λόγους μισέω at 89d constitute the greatest evil? How do we understand Socrates' claim that there is no greater evil than misology? What follows is a brief description of the events of the dialogue, up to the misology passage at 89d. Next, we examine the passage on

¹¹ The Greek is hardly different from the passage at 89d: "μέγιστον τε κακῶν καὶ ἔσχατον".

misology, aiming to draw out the philosophical stakes of the problem in answer to the above question about what the evil of misology consists of, and what its place might be in the broader context of Plato's philosophy. Our analysis will then turn to focus on the connection between λόγος and the good in support of the thesis that, in the *Phaedo*, Plato shows us, through Socrates, both that the good is reasonable, and that reason is good.

The *Phaedo* recounts a conversation that took place between Socrates and a close group of his associated disciples on the day of his death. Its principal theme concerns Socrates' apparent lack of apprehension in the face of his impending doom. Socrates asserts that death is something good, especially so for the philosopher. As the philosopher's soul has spent its life apprehending changeless, eternal things by the light of intellect, and since in so doing it has despised the pleasures of the body to the greatest possible extent (eating, drinking and sex are mentioned explicitly at 64d), so will his soul be most ready and willing to depart from his body (at the gods' behest and no sooner) at the moment of his death, in order to spend eternity in the presence of those good gods, and of other good men (64a-69e).

This would seem, at first glance, to put to rest any confusion we might have had about Socrates' unflappable confidence in the face of death. He is not afraid because the natures of the soul, the body, and their relationship are such that at the point of his death (which all involved agree consists of the separation of soul and body (64c)), his soul will return, unburdened, to the good and happy point of its origin. However, what follows this initial part of the discourse is a perplexity on the part of Socrates' interlocutors: what if the soul is destroyed after its separation from

the body? How can we be certain that the eternity promised the philosopher is real and not a figment of his imagination?

In response, Socrates presents three points in favour of the soul's immortality, all three of which, taken together, are supposed to prove the soul's immortality. The first argues by analogy that just as opposites come to be from one another (hot from cold, sleep from waking, etc. and vice versa), so too does life come necessarily to be from death, just as death comes to be from life (70e-72a). Indeed, if this were not the case, eventually, "all things would ultimately be in the same state, be affected in the same way, and cease to become" (72b). In other words, if all life ended in death, and no death issued in life, then, given enough time, all things would end up dead. The next argument (72e-76e) aims to prove the soul's perdurance by appeal to the familiar theory of recollection. We can only recognize the Forms' reflections via our sense perceptions if we have already experienced their "itself by itself" realities in our souls prior to having perceived any material thing: "We must then possess knowledge of the Equal before that time when we first saw the equal objects and realized that all these objects strive to be like the equal but are deficient in this" (75a). Finally, he gives an argument from the nature of the soul, *simpliciter*. Given that "the invisible always remains the same, whereas the visible never does" (79a)¹², so the soul, as something invisible, must also be imperishable.

¹² And given also some similar conclusions with respect to the soul and the body, for example that the body most closely resembles the mortal, the soul the divine, part of man (80a); that the body is corruptible while the soul is not (80b-c); the body is "heavy, ponderous, earthy" (81c) while the soul, by negative implication, is light, graceful, and ethereal.

The first argument shows that what is before life, will be after death. The second shows that before life there is cognition. Taken together, the first two arguments claim that, after death, there will be cognition also. The third merely qualifies the nature of this thing that persists after death: it does not admit of destruction. Taken in conjunction, these three arguments aim to convince Socrates' listeners that the soul, which consists primarily in some kind of intellectual activity or life¹³, will exist forever after its separation from the body. Socrates and his listeners take them to be fully convincing, which is why rejecting them would be bad. And yet, Simmias and Cebes' objections lead the party to do just that. After their objections are voiced, the dialogue reaches a moment of "crisis" in the etymological sense of the word: a decision must be made in favour of one of the two sides (Cebes/Simmias vs. Socrates) in rebuttal of the other, lest we abandon argument altogether.

Simmias is the first to object to Socrates, and he does so arguing for a distinction against the third of the latter's arguments for the soul's immortality. There are such things which possess all the relevant qualities Socrates attributed to the soul, but which are evidently perishable. Harmony, for example, while "invisible, without body, beautiful and divine" (85e), will cease to exist if the instrument which produces it is destroyed. So if the soul is like a harmony, then it does not follow that it is eternal. The soul might then have an affinity to the Forms, without being similar

¹³ "But when the soul investigates by itself it passes into the realm of what is pure, ever existing, immortal and unchanging, and being akin to this, it always stays with it whenever it is by itself and can do so; it ceases to stray and remains in the same state as it is in touch with things of the same kind, and its experience then is what is called wisdom?" (79d)

in the relevant respect, namely perdurance after death. It could be something very elevated, but for all that, also ephemeral. Cebes is the next to object, taking aim at arguments one and two: the soul may have existed prior to its incarnation in the body, but this does not prove that it must outlive body in eternity. Just as a weaver may in the course of his life have outlived many cloaks, this does not mean that he is immortal. The soul may have outlived many bodies, but this does not mean it is immortal, either. Cebes' and Simmias' objections lead the party into deep consternation¹⁴ and what follows this anguished moment is Socrates' brief injunction against misology.

Interestingly, and despite its critical significance within the context of the brief passage in which it is found within the *Phaedo*, Socrates' discussion of misology occupies no more than a few lines of the dialogue. It has received correspondingly little critical attention as a theme in its own right, especially when compared to the dialogue's other major themes, such as the three arguments for immortality, the philosopher's relationship to death, and the myth of the afterlife at 107c-115a¹⁵. However, those few lines occur at a decisive point, namely the literal

¹⁴ "When we heard what they said we were all depressed" (88c).

¹⁵ We might mention, as exceptions, Pamela M. Huby, "'Phaedo' 99d-102a", *Phronesis* 4:1 (1959), 12-14; K.M.W. Shipton, "A good second-best: Phaedo 99b ff.", *Phronesis* 24:1 (1979) 33-53, esp. 44-47; and more recently D.C. Schindler, "Misology and the Modern Academy," in *Plato's Critique of Impure Reason*, 1-39, Dale Jacquette, "Socrates on the Moral Mischief of Misology," *Argumentation* 28 (2014), 1-17, and Peter J. Ahrens Dorf, "Socrates' Warning Against Misology," in *The Death of Socrates and the Life of Philosophy*, 129-148. Francisco Gonzalez in his *Dialectic and Dialogue: Plato's Practice of Philosophical Inquiry* acknowledges misology's central role in the *Phaedo* but does not offer a substantive analysis of the concept itself beyond acknowledging that the latter half of the dialogue is designed to defeat its threat cf. *ibid.* 189ff.

center of the dialogue¹⁶, and they also aim to address what is in some sense the central concern of Socrates' philosophical life.

Misology is first introduced in contrast to its analogue in the realm of human relationship, misanthropy. Misanthropy comes about "when a man without knowledge or skill has placed great trust in someone and believes him to be altogether truthful, sound and trustworthy; then, a short time afterwards he finds him to be wicked and unreliable". It is a result of a broken trust, and hence of a desire for friendship that has been steadily eroded as a result of such betrayal until "in the end, after many such blows, one comes to hate all men and to believe that no one is sound in any way at all" (89d-e).

In just the same way, a person who has placed all his trust in a given argument which appears to him to be true, but who then discovers that argument to be false, after "many such blows" (presumably from many other such arguments) will come to distrust and withdraw from all arguments, not believing any to be reliable means of finding the truth. Interestingly, however, the misologue, unlike the misanthropist, does not recoil from common life and its pleasures, but rather becomes like those "who spend their time studying contradiction [and who] in the end believe themselves to have become very wise and that they alone have understood that there is no soundness or reliability in any object or in any argument, but that all that exists simply fluctuates up and down as if it were in the Euripus" (90 b-c). That is, he vaunts his so-called wisdom regarding the vanity of

¹⁶ The dialogue stretches from 57 to 118 in the Stephanus pagination, a total of 61 pages, meaning that the misology passage at 89 occurs almost exactly halfway through the dialogue.

arguments, while cynically despairing over the possibility of finding truth through λόγος. Arguments, since in his view they cannot lead to any kind of transcendent truth, thus become for him the agents of a certain kind of immanent power, namely, the power to prove at one time something false, and at another, something true. This is to be contrasted with the genuinely philosophical position as represented by Socrates. It is interesting to note that Socrates describes the prevention of misology as consisting in a certain passivity: allowing oneself to be measured *by* arguments. If at one time we find them true, and at another false, we are not to take this as a sign that there is nothing reliable at all in arguments themselves, but rather that there must be something lacking in ourselves. That is to say that in judging them, we are also, and perhaps more importantly, judged *by* them. The misological position, on the contrary, would presume not to be judged by arguments, but rather always to be in a position of judgment. The misologue is unable to imagine that his evaluation of an argument could be deficient. His lack of skill in argument¹⁷ is primarily a result of a mistaken affirmation. The philosopher asserts and affirms the truth of the λόγος at hand, but always in the context of a more important fidelity towards the truth considered absolutely¹⁸. The misologue on the other hand affirms only himself even as he seems to affirm various arguments. Since his deployment of these arguments

¹⁷ There could be an implicit pun in this passage between ἄτεχνος (without skill) and ἄτεκνος (without children). Besides being a pun that, without the negative alpha, is often employed in Plato's works, in this particular passage it also offers an insight into the "maieutic" method of the *Theaetetus*. To be without skill in reason is in a particular sense to be *barren*.

¹⁸ Cf. *Phd.* 91b-c: "If you will take my advice, you will give but little thought to Socrates but much more to the truth. If you think that what I say is true, agree with me; if not oppose it with every argument [παντὶ λόγῳ ἀντιτείνετε]".

is not in the 'interest' of a 'disinterested'¹⁹ love of truth, but only in the service of less-than-rational drives, in seeming to seek the truth through argument, he fails to go beyond mere self-affirmation.

The misological hatred of arguments thus does not exclude their use (or, more appropriately, their abuse). The misologue does not shun arguments totally and forever (as the misanthrope does human company), but rather, though having come to despise them, is more than comfortable in using them to manipulate others. The first thing that strikes one about such a description is that it is remarkably consonant with Platonic descriptions of the Sophists, in particular the portrait of Protagoras from the *Theaetetus*, and of Lysias from the *Phaedrus*.

In the *Theaetetus*, Protagoras' dictum that man is the measure of all things represents a misological position insofar as it reduces argument's claim to truth to mere relativity: nobody can be judged by the λόγος of another²⁰. Of course, this position will have as its necessary corollary that one and the same argument might at one time and to one person appear true and at another time, to another person, appear false. Whether Protagoras himself would have been disturbed to learn this, the reader of the *Theaetetus* is not given to know, since Protagoras has died before the dialogue begins. If we are to take Theodorus' word for it, however, the followers of Heraclitus in Ionia (distant cousins of Protagoras, if we accept Plato's genealogy) seem not to have had many problems with it:

¹⁹ A paradox to which we shall return in our discussion of the *Phaedrus*.

²⁰ Cf. D.C. Schindler, "The Community of the One and the Many: Heraclitus on Reason," *Inquiry* 46, 413-448: a private conception of reason is "idiotic" (from ἴδιον) in a double sense since it both pertains only to oneself and also reduces the scope and power of one's reason in a way that merits its being called by the English cognate (416-423).

If you ask any one of them a question, he will pull out some little enigmatic phrase from his quiver and shoot it off at you; and if you try to make him give an account [λόγον] of what he has said, you will only get hit by another, full of strange turns of language. You will never reach any conclusion with any of them, ever; indeed they never reach any conclusion with each other, they are so very careful not to allow anything to be stable, either in an argument [ἐν λόγῳ] or in their own souls. (*Tht.* 180a)

The reason that “you will never reach any conclusion with any of them” is simply because they do not recognize the authority of λόγοι. Neither feeling the need to give accounts of their doctrines to outsiders, nor even to each other, they continually flit from one ‘enigmatic phrase’ to the next in total disregard of whether or how those phrases might lead to the truth.

The sophists in the Platonic corpus are admittedly quite different from the Heraclitean sages of Ephesus that Theodorus describes in passage quoted above. Essentially, however, they are distinct from the true philosopher in the same way. Though the sophist makes use of λόγοι for the sake of winning a court case, public opinion, or vast sums of money, and while there is no evidence that the Ephesian sages partook of the same mischief, yet they share the same disdain for working *through* λόγοι for the sake of arriving at the truth. That is to say that they have a common disdain for the characteristic activity of the philosopher: διαλέγεσθαι, speaking through λόγοι. They are both symptomatic expressions of the same illness: misology.

Falling victim to misology therefore forces a separation between the operation of reason and the search for the truth. This search for the truth, as

Socrates recounts in a brief autobiography in the *Phaedo*, led him also to consider the importance of the good. Socrates tells how, in his youth, he sought after the “causes of everything” (96a) by means of an investigation into natural philosophy. He was disappointed until he came across the works of Anaxagoras, who posited that it was not fire, air, water, or any natural principle that “directs and is the cause of everything” (97c), but rather mind. This made brilliant sense to Socrates, as it provided a unified theory of the causes of things. If there is a “directing mind” that always acts according to what is best, then if this mind is the cause of everything, then everything that comes to be is caused by what is, all things considered, best²¹. Another way of saying this is that if the efficient principle behind all of reality is a “directing mind,” then the final principle behind that mind’s operation is that which is good without qualification²².

²¹ The nature of this causation needs to be carefully considered, however, and as such falls outside the scope of this essay. See D.R. Lachterman “What is ‘The Good’ of Plato’s *Republic*?” *St John’s Review* 39:1 139-172: “*The Good*, as the ground of the integrative ordering of the Forms, serves as the model for political and psychological integration. Knowledge of the good is what would allow us to lead, or to aspire to lead *wholesome* lives, lives in which each part—for example, each desire—is given its due precisely by being fitted together with all other relevant parts.” (160). As Lachterman notes, the good serves as the paradigm of the ideal republic as well as of the actual cosmos, a connection further evidenced by the verb Plato uses to describe how the guardians should order the city, the citizens, and themselves: κοσμεῖν.

²² An analogical distinction between a “directing mind” which orders the cosmos and a certain standard of goodness in respect of which this “directing mind” is totally heteronomous can also be found in the myth of the *Timaeus*. There, the demiurge fashions the cosmos according to τὸ αἰδίον παράδειγμα, a conclusion at which we are supposed to arrive from observing the self-evident excellence of the creator and beauty of the cosmos (29a). Interesting in this regard is that the cosmos’ comprehensibility is explicitly made due to its being fashioned in accordance with “that which always is and has no becoming” (27e). That is, human reason is adapted in its essence to the absolute, unchanging, eternal, and so on, and that this absolute is unconditionally *good* in itself, and *beautiful* in its issue.

Socrates considers his being seated in his prison cell in order to contrast his earlier understanding of Anaxagoras with what it later turned out Anaxagoras really taught. Initially, he believed that Anaxagoras held that “Mind [νοῦς] directs and is the cause of everything” (97c), but Anaxagoras betrayed this insight in claiming that the cause of destruction and coming to be was rather rooted in some physical principle than in a directing mind (98b-c). The difficulty lies in confounding necessary conditions for genuine causes. The genuine cause in this case is that to Socrates it “seemed best [...] to sit here and more right to remain and to endure whatever penalty [the Athenians] ordered.” (98d-e). Socrates’ actions are intelligible because he performs them in light of the good: it “seems best”. Thus a fidelity to reason seems to lead, in the Platonic perspective, to a consideration of what is unconditionally best. The alternative would consist of a brutally reductive physical determinism that inevitably falls victim to an infinite regress. To the question of why some physical system or other (whether this be Socrates’ person, or the solar system) has arranged itself in such-and-such a way and not another, the answer must always and only be given in terms of antecedent physical states: some body is in such a position relative to some other body because (and only because) of its momentum and position in time/space²³. But this procedure cannot prevent the

²³ This formulation of the problem is evidently posed in terms that would not necessarily have been familiar to Plato, and is perhaps anachronistic. That is to say that it is doubtful whether he would have seen the logical point of arrival of Anaxagoras’ physicalism in the systems of the great early modern philosophers of nature like Newton, Leibniz, and Kant. Plato for his part prefers not, in this dialogue, to speak of an object’s essence in purely abstract terms as consisting of its extension, position, and momentum (even though this definition of substance was rejected by Leibniz, since “we must recognize in body something related to soul,” (*Philosophical Essays*, “Discourse on Metaphysics” sec. 12, p. 44) it is yet evident that Leibniz felt

obvious subsequent question of why that body was in such a prior position in the first place, except of course by infinitely regressing²⁴. Understanding an ordered state of affairs, then, means understanding more than just the necessary material conditions for its coming to be (i.e. fire requires air, fuel, and a source of ignition). Such an explanation would indeed be a λόγος, in the sense of an explanation of that state of affairs. However, the precise claim in this section of the *Phaedo* is that a true λόγος means understanding what is best, all things considered, in that case. This discernment of the good, as we have seen, relies upon a reason that is willing and able to traverse the λόγοι – one in other words that refuses to remain at the level of a physical investigation that would in the end prove superficial.

The connection to misology is clear: on the account given in the *Phaedo*, misology would seem to hamstring the capacity of the philosopher's soul to rise to the unconditioned good. Since, however, λόγοι continue to exist in any case, it remains to be seen how exactly the misologue will make use of them. Looking slightly afield from Plato, we find an excellent example of such abuse of λόγοι in Gorgias' *Encomium of Helen*. In it, he claims that if the principle or cause of Helen's

the need to argue against it precisely insofar as it was *the* dominant scientific assumption of the early Modern period cf. also Galileo's *The Assayer* sec. 7.1: "[The book of Nature] is written in mathematical language, and its characters are triangles, circles, and other geometrical figures; without these it is humanly impossible to understand a word of it, and one wanders around pointlessly in a dark labyrinth") but rather of its more concrete determination: bones, sinews, joints, the contraction of muscles, etc.

²⁴ We could call this the "extensive" side of the problem, in that it extends our questioning infinitely far back in time. There is also an "intensive" side to this problem, in that for any given finite block of time, there are an infinite number of moments each corresponding to a different position of a given moving body. We might thus say, for example, that the earth is where it is relative to the sun both because of where it was 100 years ago, and also because of the infinite number of spaces it has traversed in the past infinitesimal moment of time.

eloping with Paris could only have been either the gods/fate, or force, or love, or speech (λόγος), then Helen is neither responsible for the act, nor blameworthy, since these causes are impossible to resist²⁵. Surely this strikes us as incorrect in an important respect: if what Gorgias says of Helen is true in general, then who can truly be said to be responsible for anything? Gorgias praises Helen and blames Paris, calling the latter a “barbarian assailant”²⁶. But what if Paris was driven by the same causes, namely, either by the gods, by force, by love, or by speech? Or is it necessary to name other causes by which Paris was driven that could not possibly have driven Helen? If so, then why could not these other causes have motivated Helen as well? We could thus form a counter-argument to the *Encomium of Helen*, constructed upon identical principles, and call it the *Encomium of Paris*. The same causes by which Gorgias absolves Helen, could just as easily absolve her ‘abductor’.

We doubt, however, whether this would have convinced Gorgias of the futility of his speech. The more fundamental problem with Gorgias’ text is not that it is self-contradictory. Rather, its most important problem is its characterization of λόγος as a physical force akin to fate or passion. This conclusion is, however, strictly incumbent upon the consistent misologue²⁷. Reason understands things according to their causes, and it is only capable of doing this through traversing the

²⁵ Gorgias, *Encomium to Helen*, 6. From *An Introduction to Classical Rhetoric: Essential Readings*, pp. 65-66.

²⁶ Gorgias, *Encomium to Helen*, 7.

²⁷ Paradoxically, the perfectly consistent misologue will not turn out to be particularly concerned about the consistency of his arguments. As Schindler puts it: “a skeptic who would be disturbed by the charge that he is contradicting himself is not yet a skeptic [...]. [...] Using the term is a way slightly different from Plato’s usage, let us give the name *misology* to this utterly radicalized skepticism” (*Plato’s Critique of Impure Reason*, 11).

appearances of things by means of λόγοι (i.e. by means of *dialogue*). Doing this, it arrives at the unconditioned good that governs them. Contempt for and mistrust of λόγοι, then, will tend to decouple reason and dialogue from a concern with the good. Decoupled from any intrinsic concern for the good, reason cannot help but be seen as essentially identical to any physical force in at least one important respect, that is, that it is in its nature ambiguous, and relies for its goodness upon the intention of the one using it. Thus for example a lightsaber in the hands of a Jedi is a tool to be put towards any number of uses, but in the hands of a Sith, merely a weapon, an agent of violence only. Reason in the hands of a philosopher might be put to good use, but the goodness of the use towards which it is put will turn out to be extrinsic to reason *per se*. Misology therefore leads to a subjectivization of the good: the good is no longer something that is “out there,” discoverable to a reason which is essentially ordered towards this discovery. Rather the source of the good will have to be sought within the individual, and will thus rest upon essentially arbitrary factors²⁸.

²⁸ It might be argued that a totally subjective good in this sense need not at the same time be totally arbitrary. It might be true both that I am the ultimate source and arbiter of the standard according to which my actions might be judged, *and* that this standard is not totally up to me. It could also be argued that, while the good may not be arbitrary, this does not entail that it is discoverable to reason, or that reason is the tool proper for its discovery. We might substitute feeling, or pleasure, or some other principle in place of the good. The first objection merely displaces the problem, since precisely insofar as this standard is not *up to* me, so far is it in that sense not *within* me. It might be that I can only arrive at it upon extensive self-reflection, meditation, etc. but despite the fact that I find it “within myself” in this sense, it is yet not “mine” insofar as I do not possess the power to manipulate it at will. This will lead Paul Ricoeur, following Heidegger, to consider one’s conscience as the locus of the self’s most radical passivity: the point at which one encounters oneself as another (cf. Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, pp. 342ff.). The second objection, in our view, necessarily falls victim to the classic Platonic riposte: as soon

Therefore, a denial (if to some degree implicit) that reason is ordered towards the discovery of the good seems to be at the core of the misological position in the *Phaedo*. The one who is “unskilled” in argumentation is not the one who has simply failed to learn the rules of inference, non-contradiction, and so on. Rather, the one who is thus “unskilled” is one whose reason will remain mired in the shadow-play of appearances, whose hatred and reviling of “reasonable discussion” will lead him in the end to be “deprived of truth and knowledge of reality.” (90d).

II. SOCRATES' DEFEAT OF MISOLOGY

The reason that people fall into misology, however, is not all bad. Just as the reason that people become misanthropes is out of a desire for faithful friends, so the reason people become misologists is out of desire for a faithful λόγος on which to base their beliefs and conduct. As Peter J. Ahrensdorf argues²⁹, it is out of their desire for immortality that Simmias and Cebes turn, perhaps a bit rashly, from the defeat of Socrates' argument for the soul's immortality to a distrust of argument generally³⁰. As Ahrensdorf notes of Simmias and Cebes at this point in the dialogue

as we substitute feeling, or pleasure, or any other principle than goodness as the criterion for our actions, we are thereby led to distinguish between 'good' and 'bad' instances of that principle, on the pain of being unable to distinguish between the pleasures of a catamite and those of a philosopher insofar as they are both pleasures (*Gorg.* 494e).

²⁹ Peter J. Ahrensdorf, *The Death of Socrates and the Life of Philosophy: An Interpretation of Plato's Phaedo*.

³⁰ Though we disagree in the strongest possible terms with much of Ahrensdorf's reading of the *Phaedo*, in particular his contentions that Socrates' principal intention in the dialogue is to convince his listeners of the impossibility of any proof for immortality (143), and that the temptation that leads to misology is the desire for “a doctrine that reveals the whole truth about things” (141), which temptation must absolutely be avoided. How these claims can be squared with the general tendency

(89a-d), “their hope for immortality is evidently so powerful that, should Socrates argue that it is necessary to choose between that hope and the philosophic life, it is doubtful that they would, at least at this point in their lives, surrender their hope” (131)³¹. But why is the mature philosopher immune from this threat? Why doesn’t Socrates bow to misology? Since his position throughout the dialogue is obviously that it is worse, if not downright incoherent, for the soul to be destroyed after death, we must answer that it is because Socrates has in some way attained to a certainty regarding the nature of the soul, namely, that this nature is ordered according to what is best, a “best” which can be known to us, and that, having accepted this conclusion without reservation, is loathe to consider the possibility that the way things are might not be as good as it could possibly be. But his apprehension concerning this point does not lead him to neglect giving a rational account (a λόγος) of why he is not afraid. That is, granted that he believes that all things are ordered by mind towards the good, and granted that it would be better in his view for the soul to outlive the body and join the gods and the souls of the good in Hades after death, why does he not simply reject out of hand, on the above grounds, the arguments of Simmias and Cebes, rather than offering the explanatory counter-

both of the *Phaedo* and many of Plato’s other works (particularly the *Republic*) towards the exact opposite conclusions remains mysterious to us.

³¹ This is a point echoed by Kierkegaard, when he writes, “immortality cannot be demonstrated systematically, either. The defect is not in the demonstrations but in the refusal to understand that, viewed systematically, the whole question is nonsense; thus, instead of seeking further demonstrations, one should rather seek to become a little subjective. Immortality is the subjective individual’s most passionate interest; the demonstration lies precisely in the interest.” *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p. 174.

arguments that he does in the second half of the dialogue? It would seem that Socrates is, bizarrely, offering arguments in favour of self-evident truths.

It should be clear enough from the preceding why the good must be reasonable. Since νοῦς always acts according to what it thinks is best, then if νοῦς is the cause of everything, so must the good be entirely according to νοῦς. Νοῦς, however, has both an objective and a subjective sense, and the two are evidently related. Working within the Anaxagorean picture, which Socrates at any rate was ready and willing to accept in its basic coordinates, the cosmos is comprehensible to human νοῦς precisely because it is ordered according to divine νοῦς, which in turn takes the good as its paradigm. The good must therefore be reasonable, understandable, comprehensible: it must make sense³². It would otherwise be impossible to inquire about it. This is what we meant above by indicating the reasonableness of the good. The reasonableness of the good, however, does not necessarily guarantee the goodness of reason. The good might be reasonable in the above sense, without every conclusion of reason thereby being good. Some λόγος might be good, while others might be bad, though true. If there were a λόγος that conclusively proved, not the soul's immortality, but its finitude, for example, then

³² It is evident that the section of the *Phaedo* in which Socrates relates his philosophical *Bildung* (96a-100a) bears a relation to the notion of reason's "reversal" from the *Republic's* allegory of the cave (Cf. *Republic* 519c ff.). Having reached the unhypothetical first principle, the philosopher is enabled to descend from the light above back down into the cave, where his newfound knowledge is sure to disturb his fellows, even those sympathetic to him, since he bears with him a light to which their eyes are not yet accustomed. The ascent to the good in the *Republic* is made by the philosopher's soul, through progressive stages of intensification of the power of reason: from εἰκασίαν to πίστις to διάνοια to νόησις. The philosopher arrives at the good by means of reason, and so the good must necessarily appear to him as what is κατὰ λόγον, according to reason.

this would seem to be, all things considered, worse than the alternative. It would be, in other words, an example of reason's being bad for us, leading us to conclusions which, while perhaps true, are nonetheless discouraging, discomfiting, even depressing. The good might be according to reason, but reasoning might not be, conversely, according to the good.

Despite this possibility, Socrates' reaction to the defeat of his first three arguments in favour of the soul's immortality seems to indicate that he believes the opposite to be true. Socrates is not bothered by the defeat of his arguments, despite the fact that if they remain false then this will mean that the real state of things discoverable to reason is not as good as it could otherwise be. Indeed he affirms his willingness to follow truth wherever it leads, reminding his listeners that what should convince them with respect to an argument is not that it is Socrates' but that it is true³³. At the same time, Socrates insists on the truth of his arguments for the soul's immortality despite the counter-arguments of Simmias and Cebes. He expresses the desire that they be true even if this should result in a future spent in mourning over their defeat: "It is today that I shall cut my hair and you yours [i.e. in mourning], if our argument [λόγος] dies on us, and we cannot revive it. If I were you, and the argument escaped me, I would take an oath, as the Argives did, not to let my hair grow before I fought again and defeated the argument of Simmias and Cebes" (*Phd.* 89c). But surely if the argument dies and cannot be revived, this simply means it was false? Why vow to go on mourning its defeat, even for the sake of a rhetorical

³³ *Phd.* 91b-c. Socrates even expresses admiration at the philosophical chutzpah of his Pythagorean sparring-partners: "What I [Phaedo] wondered at most in him was the pleasant, kind and admiring way he received the young men's argument [λόγον]" (89a).

effect? What explains this apparent tension between Socrates's conviction that his interlocutors ought to follow the truth wherever it leads them, but that Socrates must not abandon, nor even modify, but in a sense must double down on his argument in favour of the soul's immortality in the face of criticism to the contrary?

The first principle would seem to express an absolute devotion to the truth: even if it lays low the individual, still it is "better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied," and so we should seek out the truth no matter how bitter it proves. But this "better" would then be a totally abstract, because totally absolute, "better". It would be "better," but not *for* Socrates, who would remain "dissatisfied." Though it is certainly better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied, is it not even better to be Socrates satisfied? Is not that better that satisfies, and vice versa; can that be the absolute truth which is not absolutely good³⁴? The second principle would seem to display an irreverent desire for the good-for-me at the expense of what may later turn out to be true: psychic immortality would be good for me, and thus I will argue to defend it in spite of arguments to the contrary, no matter how strong these latter may appear. This risks reducing the good to a totally relative good, the good relative to me³⁵.

³⁴ The answer, for every philosopher of antiquity, is a *resounding* "no". This is perhaps most clearly expressed by Aristotle's doctrine that desire is actuated only in the presence of what appears to it to be good. If absolute truth were not also absolutely good, then we could not even find it insofar as it were true, since there would be nothing that could impel us to do so, nothing "attractive" about it. Cf. for example Aristotle's *Metaphysics* A.7.: "The primary objects of desire and of thought are the same. For the apparent good is the object of appetite, and the real good is the primary object of wish." (1072a25ff.); *Nicomachean Ethics* I.1.: "the good has rightly been declared to be that at which all things aim."

³⁵ It is for this (we could say "relativistic") attitude that Socrates chastises himself when he remarks that he is "in danger at this moment of not having a philosophical

There seem to be two possible interpretations of Socrates' insistence to keep fighting on behalf of the argument. The first is that Socrates has some intuition that Simmias' and Cebes' objections do not hold up under scrutiny. Since he knows them to be incorrect, this line of interpretation goes, he cannot accept surrendering to them without a fight. And this could in turn be for one of two reasons: either he has himself already explicitly considered them, or else he has some ineffable presentiment that they are incorrect. In the first case, if he had already considered them, then it becomes difficult to explain why his three arguments do not make any provision for their refutation: in expressing those arguments, he would have known the objections that were headed his way beforehand, and so could have nipped them in the bud, so to speak. Why he does not is hard to fathom. In the second case, although we can draw an analogy between the terms of this explanation and the vague sense that we often get when we are faced with reasons by which we are not quite convinced³⁶, yet this intuitive sense of wrongness seems a terribly unphilosophical tool for a philosopher of Socrates' calibre to rely upon. "Intuition" in this case would seem to be a mere placeholder for some concept of a faculty of mind that grasps truth without knowing it explicitly. This thorny problem is evidently

attitude about this, but like those who are quite uneducated, I am eager to get the better of you in argument" (*Phd.* 91a). It is an interesting fact, and one that many commentators miss, that Socrates does not claim to have *actually embraced* an unphilosophical opinion. He expresses merely that this is something in respect of which he is "in danger [κινδυνεύω]". Might this not, paradoxically, be because some degree of impassioned dogmatism is necessary for the highest degree of philosophical detachment?

³⁶ For example, when someone is lying to us, often despite the fact that their fabricated story could be perfectly plausible on its own, often something indescribably suspicious creeps in to our impression of their speech. It is such an intuition that Socrates could be said to experience with respect to Simmias and Cebes' objections.

related to the conundrum posed by Plato in the *Meno*, often referred to as the “Learner’s Paradox”. How can we seek to know something unless we know already what we are looking for? If we didn’t know what we were looking for, how would we recognize it when we found it? If we did know what we were looking for, why would we look for it at all? A resolution of this classic problem will not be attempted in the current essay, but suffice it to say that any attempt to do away with the paradox by appeal to a vague notion of “gut feeling” should be rejected as imprecise.

The second possible interpretation is that Socrates has formed a prior conviction concerning the relative *and* absolute goodness of the truth³⁷. This conviction is expressed in a few different ways in the Platonic corpus. For example, there is the assertion in the *Republic* that even the tyrant (the ultimate ethical villain for Plato) is not content to have friends merely reputed to be good, but desires that which is truly good. He has come to believe, in other words, that what is true will not turn out, in the end, to have been against him, but in his favour, without thereby sacrificing his conviction regarding truth’s absolute character, namely, that the truth as such surpasses his capacity of grasping it and thus may appear in some cases to exceed his present awareness of what is good for him. The other classic formulation of the conviction is of course the *Meno*’s theory of recollection. *Meno*’s slave recollects the absolute by means of the particular: he arrives at the Form by means of the image.

If what is true is good only insofar as it is good-in-itself (“better Socrates dissatisfied”), then only the first line of interpretation makes sense: Socrates must

³⁷ This idea is at the heart of Schindler’s *Plato’s Critique of Impure Reason*. See especially the book’s “Coda” (pp. 283-336).

have known beforehand that Simmias and Cebes' arguments were false since he presumably has prior access to absolute truth. But we have seen why we cannot accept this interpretation³⁸. On the second line of interpretation, that Socrates has come to a conviction about reason's twofold goodness, both good-for-me, and good-in-itself, what appeared formerly as a possible contradiction in the *Phaedo* now appears as a fruitful tension: it is reasonable *both* that Socrates insist on fighting for his "good-for-me" argument *and* that he admonish himself for running the risk of falling into eristic³⁹, argument for the sake of refutation, not for the sake of discovering truth - even should such a discovery prove painful. If his argument has failed, then it was not one which was good, despite its appearance to the contrary, either for him or his listeners. This would explain the "pleasant, kind, and admiring way he received the young men's argument" (*Phd.* 89a): he must have been grateful to have received a correction from their objections.

III. MISOLOGY, PLEASURE, AND PAIN

The remainder of our analysis now will be to explain the apparent contradiction between the "greatest evil" of 83 b-c, and that of 89d. Let us quote the first passage at length

³⁸ Incidentally, such an interpretation also destroys the "dramatic" character of the dialogue completely if it is true: if Plato had each of these arguments in mind from the inception of the dialogue, he may just as well have written a systematic treatise in the manner of Aristotle's *De Anima* than a dramatic dialogue.

³⁹ Cf. "Dialectic and Eristic in the *Euthydemus*" in F. Gonzalez *Dialectic and Dialogue: Plato's Practice of Philosophical Inquiry*, pp. 94-128: "Whatever the subject of an opinion, whatever its truth value, this art [eristic] enables one to refute it." p. 95.

Philosophy then persuades the soul to withdraw from the senses in so far as it is not compelled to use them and bids the soul to gather itself together by itself, to trust only itself and whatever reality, existing by itself, the soul by itself understands, and not to consider as true whatever it examines by other means, for this is different in different circumstances and is sensible and visible, whereas what the soul itself sees is intelligible and invisible. The soul of the true philosopher thinks that this deliverance must not be opposed and so keeps away from pleasures and desires and pains as far as he can; he reflects that violent pleasure or pain or passion does not cause merely such evils as one might expect, such as one suffers when one has been sick or extravagant through desire, but the **greatest and most extreme evil**, though one does not reflect on this.

What is that, Socrates? asked Cebes.

That the soul of every man, when it feels violent pleasure or pain in connection with some object, inevitably believes at the same time that what causes such feelings must be very clear and very true, which it is not. [emphasis added].

We remarked at the outset that there appeared to be three interpretative possibilities open to us with regard to this passage. Either (1) the “greatest evil” described here is radically different from that of 89d, and so Plato contradicts himself in those passages, or else (2) one or the other “greatest evil” can ultimately be reduced to the other, or else (3) the two passages offer descriptions from different points of view of the same reality. We will offer our interpretation of the passage and then see which of the three options best convenes to it.

The “greatest evil” of 83c is that the soul of a person who experiences intense pleasure or pain comes to believe that the source of that sensation is “very clear and true.” Thus the evil would seem to consist in believing, on account of violent pleasure or pain, something to be clear and true which is in fact obscure and false.

What is true in this case, moreover, would seem to be identical with what does not change. The soul is not “to consider as true whatever it examines by other means [than reason], for this is different in different circumstances,” which is to say that the reality accessible to the senses is a changeable one. So then the greatest evil one could suffer would be as a result of a misidentification: one takes to be true and hence unchanging what is in fact false and hence mutable.

But what is the sense in which sensible information is “different in different circumstances”? There is the famous example from Descartes’ second meditation concerning the piece of wax: what it appears to be at room temperature is different from what it appears to be at a higher temperature. The senses therefore fail to offer the clear and distinct knowledge accessible to the pure exercise of mind: they offer knowledge that is confused and obscure⁴⁰ Then there is the example of dreams, which, for all their vivid verisimilitude, yet are not real or true⁴¹. But in the passage at 83b, Plato does not resort to these philosophically familiar examples, instead choosing to target “violent pains and pleasures” as the source of the ailment he describes. A clue as to why he focuses on them is provided in the passage immediately following: “every pleasure or pain provides, as it were, another nail to

⁴⁰ Plato himself claims as much at 79c.

⁴¹ Or, as Heraclitus remarks, are not common (ξυρόν/κοινόν) to all. This is a theme echoed in a few fragments of Heraclitus, notably in B1 and B89, the latter of which is worth quoting: “for those who are awake there is a single, common universe [κοινόν κόσμον], whereas in sleep each person turns away into [his] own, private [universe].” Cf. D.C. Schindler, “The Community of the One and the Many: Heraclitus on Reason,” 416-423. For a good overview of the history of dream skepticism in philosophy, see J.M. Windt, “Dreams and Dreaming,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2016/entries/dreams-dreaming/>>. Sec. 1 “Dreams and Epistemology”.

rivet the soul to the body and to weld them together.” (83d). *Violent* pleasures and pains, then, affix the soul to the body more securely and with greater ease than lesser kinds of pleasures and pains. Lesser pleasures and pains could perhaps be withstood by the soul that refused to submit to them, but at a certain level of intensity, resistance to this submission becomes difficult to the point of impossibility. We might think, for example, of soldiers returning from prisoner of war camps in which they were tortured: few are the souls that would be able to withstand such an experience without a profound change in their basic orientation towards reality. This change might manifest in that group of symptoms referred to as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and from the Platonic point of view, this change is best expressed in terms of the soul’s attitude towards the truth. The person suffering from PTSD characteristically misperceives certain stimuli as belonging to the trauma they suffered, when they are not. So at the sound of a firecracker, they may tend to panic, become violent, or experience vivid flashbacks. Their soul is thus so wedded to their bodies that it is incapable of performing the act of abstract intellection necessary to distinguish a firecracker from a gunshot: the memory of their wound is so present and raw that it can be evoked at the slightest provocation.

Without the possibility of a certain remove from the body, the soul would be incapable of seeking Truth, with a capital T⁴². Why this is so is clear: every soul

⁴² Cf. *Phaedo* 79c: “Haven’t we also said some time ago that when the soul makes use of the body to investigate something, be it through hearing or seeing or some other sense—for to investigate something through the body is to do it through the senses—it is dragged by the body to the things that are never the same, and the soul

naturally seeks the 'unmoved mover' of its desire (to use Aristotelian terms). It seeks that source of goodness which it discerns in the midst of appearance. But this good itself is fundamentally incapable of being changed; it is never "different in different circumstances"⁴³. If the soul, instead of seeking that good which transcends every particular appearance instead seeks the appearances themselves, pains and pleasures, then in consequence, it becomes affixed to the body⁴⁴. For the soul to be affixed to the body, moreover, is for it to be prevented from its own proper functioning, which can only be revealed to it through the ascetic work of philosophy: "the soul of the philosopher achieves a calm from such emotions; it follows reason and ever stays with it contemplating the true, the divine, which is not the subject of opinion" (84a). Violent pleasures and pains, then, prevent a soul from coming into its own, so to speak, and in fact entail its eventual dissipation. The soul totally affixed to its body would be a soul completely *in potentia*, a soul that was in no sense activated. It would entail the enslavement of that faculty by which a philosopher comes to the knowledge of that which does not change (and is, as such, above opinion), to the flux of pleasure and pain.

itself strays and is confused and dizzy, as if it were drunk, in so far as it is in contact with that kind of thing?"

⁴³ If it changed, then this alteration was for the better or for the worse. If for the worse, then it was not absolutely good since anything which has the potential to move from a good state to a worse is worse than a thing which has no such potential (i.e. if you had a car that never broke down, this would obviously be better than a car which was capable of breaking down). If it changed for the better, then this means that its prior state of goodness was not good absolutely, but merely relatively so, since a better state relative to it was possible.

⁴⁴ There is besides this the more natural fact that pain usually serves to draw our attention to our bodies, and usually for important and useful purposes. The point seems to be that this mechanism can go overboard, and that it, in crossing a certain line, causes a kind of irreparable damage to the soul.

Crucial to the evil of the soul's submission to the body is that it *chooses this submission for itself*: "Philosophy sees that the worst feature of this imprisonment is that it is due to desires, so that the prisoner himself is contributing to his own incarceration most" (*Phd.* 82e). It is furthermore "the *soul* of the true philosopher" that chooses to "keep away from pleasures and desires and pains as far as it can" (*Phd.* 83b). The ailment is not an ailment of the senses or the body, but precisely an ailment of the soul, which, for Plato, is tantamount to the self. As such, it cannot help but have a bearing on the soul's relationship to λόγοι, as we will see in further detail.

Be that as it may, it remains to be understood in what sense pleasure and pain are themselves changeable, or "different in different circumstances". A possible example of such a phenomenon is found within the context of the philosophical education itself. Though we could point to Socrates' adumbration of the guardians' education in the *Republic* as paradigmatic in this respect, it is in fact the allegory of the cave that best exemplifies this somewhat enigmatic assertion. The prisoners of the cave (analogously to the souls imprisoned in the body in the *Phaedo*), Socrates says, "would in every way believe that the truth is nothing other than [...] shadows", but

when one of them was freed and suddenly compelled to stand up, turn his head, walk and look up toward the light, he'd be pained and dazzled and unable to see the things whose shadows he'd seen before. What do you think he'd say, if we told him that what he'd seen before was inconsequential, but that now—because he is a bit closer to the things that are and is turned towards things that are more—he sees more correctly? [...] don't you think he'd be at a loss and that he'd believe that

the things he saw earlier were truer than the ones he was now being shown? (*Rep.* 515 c-d).

When the philosopher makes his return from the realm of the sun to the cave below and attempts to free his fellow prisoners from their imprisonment against the wall of the cave, he should expect their first reaction not to be one of gratitude towards their liberator, but of pain and frustration upon being shown things to which their eyes are not accustomed, similar to the pain one feels when walking out of a movie theatre in the middle of a sunny summer afternoon. Similarly, we should expect that they would feel the pleasure of relief if they turned their eyes away from the light of the “things that are” back towards the shadows⁴⁵. Philosophical education *hurts*. It is painful and uncomfortable, in the same way as a bitter medicine might be. If the soul is so attached to the body as to imagine that its pleasures and pains are indications of the “things that are,” and not merely the somatic reverberations of the play of shadows on the cave wall, then it will mistakenly believe that the philosophical education it is receiving is not merely painful, but also misleading and false: not just bad-for-me, but bad *in se*. This is so because pleasure and pain are fundamentally

⁴⁵ Indeed Socrates remarks upon this kind of pleasure near the beginning of the *Phaedo*: “My bonds caused pain in my leg, and now pleasure seems to be following” (60c), and it also emerges as an important theme in the *Gorgias* as Socrates attempts to distinguish good from bad pleasures (494b-495a). It also emerges in the *Philebus* where Socrates and Protarchus discuss the nature of so-called “mixed” pleasures (45a-47d): “if we wanted to study the form of pleasure, to see what kind of nature it has, in that case we ought not to look at low-level pleasures, but at those that are said to be the strongest and most intensive. [...]. Now, aren’t the most immediate and greatest among the pleasures the ones connected with the body, as we have often said?” (44e-45a); “it is obvious that it is in some vicious state of soul and body and not in virtue that the greatest pleasures as well as the greatest pains have their origin.” (45e). Dorothea Frede argues that in the *Philebus*, Plato discusses pain and pleasure on the basis of a new “ontology” (437) of these terms (“Pleasure and Pain in the *Philebus*,” *The Cambridge Companion to Plato*, 425-463).

ambiguous states⁴⁶. Something which is bad for me is yet capable of causing an extreme pleasure in my body, and something which is good for me (philosophical education for example), is yet capable of causing an acute pain. It is clear, therefore, that if the soul is to judge about “the things that are” on the basis of its pains and pleasures, the more intense pains and pleasures obviously influencing its judgment all the more in proportion to their intensity, then it will be unable to accept the philosophical education that would aim to free it. This would reduce truth to the representation of a bodily state, as Socrates makes clear: “[pleasure and pain] make the soul corporeal, so that it believes that truth is what the body says it is.” (*Phd.* 83d).

This philosophical education would aim precisely at persuading the soul to see the good in higher terms than merely pain and pleasure. It would probably employ the same argument Socrates uses against Callicles in the *Gorgias*, which I have paraphrased above, namely, that since some pleasures are bad and some pains good, therefore pleasure and pain cannot coherently be the sole criteria of the good. The soul of the philosopher, by contrast, enjoys subtler pleasures. What the body sees is sensible and visible, whereas what the soul itself by itself sees is intelligible and invisible: “the soul of the philosopher [...] follows reason and ever stays with it contemplating the true, the divine [...]” (*Phd.* 84a). A soul accustomed to judge on the basis of intense pain and pleasure will therefore be unreceptive to the liberation offered by philosophy.

⁴⁶ This ambiguity is examined in greater detail in the *Gorgias* (494b-495a).

What is the relation, then, of this account of the “greatest evil” of 83b-c to the account we have given above of misology (89d ff.)? Is one to be subsumed by the other, are they contradictory accounts, or is there a way of harmonizing them?

To answer this difficulty requires a vigilant attention to the text. At 83b, Socrates says that violent pleasures and pains “do not merely cause such evils as one might expect [...], but **the greatest and most extreme evil**” (emphasis added). At 89d, he says “There is **no greater evil** one can suffer than to hate reasonable discourse” (emphasis added). *Prima facie*, there is little ground here to accept any reading other than one which would attempt to harmonize the two accounts. Whatever the “greatest and most extreme evil” is, it cannot really be different than that evil than which none is greater. To say that there is no greater evil than misology is just to say that misology is the greatest and most extreme evil, and to say that violent pleasures and pains cause the greatest and most extreme evil is just to say that they cause that evil greater than which there is none, namely, misology. Thus a naïve first reading should assume that the evil “caused” by violent pleasures and pains is none other than the hatred of λόγος of 89d. Violent pleasures and pains are therefore sufficient, though perhaps not necessary, to induce misology.

The problem that this “naïve” reading immediately runs into is Socrates’ account of just what the “greatest and most extreme evil” is: “that the soul of every man, when it feels violent pleasure or pain in connection with some object, inevitably believes at the same time that what causes such feelings must be very clear and very true, which it is not.” (83c). On *its* face, this would seem to have little to nothing to do with a hatred of “reasonable discourse”. What Socrates seems to be

describing is an almost mechanical reaction that the soul has to acute pains and pleasures: the soul “inevitably believes” that the cause of these things must be “very clear and very true”. This greatest evil is therefore inescapable for any soul subject to violent pains and pleasures, which is why Socrates warns his companions that the philosopher must abstain from these on pain of ceasing to be a philosopher at all. But certainly violent pleasures and violent pains can assail us despite our best efforts to the contrary, and it is also certainly true that everyone, at some point in his life, has to suffer such feelings. It will follow that nobody will be totally immune from this “greatest evil,” but rather that everyone will in some measure have to deal with its consequences, the philosopher’s particular method being the best.

Misology, on the other hand, seems anything but inevitable. It can be avoided simply by the thinker who imagines that the fault he sees in the argument at hand must have something to do rather with his own lack of wisdom than with the given argument’s weakness. As Socrates demonstrates throughout Plato’s work, not only a strong, but even and perhaps especially a weak argument is capable of leading to wisdom⁴⁷. Be that as it may, it remains consistently true in those same works that a haughty, know-it-all attitude does *not* lead to wisdom. To compare two Platonic characters, Theaetetus and Euthyphro are quite different in this very respect. The former of the two, though possessed of the inadequate λόγοι of his erstwhile teacher Protagoras, is yet susceptible to Socrates’ insistent coaching, the latter being on the other hand so convinced of the divinity of his inspiration that he is scarcely able to entertain any doubt as to its truth. Misology in this sense seems therefore a disease

⁴⁷ But only upon the mediation of the philosopher in dialogue.

of presumption, of the refusal to humble oneself not before any particular argument, but before the power of reason in general.

At this point we may well be tempted give up any attempt at a synthetic reading of the two passages. It is by no means clear how they can be brought in line with each other. Certainly presumption regarding arguments is a thing far removed from being afflicted by violent pleasures and pains? However, they are not far apart in the same dialogue: they must fit, and Plato must have arranged it so that we learn from trying to reconcile them. There is a nuance in the account at 83b which may help salvage the dialogue's unity on this point. As we mentioned earlier, the greatest evil appears to consist, in the first place, of taking something to be true (on account of its perceptual vividness) which is in fact false. As a corollary, Socrates goes on, "such an experience [of violent pleasure or pain] tie[s] the soul to the body most completely". Therefore the greatest evil does not primarily consist in the soul's being riveted to the body, but this is rather a consequence of its taking violent pleasure and pain to be clear signs of truth and reality. There is the further fact that "the worst feature of this imprisonment is that it is due to desires [ἐπιθυμίας], so that the prisoner himself is contributing to his own incarceration most of all" (82e), which is to say that the soul is not just the passive recipient of otherwise indifferent pains and pleasures, but rather that it submits itself to the reign of its own baser desires (ἐπιθυμίας). Reason understood as the soul's aspiration for what is highest (indeed for what is best), is thus extirpated from the horizon of the soul's concern.

Does this not bear an uncanny similarity to our description of misology above, namely insofar as such self-imprisonment will also tend to decouple reason

and dialogue from a concern for the good? Indeed, how could it be otherwise in a soul which is accustomed to regard as true (and therefore *good*) only what it can grasp with its senses? Reason will necessarily be reduced to being “the slave of the passions”⁴⁸ in the case of such a soul, concerned not with pursuing the unconditioned good (in any case not a sensible ‘thing’), but rather with the prudent administration of its own drives⁴⁹.

At this point, we propose the following synthetic reading of the two passages: the man who allows himself to be afflicted by the greatest pleasures and pains suffers the greatest evil insofar as this submission will prevent his soul’s coming into its own. This soul would recognize as true only what causes its body to experience pleasure or pain, and will therefore fail to realize its proper potential: the contemplation of the insensible ὄντα. The misologue suffers the greatest evil insofar as he arrives at the same end, and indeed Socrates is explicit on this point when he says that the misologue comes to be “deprived of truth and knowledge of reality [τῶν ὄντων ... ἀληθείας ... ἐπιστήμης]” (90d). However, that the soul be riveted to the body by the experience of violent pleasures and pains also seems to be a necessary concomitant of the misological position: if we think that λόγοι are not ways to arrive at truth but are the mere operatives of extrinsic force (Gorgias), then the only possible criteria of truth would have to be sensible criteria. It is hard to see

⁴⁸ Cf. David Hume, *Treatise Concerning Human Understanding*, bk. II sec. 3 ch. 1.

⁴⁹ It is perhaps in this sense that we can identify two seemingly contradictory modern trends on the one hand towards hedonistic abandonment and on the other towards the obsessive management of appetite. Indeed the diet fanatic fixated upon counting every calorie is not so very far from the totally self-indulgent glutton. What both lack, in the eyes of the *Phaedo*, is a conception of reason’s inherent drive towards a good that exceeds sense experience. Practically speaking, this just means that the good of eating must transcend merely *sensible* well being.

what these could be other than pleasure and pain. The true λόγος is the one that produces pleasure in its listener, and the false is the one that produces pain. Misology serves to rivet the soul to the body, since the only thing that can free the soul of its self-imposed imprisonment within the body is the help of philosophy, which is necessarily mediated through (διὰ) arguments (λόγοι) in conversations properly called dialogues (διάλογοι)⁵⁰. At the same time, the experience of violent pleasures and pains primes the ground for a hatred of arguments. Since they provoke the soul to imprison itself deeper and deeper within the sensible confines of the body, and thus posit the ultimate criterion of truth firmly and exclusively within the subject himself, they above anything else will lead a person to a mistrust of arguments, which, as we have seen, always aim at a reality that transcends the senses. The soul, in thrall to violent pleasures and pains, or enchanted by misology is thus the victim of its own ignorance. Misology is a kind of psychic suicide: a denial by the soul of its very own nature. We said earlier that misology prevents the soul from coming into its own, in the sense of realizing its potential, but it is closer to the truth to say that misology prevents the soul from being *soul*, from striving for the truth. As we will see in the next chapter on the *Phaedrus*, this striving for the truth is what makes us human: the misologue is a pitiable caricature of true humanity, and is rightfully reincarnated as an animal, having given away his capacity for reason.

⁵⁰ However, as Katarzyna Jazdzewska notes, the curious fact that Plato uses the verb διαλέγεσθαι about 25 times more frequently than he uses the word διάλογος (over 200 instances of the former compared to just 8 of the latter) calls for a special attention to the precise meaning of διάλογος in Plato. That question is beyond our scope here, however. Cf. K Jazdzewska, "From *Dialogos* to Dialogue: The Use of the Term from Plato to the Second Century CE".

The final word on the misological position we will leave to Plato as he describes the “paid private teachers whom the people call sophists” (*Rep.* 493b-c). For the misologue, knowledge is reduced to the administration of pre-rational desires and drives: “it’s as if someone were learning the moods and appetites of a huge, strong beast that he’s rearing”. The misologue’s reason aims always and only serving the interests of his (or another’s!) ἐπιθυμία, which, as a faculty of soul exclusively occupied with sensibles, cannot be a reliable measure of truth. The misologue also dwells in profoundest ignorance, namely in ignorance of his own ignorance: “Having all this through tending the beast over a period of time, he calls this knack wisdom, gathers his information together as if it were a craft, and starts to teach it.”⁵¹ The clear implication is that this cobbled-together set of protocols is anything but wisdom. Finally, the precise reason that it cannot be called wisdom is because the misologue “In truth [...] knows nothing about which of these convictions is fine or shameful, good or bad, just or unjust, but he applies all these names in accordance with how the beast reacts—calling what it enjoys good and what angers it bad”. The misologue is ignorant because his protocols, despite whatever title to ‘efficiency’ or ‘effectiveness’ they might enjoy, have no relationship at all to that which really is, to τὰ ὄντα, to the things themselves. And this lack of relationship Plato defines as a type of extrinsicist nominalism: the misologue merely “applies all these names in accordance with how the beast reacts”. The implication is that the truth has an inherent evidence; it is not the mere result of a correspondence

⁵¹ And this ignorance can be, when combined with strength, the cause of “serious and barbarous wrongdoing” (*Laws* 863c). There is the further implication in the passage from the *Laws* that ignorance is no excuse for wrongdoing. The misologue really *ought to know better*.

between a label and a phenomenon, but stems from the essence of the phenomenon itself⁵².

It is this final observation about the truth's inherent evidence that will form the core of the next chapter's discussion. In the *Phaedrus*, we see a contrast established between the philosopher-lover and the sophist. In some way this contrast parallels the contrast, found in the sophist Lysias' own speech on love, between the 'true' lover and the merely 'carnal' lover, inverting the terms of that speech to reveal the carnal lover as closer to the truth than the sophisticated, sophistical, lover who loves without loving. The philosophical lover, on apprehending his beloved, literally enjoys truth, via the medium of beauty, as it *streams* into his eyes through the person of the beloved. The Forms are radiant in the person of the beloved on account of the beloved's beauty. The "inherent evidence" of truth is therefore beauty, and, as we shall see, it is only in the context of fidelity to beauty that philosophical reason is capable of reaching truth—rather, in a more profound sense, that truth is capable of reaching philosophical reason, since reason, as we shall see, is for Plato fundamentally a capacity of receiving being. The misologue is blind not only to the claims of λόγοι, but is also incapable of truly enjoying beauty—even, despite what he imagines, purely sensual beauty.

⁵² Indeed, this is likely the deeper significance of the passage in the *Cratylus* where Socrates calls the dialectician the one who supervises the giving of names (*Cra.* 390d). How could it be otherwise, if as we have attempted to show, it is dialectics that arrives at a truth whose name is an intrinsic property of its essence? Only the dialectician would be capable of giving things their correct names, since it is only he who is on intimate terms with their truth.

CHAPTER TWO: REASON IN THE *PHAEDRUS*

In this chapter, we shall attempt to trace the lineaments of the Platonic conception (via the *Phaedrus*) of reason's role in the nature and destiny of man along three major lines. The first of these will consist of an investigation of reason's essentially receptive nature. We claim that reason, in the first place, is not an active faculty that marches forward by means of hypothesis towards attaining its desire for knowledge and beauty. As Book VI of the *Republic* already makes clear, this is the δίανοια of the geometers, to be distinguished and set at a lower place from the νόησις of the dialectician (510c-511e). We shall see how Plato conceives of reason rather, and primarily, as a capacity of receptivity and openness, which guarantees the truth of reason's 'dianetic' faculty as well. Secondly, we shall look at the paradoxical nature of philosophical desire. The philosopher possesses a 'disinterested interest,' if we can put it in that way, with respect not only to his affective relationships (paradigmatically in his role as teacher), but also with respect to the Forms themselves. Though the Forms (and the good of which they are the reflections) are the ultimate object of his yearning, he can arrive at these only through the mediation of sensible particulars, and must therefore avoid neglecting or censoring the life of the senses. He must be 'disinterestedly interested' both in his senses for the sake of the Forms, and conversely, in the Forms for the sake of his senses. We shall see both how this requires a sacrifice of him, and what kind of sacrifice it might be. Finally, we shall briefly examine the relationship between reason, philosophy, and τέχνη. It will be shown that a preoccupation with philosophy, far from being an impediment to or distraction from the particular arts

and sciences, is in fact the *ars artium* without which they, in the first place, lose their meaning and, in the second place, lose their efficacy.

I. REASON AS OPENNESS

A strange, seeming inconsistency is bound to appear to the mind of anyone who scours Plato's works with the goal of extracting from them the relatively concealed nuggets of propositional knowledge they are supposed to contain. Such a person will be more than content to discover phrases in Plato, for example, identifying virtue with knowledge, or knowledge with recollection, or claiming that the soul is immortal, or tripartite, or that the men of the ideal city ought to hold their wives in common. Such claims, and the arguments which support them, can be exhaustively analyzed in terms of their consistency, validity, soundness and so on. Either virtue is knowledge, or it is not: *tertium non datur*. Less easy for such a person to digest will be phrases such as the following: "the best things we have come from madness, when it is given as a gift from the God" (*Phdr.* 244a), or "isn't love the son of Aphrodite, and so one of the gods?" (*Phdr.* 242d). There is very little about the foregoing that suggests the tone and tenor of much contemporary writing in philosophy, nor of much contemporary writing on Plato. Plato, in the *Phaedrus* at least, seems at certain key points to have little regard for clarity, precision, and the definition of terms⁵³.

⁵³ The passage of 237c, stressing the importance of knowing "the true nature of a particular subject," is in this respect highly ambiguous. Though it precedes the more or less precise distinction between true and false loves, it also precedes the statement that the "true nature" of the subject at hand is beyond the reckoning of anyone but a god (246a). So it would be incorrect to state that Plato has *no* regard

The crude understanding of Plato as the 'idealist' or 'rationalist' *par excellence* (usually contrasted to the 'realist,' 'empiricist,' Aristotle) immediately founders on the rock of such bizarre and enigmatic passages. There is a seeming contradiction between Socrates the apostle of reason, and Socrates the initiate of divine mysteries: readings which would attempt to foreclose on either of those two poles will necessarily tend towards an excessively univocal reading of Plato. Of course, perhaps we would be capable of distilling from Plato's mysterious references to gods and madness the supposed propositional essence which lies within them, and to be sure, Plato is himself occupied with much the same goal at certain points in the dialogues. However, it is more reasonable to take them at face value, as statements which Socrates takes with deadly seriousness, despite their apparent, and baffling, lack of philosophical rigour. This approach has the distinct advantage of preserving, in principle, the unity of the dialogues. If we take the dialogues as either proto-treatises or else as mystical allegories (the two extremes at issue), we will, in the former case, miss those elements of drama, myth and allegory that Plato thought philosophically important enough to include in the dialogues, and in the latter case, have abandoned philosophy as such in favour of poetic, mystical, speculation.

With all that in mind, we propose that, rather than understanding Socrates' constant appeal, especially in the *Phaedrus*, to the gods, nymphs, and muses as so much rhetorical flourish, or poetic colouring, we take seriously the hypothesis that

for clarity and precision. Rather, paradoxically, Plato is seeking to be as precise as possible about a topic even he regards as inexhaustibly rich, and which on that account does not admit of total definition or clarity.

Socrates meant what he said: that he was not speaking ironically or in jest⁵⁴. We should not perhaps be surprised to find within the *Phaedrus*, being in an eminent sense preoccupied with the nature of rhetoric, the presence of merely rhetorical elements. However, the Socratic use of irony, allegories, myths, puns, fake etymologies, and so on, is never merely in jest. There is some method to the madness, and though none of Socrates' mythological assertions is "backed up" by anything more than the appeal to divine authority⁵⁵, that does not make them unreasonable or irrational. We shall attempt to see what this means for Plato's conception of reason, particularly in the *Phaedrus*.

⁵⁴ We would contrast this approach with that of Richard Kraut, who, in his introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Plato*, writes "The dialogue form of [Plato's] works should not keep us from saying that they are vehicles for the articulation and defense of certain themes and the defeat of others. Though they are not philosophical treatises, many of them share these purposes with philosophical treatises." (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, 26). Cited in D.C. Schindler, *Plato's Critique of Impure Reason*, 30. Certainly there is nothing necessarily faulty with such an approach, though it has the disadvantage of narrowness: for what philosophical theme are the cicadas advocating victory? Though Kenneth Sayre rejects this 'proto-essay' hermeneutic, we do not entirely agree with his position, namely, that this rejection leads to the conclusion that "The goal of philosophy is not argument, but mental discernment." (242) cf. K. Sayre, "A Maieutic View of Five Late Dialogues," *Methods of Interpreting Plato and His Dialogues*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992, 221-243. For another reading of Plato that rejects both the "dramatic" and the "doctrinal/proto-essay" interpretations, see M. Byrd, "The Summoner Approach: A New Method of Plato Interpretation," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 45(3), July 2007, 365-381.

⁵⁵ As Catherine Pickstock notes, this is a motif that is rife throughout the Socratic dialogues. Cf. "The Late Arrival of Language: Word, Nature, and the Divine in Plato's *Cratylus*," *Modern Theology* 27(2), 238-262: "Socrates invokes peculiar and unplaceable sources of authority, from untraceable myths, nymphs and strange gods, likenesses and unlikenesses, strange analogies and images; he attends to the mysterious prompting *daimon* who whispers hesitations into his ear and holds him back from certainty; he admires the wisdom of the people at Dodona who were prepared to take heed of the prophetic promptings of oak trees and rocks." (241).

We refer to this tendency of Plato's towards using rhetoric, poetry, and myth⁵⁶ as a seeming inconsistency, because it apparently contradicts, at least, the imperative given in the *Phaedo*, to "give but little thought to Socrates but much more to the truth" (*Phd.* 91b-c). Certainly the reader of Plato's dialogues ought, analogously, to give but little thought to the inherited myths of his culture or time, to the authoritative pronouncements of those reputed for their wisdom, and to the dazzling but potentially deceptive raptures of fine poetry and rhetoric, and much more to the truth. That is, the 'truth' thus understood is unconditioned by any association with contingent realities, like myths or poetry. Myths might *contain* truth within them. For example, the myth of Prometheus might truly warn against the perils of *hubris*, but for all that, that the injunction against *hubris* be wrapped up in a myth about fire-stealing is inconsequential. Given the extremely vexed and vexing question of the relationship between poetry and the inspired arts and philosophy in Plato's work⁵⁷, we do not propose to examine fully the relationship between figurative and philosophical language as this relationship might have to do with the *Phaedrus*. Rather, we propose to examine only one philosophically interesting aspect of Plato's constant use of allegory, myth, and poetry, and his

⁵⁶ And it is by no means limited merely to the *Phaedrus* and the *Phaedo*. See for example the myth of Er in book 10 of *The Republic*, the reference to "wise men and women" in the *Meno* (81a ff.), or the puzzling and aporetic allegories of thought towards the end of the *Theaetetus*. Cf. also Catherine Pickstock, "Eros and Emergence": "their [i.e. the priests' and priestesses'] teaching is not to be regarded as a mere *mythos* but is already a *logos*." (100).

⁵⁷ As G.R.F. Ferrari bluntly notes, "The great challenge to any interpreter of Plato's views on poetry is to understand why he is so uncompromisingly hostile towards it." (92). "Plato and Poetry". Even in the *Phaedrus*, on the whole an extremely 'poetic' dialogue, the poets are ranked sixth on the scale of the soul's descent – just above menial labourers, sophists, and tyrants (248e).

continual reference to the inherited cultural wisdom of Greek civilization. This aspect we can concisely define in terms of the following maxim: reason must remain open to the reception of being.

a. A Methodological Digression

A possibly significant problem for our reading of the *Phaedrus* is the apparent ambiguity surrounding Socrates' delivery of the second, revised, speech on love at 244a-257b, usually referred to in the literature as the palinode. That is, how, exactly, does Plato intend we read this speech? Depending on how we read it, its meaning could be diametrically opposed to the one we propose above. This diametrically-opposed reading might go roughly as follows: the speech takes place in the context of a dialogue which is in the first place concerned with the nature and aim of speech-making. That is, the *Phaedrus* may not be *prima facie* concerned to develop any particular metaphysical teachings about the soul, Truth, the cosmos, the Forms, and so on. Granted, it may or may not contain these, but if it does, it will do so only accidentally, and in the service of its more general aim. This aim of the *Phaedrus* may be simply to improve on the then-contemporary "books on the art of speaking" (266d), offering more than merely the "preliminaries" of an art of rhetoric. In some way, it is closer to the truth to say that it sketches the necessary and sufficient conditions of the art of speechmaking, or rhetoric, *qua* art and not mere ἐμπειρία, than to say it aims to communicate certain doctrines about reason as such.

To offer a handbook on the complete art of speechmaking would perhaps be a fool's errand, as Plato hints in a few places. To embark on such a task would be

“altogether a task for a god in every way” (246a) since a total account of this art would amongst other things require a description of what the soul actually is, a task which would in turn require “understanding the nature of the world as a whole” (270c). A tall order, suffice it to say. Consider also his general invective against writing at 274c-277a. In the latter, the problem with writing is that it is but a reflection of real knowledge and wisdom, which is evidently something passed from master to pupil in a live dialogue. In this sense, we might not be prepared to accept the palinode’s myth of the soul’s pre-existence as having been literally intended by Plato. Especially in the context of a work on rhetoric, so this reading goes, we ought to be especially wary of rhetorical flourishes within a rhetorical response to a rhetorical abuse. If this is true, then we ought to understand Plato’s appeals to madness, tradition, religion, and love not as explicit pronouncements on the value of those things for the philosopher, as it were, that Plato meant for his reader to acknowledge and heed, but rather as more narrowly-intended instructions for, and illustrations of, the writing of effective speeches. So it is not clear that Plato is making a point about reason *as such*, as much as about proper speech writing. Maybe, in order to produce conviction in a listener, some speeches ought to resort to passionate appeals to tradition, love, the muses, whatever. This fact, however, should not lead us to believe that Plato is saying that reason itself stands in need of inspiration, much less that it essentially is this receptivity to inspiration.

However, a careful attention to the precise context of the palinode should serve to justify our own interpretation. First, we note that the palinode takes place specifically as a response to the demand of the *truth* about love. There is false and

true love, Socrates says⁵⁸, and the fact that he veils his head while giving his first speech (*in persona sophistica*) can only be understood as his way of taking a distance from what he says in that speech. In fact, that gesture could even be understood as Socrates' attempt to specifically distance himself from the *content* of the speech (which he is loathe to associate with his *persona*, his *face*), and to draw attention specifically to its *style*. The fact that he unveils himself in delivering the palinode thus suggests, not that the palinode is being proposed as better *qua* rhetorical style (although it is that), but as the *truth* of the matter in question, as that which Socrates is not ashamed to call his own. He unveils his face in order to draw attention to the *content* of what he is going to say, because it is the *true* account of love. Second, the “erotic ascent” of the speech itself clearly mirrors the account in the *Symposium*: through correctly loving boys, the philosopher is able to attain to the truth of the heavens, via the mediation of Beauty. The fact that these two dialogues agree on this point, despite their many differences in style and emphasis, strongly suggests that Plato meant for that portion of the palinode to be read as more than merely rhetorical. Finally, the nature of the importance given to the erotic ascent within the speech itself is such as to highlight its importance precisely for arriving at intelligible truth. There is no method of grasping truth itself except by way of the *θεία μανία* of erotic love. Therefore the prominence of such so-called “irrational”⁵⁹

⁵⁸ “There’s no *truth* to that story—that when a lover is available you should give your favours to a man who doesn’t love you instead, because he is in control of himself while the lover has lost his head” (244a; emphasis added); “risky as it may be, you see, I must attempt to speak the truth, especially since the truth is my subject” (247c).

⁵⁹ And of course our own reading takes issue with characterizing these elements as “irrational”.

elements within the speech as love, madness, poetry, and myth are not presented as being essential in the context of rhetoric only (although they may indeed be essential in that context), but properly speaking in the context of arriving at philosophical, intelligible, truth.

To see how this maxim (“reason must remain open to the reception of being”) is embodied in the *Phaedrus*, let us unpack the meaning of what is stated above. The first question concerns what we mean by “reason” in Plato. We could begin by pointing to two sides or aspects of the reality expressed by the word “reason”⁶⁰ in translations of Plato’s works. On the one hand, there is the “objective” dimension of reason. As examples, we could take the assertion from the *Laws* that law ought to be defended as “either part of nature (ὡς ... φύσει) or existing by reason of some no less powerful agency—being in fact, to tell the truth, creations of reason [γεννήματα κατὰ λόγον ὀρθόν]” (*Laws* 890d), or the reference in the *Phaedo* to a “directing Mind (νοῦς),” or, perhaps most famously, we might cite the demiurge of the *Timaeus* who constructs the cosmos according to an eternal paradigm, which model can be taken to account for the orderly beauty of nature’s arrangements (29a). This “objective” reason amounts to something like “the principle according to which reality is organized,” and hence, as constitutive of or according to the order of nature.

⁶⁰ We should note, however, that there are many occasions in which the same or a similar concept is translated by different words, better suited to express the nuance of the original Greek. So for example νοῦς in the *Phaedo* is translated ‘mind,’ while νόησις in the *Republic*, which, literally translated, should be ‘minding,’ is translated ‘reason’. Despite the divergent translations, it is not a stretch of the imagination to assume they express deeply similar realities for Plato.

On the other hand, there is the “subjective” dimension of reason. As examples of the latter, we might take the charioteer from the *Phaedrus*, the threefold division of the soul in *Republic IV* and the divided line in *Republic VI*⁶¹ or Socrates’ identification of the rational soul with the self⁶² in the *Phaedo*⁶³. All this to say that “reason” can mean either something like “the principle according to which reality is organized,” or else, “the highest faculty of soul”. That, for Plato, there is some relationship between the two is clear enough, but is not the focus of the present study.

“Objective” reason should also be understood in a particular sense as a “beyond” to which “subjective” reason is related and in respect of which it must maintain a posture of openness. There is a certain continuity between the two on account of which they can both be called reason. There is an inherent capacity for reception within the structure of “subjective” reason itself that allows for it to understand something of “objective” reason—the “beyond” in question is thus not an irrational force, like Schopenhauer’s Will, for example. It is a reasonable, ordered reality. That is not to say, however, that it is at the same time something basically assimilable to “subjective” reason: it remains “objective” by remaining ever beyond

⁶¹ Specifically, Socrates’ claim that the highest division of the line is reserved for a faculty of soul that he refers to there as νόησις, and which is usually rendered in English as either “understanding,” or “reason” (see *Republic* 510b-511e).

⁶² “I do not convince Crito that I am this Socrates talking to you here and ordering all I say, but he thinks that I am the thing which he will soon be looking at as a corpse” (*Phd.* 115d). Cf. *Alcibiades* 131b: “if someone takes care of his body, then isn’t he caring for something that belongs to him, and not for himself?”

⁶³ I follow A. Domanski in referring to both λόγος and νοῦς as “reason” in the ‘subjective’ sense I have described above. See A Domanski, “The Role of Reason in Plato’s Philosophy”. Obviously, however, λόγος has a much wider range of acceptations as well.

the totalizing grasp of that latter. Our claim is that Plato's concept of reason entails that the "subjective" side of reason must be open towards that which exceeds its total comprehension or mastery, even though this "excess" is not on that account irrational.

The second question concerns what "receiving being" means. To begin with, we note that the reception of being is, with remarkable consistency, the characteristic function of reason in Plato's work⁶⁴. That is, reason for Plato is ordered essentially to the recollection of what eternally exists—τα ὄντα—not to the search for necessary and sufficient conditions (for example), although this is by no means inconsequential.

Plato's *Seventh Letter* furnishes us with a detailed anatomy of reason's ambit in this sense. In the context of explaining to the "friends of Dion" why he was unable to produce the conviction in the tyrant Dionysius that the philosophical life was the only one worth living, Plato leaps into an extremely interesting excursus on the method of philosophical instruction, and of the path to conviction and knowledge⁶⁵. "For every real being [τῶν ὄντων ἕκαστων]," he writes, "there are three things that are necessary if knowledge of it is to be acquired: first, the name; second, the definition [λόγος]; third, the image; knowledge [ἐπιστήμη] comes fourth, and in the fifth place we must put the object itself, the knowable and truly real being [γνωστόν τε καὶ ἀληθῶς ... ὄν]." (*L.VII.* 342a-b). He later expands on this fourth term: "In the fourth place are knowledge, reason [νοῦς], and right opinion (which are in our

⁶⁴ The *Republic's* allegory of the sun (507b-509d) is emblematic in this regard: "[Sight] receives from the sun the power it has, just like an influx from an overflowing treasury." (508b; emphasis added).

⁶⁵ See note 1.

minds, not in words or bodily shapes, and therefore must be taken together as something distinct both from the [being] itself and from the three things previously mentioned) of these, reason [voũç] is nearest the fifth [i.e. being] in kinship and likeness” (L. VII. 342 c-d). Reason, then, functions as a mediating term or faculty between name, definition, and image (which we might group together and gloss as the “necessary and sufficient conditions”), and reality itself. Reality cannot be reduced to my linguistic grasp of it (i.e. via “the four”), though this does not in turn mean that I cannot know anything about it. Likewise, my knowledge of reality cannot be reduced to name, definition, and image, though this does not entail that these three reflect nothing of being. Knowledge and subjective reason cannot be reduced in this way because names, definitions, and images are malleable and unfixed (343a-c), “by nature defective” (343d), and can easily be made the tools of mere refutation for its own sake on account of this inherent slipperiness. If reason were to remain within the sphere of those names, definitions, and images easily known to and manipulable by it, without enduring the labours and difficulties that necessarily attend the genuinely philosophical life (340b-341a), then it would fail ever to attain to the knowable and truly real being that it seeks⁶⁶. Therefore, reason must strive to remain ever open to an irreducible reality of which it is not the master, but the servant.

⁶⁶ In this, we can see a clear parallel to our discussion of misology in chapter 1. The misologue, bound as he is to consider pains and pleasures as the ultimate criteria of truth, cannot see beyond the difficulty inherent in pursuing philosophy, and so cannot attain “knowledge of truth and reality,” or the “knowable and truly real being,” for which he, perhaps unwittingly, longs.

Our claim here, that reason is primarily an openness to reality, is substantiated by several elements of the *Phaedrus*. First, there is the fact that Socrates, at least initially, rebukes Lysias' speech on the grounds of impiety⁶⁷. That is to say, Lysias' speech offends conventional belief about the nature of the divinity while Socrates, the paradigmatic philosopher, remains ever open to the inherited beliefs of his culture regarding this divinity. This move forces us to ask what the relation between philosophy and religion/culture might be. Second, love in the *Phaedrus* is described as a divine madness. Madness, which by definition is to be out of one's mind, without the use of one's (subjective) reason, is paradoxically described as the philosopher's greatest ally. The passivity of reason in this regard will consist of the soul's docility before the forces of inspiration and "enthusiasm". In order to be fully reasonable, the philosopher must invoke forces which exceed his comprehension. Finally, in the allegory of the soul that takes up most of Socrates' second speech, the finest souls are described as yearning precisely for that "experience [which] is beyond their comprehension because they cannot fully grasp what it is that they are seeing" (250a). The only reason that those souls are capable of recognizing Beauty itself amongst the beautiful things of the world is because they had earlier caught a glimpse of "what really is what it is" (247e), which Socrates describes as "without colour and without shape and without solidity ... visible only to intelligence [νῶ]" (247b). In other words, their capacity for philosophy is strictly

⁶⁷ The word Socrates uses for "impiety" is "ἀσεβής," an action or attitude that comes under strict condemnation in the *Laws* 885ff. There is therefore some reason to think he is not being merely ironic in his condemnation of Lysias, but is rather strictly censuring him, though, of course, he could be doing both.

dependent upon their reception of a hyperrational⁶⁸ reality. We will have to ask what the *Phaedrus* tells us about the nature of this receptive capacity (νοῦς). We shall now go through these elements in turn, beginning with the last one listed.

b. Hierarchy and Transcendence

The nature of the soul, and reason's place in that nature, is illustrated poetically during Socrates' second speech on love in the *Phaedrus*. That speech argues, first, that there are different kinds of madness, not all of which are "bad, pure and simple" (244a). Love is a kind of madness "sent by the gods as a benefit to a lover and his boy" (245b). Next, Socrates discourses about the nature of the soul. Deciding that a complete account of the soul's nature is out of reach⁶⁹, he opts instead to describe what the soul is "like". What follows is the famous allegory of the charioteer. The soul is like a two-horse team, one of which horses "is beautiful and good and from stock of the same sort," the other of which "is the opposite and has the opposite sort of bloodline"⁷⁰ (246b). The horses are intended to represent,

⁶⁸ We use the term "hyperrational" in order to avoid a possible misunderstanding: this reality to which we refer is by no means an "irrational" realm of mystical feeling or intuition. To understand τα ὄντα in this way would be contrary to the spirit of the entire Platonic corpus. However, it is clear that τα ὄντα stand above, far above, the grasp of human striving – so much so that it is only in a certain sense by their condescension that we can know them at all. We have therefore chosen to express this relationship as "hyperrational"; paradoxically, the reality of being is *more rational than reason itself*.

⁶⁹ Interestingly, he notes that "to describe what the soul actually is would require a very long account, altogether a task for a god in every way" (246a). Is not this moment of demur perfectly consistent with the claim in the *Seventh Letter* that "whenever we see a book [...] we can be sure that if the author is really serious, this book does not contain his best thoughts; they are stored away with the fairest of his possessions." (344c)?

⁷⁰ Although the following is beyond the scope of the present essay, it is interesting that, despite the fact that one horse is described as being wholly good, the other as

respectively, the soul's desire for Truth and Beauty, and its desire for carnal pleasure⁷¹, while the charioteer is himself identified with the rational, guiding element of the soul, as the one who gives rein to desire in the form of either the one or the other horse.

Striking with regard to the allegory is the rather ornate hierarchy that Plato describes: there is the "place beyond heaven" (247c), followed by heaven itself where the gods dwell, followed by those souls who cleave most nearly to the gods, and who are able to catch passing glimpses of Reality itself (248a), followed by souls who "rise at one time and fal[l] at another" seeing some real things but not all, followed finally by the other souls, "eagerly straining to keep up, but ... unable to rise." This last group suffers the most: its members are "carried around below the surface⁷², trampling and striking one another as each tries to get ahead of the others. The result is terribly noisy, very sweaty, and disorderly." (248a-b). The hierarchical nature of psychic reality described here by Plato is crucial for the point at hand⁷³. For him, it is not just the case for him that human rationality stands in need of just anything beyond itself, but rather that it depends upon what is specifically higher, nobler, and more real than itself. The plains where truth stands, which provide the

wholly bad, yet the souls of the gods, who are themselves wholly good, are described as driving both horses cf. 247b-e.

⁷¹ Taking the words of Socrates' first speech, we could say that they represent on the one hand "our inborn desire for pleasures," and, on the other, "our acquired judgment that pursues what is best" (237d). Lysias' speech deceptively identifies *ἔρως* with the bad horse, in spite of the good, when he writes that the lover is driven by "bodily passion [*σώματος ἐπιθύμησάν*]" (232e).

⁷² "The surface of what?" we might ask.

⁷³ The heavenly hierarchy is matched to the incarnate hierarchy which descends in nine rungs downward from the "seed of a man who will become a lover of wisdom or of beauty, or who will be cultivated in the arts and prone to erotic love" (248d) finally to the "tyrant".

“grass that is the right food for the best part of the soul” (248c) are ultimately the object of every soul’s yearning, not just that of the philosopher’s⁷⁴. And this is the case not extrinsically or adventitiously, but essentially: it is of the very nature of the soul to desire this truth that stands above it⁷⁵.

This account also provides a helpful counterbalance to one temptation that readers of Plato often face, namely, that of conceiving his opinion of the philosophical life as consisting mainly in advancing from appearance to reality, from matter to spirit, until we are sufficiently initiated to be able to dwell in the presence of the ethereal realities on a daily basis, under our own power⁷⁶. In fact, Plato makes it very clear that it is not by means of our own strength that we attain to those realities, and once we have reached them, we are not thereby made indifferent to the lower rungs of reality that mediated them for us⁷⁷. To be sure, we must be properly disposed to receive, remember, and correctly desire them, and so there is a

⁷⁴ It would in fact be nearer the truth to say that for Plato every human soul is a philosopher insofar as it is human. Cf. *Phaedrus* 249b; e: “nature requires that the soul of every human being has seen reality; otherwise, no soul could have entered this sort of living thing”.

⁷⁵ And in that sense, the soul is not totally passive with respect to the object of its desire. In desiring it, it also strives to achieve and possess it. However, it must not be forgotten that this desiring and striving are predicated upon the more fundamental passivity of *being struck* by the object’s beauty.

⁷⁶ Diotima’s description of love from the *Symposium*, for example, is sometimes described in these terms. See *Symposium* esp. 211a-212a. For one example see F. Kerr “Thomas Aquinas: Charity as Friendship”: “[Supremely happy people] have reached that radical independence of other people which Diotima’s program of erotic exercises is intended to secure. Such a man becomes so self-sufficient that he becomes indifferent to the presence of other people.” (256).

⁷⁷ Otherwise, it is hard to explain why the philosopher must be compelled to *return* from the light of the sun to the cave (*Republic* 519c). Cf. D.C. Schindler, *Plato’s Critique of Impure Reason*, pp. 160-164.

prominent element of asceticism involved in the philosophic life⁷⁸. However, in order to begin looking for them at all, our soul must first have received them through the medium of sight in its circuit through heaven. And furthermore, in order to continue its search, its “wings” must continually receive nourishment in the intimate company of the beloved. This is by no means an example of an abstract love for Beauty that would as soon do away with beauty in the concrete, but rather is a love for Beauty that, in order to pursue its object, must love beautiful things for what they are. There is a delicate paradox involved here: the thing of beauty can only be loved for itself if it is at the same time loved for the sake of what exceeds itself. The moment that love for what is beyond the beautiful thing, participation in which renders that thing beautiful in the first place, is done away with, so too must a genuine love for the beautiful thing itself. A beautiful thing that has no reference to Beauty as such is not even beautiful; it is just a thing, and as such is radically susceptible to manipulation, because there is nothing within it that demands our respect⁷⁹. The antidote to this ‘technological’ grasping and manipulation of things, is not a different way of acting merely, but a different way of seeing⁸⁰. As G.R.F. Ferrari puts it: “The lover [...] sees straight because he sees double”⁸¹. He sees both his beloved and the form of Beauty itself, and on account of this double vision, he sees

⁷⁸ Cf. *Phaedrus* 254a-e.

⁷⁹ This is what Heidegger refers to as the “standing-reserve” character of the natural world as understood by the technological mentality (17ff.). See Martin Heidegger “The Question Concerning Technology”.

⁸⁰ Cf. Heidegger *ibid.* In this sense, there is a profound connection between a Sophistic, “sublunary” conception of reason (reason as the mere manipulation of verbal terms or images), and the technological exploitation of nature. If reason is not more than itself by participating in hyperrational Truth, so too is the natural world no more than itself, and thus is a mere “standing-reserve” for human purposes.

⁸¹ G.R.F. Ferrari, *Listening to the Cicadas: A Study of Plato's Phaedrus*, p. 178.

the beloved for what he is, and this causes respect and veneration for the beloved to well up within him.

This means that the lower realities depend on the higher in order to be understood, as they really are. Analogically, therefore, we can say that a rational soul is never so rational as when it searches for that which lies beyond—in point of fact, for that which is specifically *higher than*—its own, “rational,” measure⁸². If a beautiful object is only beautiful if it participates in Beauty itself, which radically exceeds the beautiful thing while being totally present to every part of it, then a rational soul, as well, can only operate in the context of a similar dependency. If the form of Beauty is what makes beautiful things to be beautiful, then, following the allegory of the “plains of truth,” we can say that it is this “truth” that makes souls rational. It will then follow that in order for reason to operate properly within the sphere of its own “ambit” as we defined this above, it will require reference to and dependence upon this more intensely rational⁸³ “truth” for which it yearns and strives. If beautiful things are not beautiful unless they participate in Beauty, then neither are rational souls rational unless they participate in Truth.

This radical hierarchical dependence therefore means that reason understood *only* as a faculty of human ratiocination must be totally alien to Plato’s

⁸² Though this “beyond” is the consummation of reason in a way that avoids unilaterally violating human reason.

⁸³ It is more intensely rational in proportion, analogically, as Beauty itself is more intensely beautiful than any particular beautiful thing. Additionally, and to clarify, it is “beyond” reason understood as *διάνοια*, as Socrates makes clear: “The place beyond heaven [i.e. the “plains of truth”]—none of our earthly poets has ever sung or ever will sing its praises enough! Still, this is the way it is—risky as it may be, you see, I must attempt to speak the truth, especially since the truth is my subject.” (247c).

view. To be sure, there is room within this interpretation for the *Phaedo's* method of hypothesis, by which reason moves from less to more secure ground, seemingly under its own power, and the *Meno's* account of philosophical instruction, in which it is through the agency of the mature philosopher that the soul unpracticed in philosophy can attain to the recollection of the Forms on its own. Those examples of "purely human" striving, however, need to be recontextualized in light of the foregoing. That is to say, we must ask why one would desire to ascend via hypothesis or to recollect the Forms in the first place? What makes those things worth doing rather than not, and from where do we derive the energy to pursue them, especially when the going gets tough? The "activity" of reason (whether we understand this as reasoning by hypothesis, engaging in dialogue, or instructing a pupil) is always predicated upon a more essential and ontologically primary "passivity" in which the soul receives the vision of those realities which exceed its measure, and desires and recollects those realities in the course of its earthly life⁸⁴.

c. Madness and Mediation

The question of madness in the *Phaedrus* is closely connected to the above discussion. We want to introduce a reading of $\mu\alpha\nu\acute{\iota}\alpha$ in the *Phaedrus* as that which mediates between the lower and higher rungs of reality as we have described them. First, however, we have to understand the nature of this mediation. The picture of the cosmos that Plato is working with is not one in which higher levels of reality are

⁸⁴ As E. Hülsz puts it: "The notion of "a place beyond the heavens" (247c3) should be interpreted as the ontological ground upon which Plato constructs his philosophy." True enough, we say, but it must equally be recognized that the "place beyond the heavens," more than being the ground of philosophy, is in the first place the ground of the *philosopher*. Cf. E. Hülsz, "Four Features of Dialectic in Plato's *Phaedrus*," p. 261 n. 2.

merely superadded to lower levels as the eleventh floor of a building is superadded to the tenth. If that were the case, there would be no qualitative difference between the philosopher and the tyrant, i.e. between the highest and lowest rungs of human types described at 248d, but merely a quantitative or accretive difference. Such a reading seems highly implausible. Rather, each higher level beyond the first is in a sense orthogonal with respect to the latter. Just as there is nothing in a one-dimensional figure (i.e. a dimensionless point), that includes the existence of two-dimensionality, and as there is nothing in a two-dimensional figure that includes the existence of three-dimensionality, so there is nothing within the “grasp” of reason which includes that which is beyond itself. However, a three-dimensional figure “includes” as it were both two- and one-dimensionality, just as the things which are in “the place beyond heaven” include the lower levels of reality within themselves, without themselves being exhausted by their instantiations⁸⁵. The nature of this inclusion, however, is obviously different from the way in which the eleventh floor of a building “includes” floors one through ten. The notion of a force that would mediate between these different levels of reality cannot, therefore, be adequately compared to the elevator of a high-rise building, but is rather more comparably expressed by the leap in imagination required of the narrator of *Flatland*⁸⁶. To put things more plainly, a being that had only ever known three dimensions (and who was thus capable of imagining things only within the confines of three-

⁸⁵ Indeed for Plato these lower levels of reality are not, properly speaking, quite *real* at all. Rather, all of material reality is but a refraction of the spiritual reality of the Forms. The Forms lose as much reality on the destruction of material reality as I lose on the destruction of my reflection, which is to say, none at all.

⁸⁶ Cf. E. Abbott, *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions*, Boston: Little, Brown, &co, 1899.

dimensionality) could not initiate *itself* into the fourth dimension. It could not simply take the stairs, so to speak. The fourth dimension, as a field orthogonal to three-dimensionality itself, is strictly unimaginable for the three-dimensional being, and thus requires the intervention of a mediating force⁸⁷. There is of course a sense in which even we three-dimensional beings can understand four-dimensionality, namely by abstraction. So just as one draws a cube by drawing two equal squares and connecting their corners, one can draw a projection of a four-dimensional 'hypercube' by doing the same with two cubes instead of two squares. However, consider that the resulting hypercube's eight resulting "faces" will each have a *volume*, rather than a *surface area* as in a three-dimensional cube, since each will be a cube, just as each of the faces of a cube was a square. It is impossible to imagine, for example, inhabiting a 4d space – we can only visualize moving around on one of its 'surfaces' in 3d space. To make the leap to a full understanding of 4d space, rather than a reduced projection of it would seem to require a jump in imaginative capacity analogous to the move the philosopher-lover makes when he is enraptured by Beauty.

It is in something like this sense that Plato intends the initiation of the philosopher into divine madness, θεία μανία. Like we said before, the operation of reason understood as an active faculty is only guaranteed in this hierarchical picture

⁸⁷ This recalls Pascal's formulation of the virtue of charity: "From all bodies together, we cannot obtain one little thought; this is impossible, and of another order. From all bodies and minds, we cannot produce a feeling of true charity; this is impossible, and of another and supernatural order." (no. 792). Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, Boston: Sheed and Ward, 1958. We might say along with Pascal and Plato that, "from all actions of human self-control [σωφροσύνη] together, we cannot obtain true love, true ἔρωρ".

of things by its dependence upon and participation in a level of reality that exceeds reason's total grasp⁸⁸. As Socrates' admonition of Phaedrus shows, the art of rhetoric is only possible on the basis of a certain knowledge of the truth (259e ff.). This dependence, however, is visited upon the philosopher not as the result of his own achievement, as we have noted, but as a "gift of the god". As Josef Pieper notes in his book on the topic,

If we consider all the aspects of *mania* which Plato mentions, we shall have to say that he uses the word to mean, primarily, a being-beside-oneself, a loss of command over oneself, surrender of autarchic independence and self-control; a state in which we are not active, but passive. We do not act, but suffer something; something happens to us.⁸⁹

The philosopher thus inspired is one whose autarchic self-possession has been dislodged by the Deity, but only so that another, more integral, fulfillment is offered to him⁹⁰. The philosopher's ascent from the beauty of his beloved to Beauty

⁸⁸ By way of the elucidation of this concept, we cite Thomas Aquinas, who argues that the knowledge of corporeal things is only possible on the basis of an incorporeal soul. If the soul were a body, it could not know body *as* body: "Now whatever knows certain things cannot have any of them in its own nature; because that which is in it naturally would impede the knowledge of anything else. [...]. Therefore, if the intellectual principle contained the nature of a body it would be unable to know all bodies," Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I, 75, ii, co. Similarly, if the soul were not always-already more than merely rational, it could not even use reason in the sense we describe above (i.e. name, definition, and image).

⁸⁹ Josef Pieper, *Enthusiasm and Divine Madness*, p. 49.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.* 51. Pieper notes the tension between a recognition that "man is of such nature that he possesses himself in freedom and self-determination; he can and must examine critically all that he encounters; he can and must give shape to his own life on the basis of his insights" and that "the shattering of autonomy by the intrusion of a higher power is essential to the nature of man" (51). He cites the *Ion*, *Meno*, and *Apology*, in which Socrates seems to emphasize rather that something is lost in inspiration – that the sickness of enthusiasm is really and truly a *sickness* – at

proper is given its *élan vital* by way of the “possession”⁹¹ of the gods. This impetus given of madness is both a motive force in the philosopher’s drive upward, and the introduction of a qualitative broadening as we discussed above. Plato’s *θεία μανία* thus shows reason to be a faculty both of knowledge and desire, united under the aegis of Beauty. Desire is driven by *μανία* to pursue Beauty, and reason is at the same time made fertile for the reception of the hyperrational realities of the Forms⁹².

d. Culture, History, and Prayer

That the philosopher cannot induce this *μανία* within himself points to the final aspect of our discussion of reason’s essential nature as “openness”. Plato expresses the flowering of this realization, the idea that the apex of rationality consists in an utter heteronomy and passivity, in the form of Socrates’ prayer and invocation. If human reason depends for its rationality upon a reality which exceeds it, and over which, as such, it has no control, the most reasonable act of a reasonable

the same time as noting that in the *Phaedrus*, Plato “would have declared it an even worse sickness not to be able to be “sick” in such a way (52).

⁹¹ It would be a mistake to interpret this *μανία* in a reductively psychologizing way, as e.g.: “He [i.e. Socrates] comes to acknowledge deeper and more mysterious powers at work unconsciously within the soul. Underneath our conscious experience, the “I,” the *autos*, the self, with its autobiography and all the responsibilities it has assumed, there is a level at which, for instance, the experience of *eros* may be aroused. Organized, conscious memory is only on the surface of a darker stratum.” (G. Nicholson, *Plato’s Phaedrus: the Philosophy of Love*, p. 170). In fact, for Plato, it is more correct to say that conscious memory *is* this “surface of a darker stratum”. It is not the things within and below that are more real, for him, but those which are without and above. There is clearly a metaphysical, even theological, register of meaning in play here.

⁹² The recollection of Beauty, the most radiant of the Forms, draws the soul to the memory of the other Forms, like Justice and Self-control [*σοφροσύνη*] which “do not shine out through their images down here” (250b).

soul is to request that that reality intervene continuously⁹³. This is by no stretch of the imagination a means of ensuring that force's condescension, since if it were, this would mean that that hyperrational force were merely the guaranteed result of a certain formula or spell and thus, in the end, merely an appendage of the power of language⁹⁴.

It is interesting to note at this point that Plato has in a sense already responded to those critics who criticize him for having posited the meaning of life as residing in a realm totally beyond embodied experience⁹⁵. As is clear from Socrates' first speech in the *Phaedrus*, the position that many have ascribed to him he had already attributed to the "wily" (237b) lover, who loves without wanting to give the appearance of loving. The 'true' lover, according to this "impious" account, loves his beloved purely with what came later to be called a "platonic" love. That is, he loves without passion, without desire, in an unequivocally spiritual way, having no interest at all in the body, 'unselfishly' desiring nothing for himself. The crude

⁹³ Pieper describes this dynamic well: "Man is so constituted that, on the one hand, he can be thrown out of the autonomous independence of his thinking by *inspiration*, which comes to him as a sudden, unpredictable force from outside. On the other hand, this very abandonment of critical sovereignty may bring him an abundance of insight, of light, of truth, of illumination as to the nature of reality which would otherwise remain completely out of his reach." Op. cit. p. 56.

⁹⁴ This latter perspective of ancient Greek invocation of the gods is well expressed (in all its narrowness!) in T. Adorno and M. Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, "Excursus I: Odysseus or Myth and Enlightenment," pp. 35-62. "If exchange represents the secularization of sacrifice, the sacrifice itself, like the magic schema of rational exchange, appears as a human contrivance intended to control the gods, who are overthrown precisely by the system intended to honour them." (40). Though what they write is no doubt true to some extent (in regard of which Augustine's *Civitas Dei* VIII-IX is an excellent source), namely, that incantatory rites were intended to wrest control of fate from the gods in what they describe as an act of elemental "fraud," it is by no means clear that this factor is the essential one with respect to Plato's own concept of worship.

⁹⁵ See below.

“philosophy 101” critics of Plato and Platonism would have better directed their energies against the sophists.

In opposition to this idea of love (which, as Socrates notes, in the end is always only a deceptive front that aims to mask love itself (237b)), Socrates turns to divine madness: “if Love [ἔρως] is a god or something divine—which he is—he can’t be bad in any way” (242d-e). Socrates’ starting point is a distinction: “the best things we have come from madness, when it is given as a gift of the god” (244a). That is, there is a distinction between madness that is a gift of the god, and madness that is not. What follows and justifies the appeal to the goodness of madness is an appeal to authority and tradition, on behalf of madness: the prophetesses of Delphi, not to mention the Sybil, are out of their minds when they foretell the future and give wise advice to people. Moreover, “the people who designed our language in the old days never thought of madness as something to be ashamed of or worthy of blame” (244b). Obviously there is some question here as to the accuracy of Socrates’ etymological reasoning, in his derivation of *μαντικήν* from *μανικήν*. Regardless of its accuracy, it is nonetheless striking that Plato should bring etymology to bear on a philosophical point. The implication of this move is clear: history and culture are *philosophically interesting*.

But why should that be the case, exactly? Are the inherited myths, language, and religious traditions of the Greek culture merely the raw material for the exercise of philosophic reason? Are they, in that sense, totally accidental with respect to the aims of philosophy? Or does Socrates rather depict philosophy as coming to a humble and demure standstill before the gods themselves, understood not as

mythical (and thus, *unreal*) figures from a distant past, but as eminently present forces and personalities? Prayer, praise, and invocations of deity occur at several decisive points in the *Phaedrus*: the arrival at the plane tree (230b-c), Socrates' "ecstasy" at Lysias' speech (234d), the ambiguous invocation of the muses at the beginning of Socrates' refinement of Lysias' speech (237a), the divine sign that intervenes after the first speech (242c), the second speech itself, offered as an "ancient rite of purification" (243a), the "impossible" hymns to the soul and the fields of truth (246a; 247c), the conclusion of the second speech (257a-b), and finally the brief epilogue (279a-c)⁹⁶.

Prayer and invocation in the *Phaedrus* tend to mark moments of concentrated or focused interest for the dialogue's interlocutors, crests of meaning which flow over the normal bounds of language into the invocation of the inexpressible⁹⁷. As such, they seem to mark the very boundaries of language itself: Socrates and Phaedrus are discussing topics so eminently *real* that their language is guaranteed to remain truthful if and only if it passes from the "name, definition, and image" of the *Seventh Letter* over to the field of truth itself by-itself⁹⁸. In contrast,

⁹⁶ A. Motte, "L'aventure spirituelle du Phèdre et la prière", p. 322. Our enumeration of the critical points of the dialogue marked by prayer is in part indebted to Motte's article.

⁹⁷ The structure of the dialogue itself also seems to suggest something significant about the nature and relationship of prayer and philosophy. As in the *Republic's* allegory of the cave, there is a sort of *exitus-redditus* movement suggested in the *Phaedrus*. The philosophers must first ascend to the ecstatic heights of myth in Socrates' second speech before descending to the method of collection and division and the analysis of rhetoric *qua* art. Just as the rhetorician speaks meaninglessly if his speech is not founded on truth and reality, so διαλέγεσθαι must be preceded by μῦθος.

⁹⁸ It is in this sense that Catherine Pickstock argues that, in the *Phaedrus*, "orality is primarily linked to an account of the subject as doxological," *After Writing*, p. 4.

Lysias offers around ten “points” in regard of which the non-lover exceeds the lover, but as Socrates notices (235a), these can be boiled down to a single basic point: since erotic love is temporary and the lover’s desire inconstant and changeable, there is nothing at all secure in submitting to the lover’s entreaties. Because of this inherent instability, the lover will do violence to his beloved in order to insure himself against reversal. As Socrates remarks in his first speech, a (Lysian) lover will desire above all a boy who lacks intellectual capacity, physical strength, social ties, and material wealth. The lover is the one least capable of actually loving the boy (indeed he is the one least *willing* to do this), in the sense of realizing the latter’s real good.

While the Lysian lover is marked by rootlessness and impermanence, the philosophical lover and his beloved in contrast “awake to the prospect of an entire life of inspiration”⁹⁹. But a life of inspiration cannot be other than a life spent possessed by the god, and so a life spent also in prayer. It will be a life striving to escape “the place from which Phaedrus has come ... the place of a speech without prayer and without love, a speech which has no divine roots and which rests turned

Pickstock’s account tends, however, to obscure the importance of “reasonable discourse” (and thus, name, definition, and image) to the Platonic subject in favour of a dangerously obscurantist-irrationalist reading of these “doxological” moments.
⁹⁹ G.R.F. Ferrari op. cit. p. 181. The passage of *Phaedrus* 256a-b cannot really be understood in any other sense than that of a life spent together: “Now if the victory goes to the better elements in both their minds, which lead them to follow the assigned regimen of philosophy, their life here below is one of bliss and shared understanding. They are modest and fully in control of themselves now that they have enslaved the part that brought trouble into the soul and set free the part that gave it virtue. After death, when they have grown wings and become weightless, they have won the first of three rounds in these, the true Olympic Contest.”

in on itself”¹⁰⁰. The practice of prayer (the same idea is expressed by “doxology” in Pickstock’s work already cited) is what paradoxically guarantees love’s permanence over time.

II. ‘DISINTERESTED INTEREST’: PHILOSOPHY, SACRIFICE, AND *EROS*

As we have already seen to some extent, the philosophical lover “sees straight because he sees double”¹⁰¹. That is, paradoxically, he is capable of correctly grasping the reality before his physical eyes because his spiritual eyes are trained on something higher. And to correctly grasp means in this case to grasp in accordance with reason, which in turn means in accordance with the way things really are, their objective reality. This objective reality is always already twofold: both the thing as it appears, and the thing as it *is*.

Immediately we encounter the possibility of identifying too strongly either the appearance of the thing or the truth of the thing with the thing itself, so to speak. Certainly Plato tends strongly in the direction of the latter tendency. Besides his more or less constant and consistent comparison of the body to earthly, ponderous, lower, constrictive, coarse, and brutish matter, recall that it is not Socrates himself who will die, but only his body (*Phd.* 115d). That is to say that what, in the end, counts as truly “real” is not Socrates’ appearance, i.e. his body, but his soul, which is not perceptible to the physical sense of sight. Such a dualism is sometimes perceived

¹⁰⁰ A. Motte, op. cit. p. 323.

¹⁰¹ G.R.F. Ferrari, op. cit. p. 178.

as proto-Cartesian¹⁰², and seems to support the contentions of certain readers of Plato who identify his philosophical position with the various evil consequences said to result from such dualisms¹⁰³. In short, the criticism amounts to the charge that Plato's conception of truth reduces the criterion of truth to the philosopher's mode of seeing rather than the revelation of things' 'unhiddenness,' a concept which Heidegger prefers to express using the untranslated Greek, ἀλήθεια. This is supposed in turn to lay the groundwork for the subsequent Western tradition of metaphysics which is incapable of grasping Being in terms other than usefulness¹⁰⁴. It is difficult to boil down the myriads of commentaries and criticisms of this nature into a general claim, but we should nonetheless be able to say something general. In short, the criticism amounts to the following: Plato, in putting an excessive emphasis on the immaterial world of the Forms¹⁰⁵ was forced to deplore carnal reality; there is something about his philosophy that is Manichean *avant la lettre*¹⁰⁶.

¹⁰² Or, at least, is often presented as such in Philosophy 101 courses. See S. Broadie, "Soul and Body in Plato and Descartes".

¹⁰³ Amongst which readers we would cite Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Derrida as the most prominent. Cf. F. Nietzsche n. 108 *infra*; M. Heidegger *Being and Time*, and "Plato's Doctrine of Truth;" J. Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy," in *Dissemination*. For a good discussion of Heidegger's relation to Plato see G. Fried, "Back to the Cave: A Platonic Rejoinder to Heideggerian Postmodernism". A helpful resumé of some 20th-century readings of Plato is also offered in C. Zuckert, *Postmodern Platos*.

¹⁰⁴ This, of course, is how Heidegger formulates Plato's "doctrine." He in turn is responding to Nietzsche's critique of the same, and Derrida responds in large part to him.

¹⁰⁵ What Nietzsche refers to as his "invention" cf. F. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, p. 4.

¹⁰⁶ Indeed, Plato gives us plenty of reasons to read him in this way. In some sense, the central perplexity of Plato's anthropology could be said to be the question of why body exists at all. Such a question is outside the scope of this essay, but we have at least endeavoured to show that Plato's appraisal of body is not *totally* negative. That is, body is good, and even useful to the philosopher, but it remains to investigate why *body* should exist at all.

It is perhaps Nietzsche who best captures this supposed hatred of appearance, material reality, and the body¹⁰⁷ in favour of the “true world,” to use his term: a world of Ideas, of Forms, of insensible truths of reason; a world which, as Nietzsche notes, incipiently contains the seeds of its own destruction. Curiously, however, Nietzsche also claims “we got rid of the illusory world along with the true one”¹⁰⁸. Though the meaning of that claim within the context of Nietzsche’s own anti-platonic project is highly ambiguous, in this section we aim to show that it is precisely in cleaving to the “true world” that we rescue the “apparent one”. What is thus decisive for the philosopher is maintaining a stance of “disinterested interest” – that is to say that there is something paradoxical with regard to the philosopher’s approach to material reality. He must be “interested” in material reality, in the sense of having a stake in it, having an “interest” in it. If he doesn’t, after all, then Nietzsche is correct. But he must at the same time bear within himself a radically “disinterested” detachment from material reality, if he is to be a philosopher.

In the *Phaedrus* this dynamic, that of cleaving to the “true world” in order to rescue the “apparent world,” is described in terms of the philosophic lover’s attachment to his beloved boy. It would be easy to render too univocal a reading here: the philosopher claims to love the boy for the sake of an Ideal reality, but is in fact a cynical seducer, or else he is a purely disinterested “platonic” lover who has no interest in the boy himself for himself, but is interested merely in using the latter

¹⁰⁷ For Nietzsche, Socrates’ advent on the stage of the history of spirit is the beginning of a long period of decadence marked by the suppression of the “Dionysian” in man. See his *The Birth of Tragedy* and *The Genealogy of Morals*.

¹⁰⁸ Cf. F. Nietzsche, “How the ‘True World’ Finally Became a Fable,” *Twilight of the Idols*, p. 171.

in order to achieve a philosophic knowledge of reality. That is to say, that too marked an emphasis on either pole of the dialectic will result in the destruction of the composite in which we are interested: either appearance must be sacrificed for a truth that is thus emptied of concrete signification, or else truth must be sacrificed for an appearance that is thus emptied of transcendent meaning. The only alternatives would thus be a ghostly spiritualism, or a bestial immanentism. What we would lose is precisely the paradoxical combination of the two in the person of the philosopher-lover.

Though it seems difficult to rescue Plato's view from its tendency towards "ghostly spiritualism" in the above sense, there are a number of reasons for understanding his account of erotic desire in the *Phaedrus* as a true synthesis of the two terms described above. The first is of the nature of image and analogy as such. For the boy as image to awaken a desire for Beauty in the philosopher, there must be something *in* him *as* image which bears an essential relationship to the reality he evokes¹⁰⁹. If there weren't, then the image would be reduced to something essentially arbitrary, even merely vestigial. The image is indeed a "vestige" in the sense of a "trace" of a reality that goes beyond it, but it is so by virtue of its being *this* image and not another. The image is thus not an inessential occasion for appreciation of and inspiration by the universal. Though the universal in no way relies upon the image for its own being, there must nonetheless be something about the image's particular structure that serves to summon the recollection of the reality in question.

¹⁰⁹ And this need not be the beloved's physical appearance merely, though it may be this also. Cf. *Theaetetus* 185e.

What this “something” is, however, cannot be anticipated in advance, but always arrives in new and unexpected ways, which carries us to a second important respect in which the platonic philosopher is not a mere hater of physical reality. That the “traces” of the form are mediated via ever new and unexpected ways means that one must keep one’s eyes open upon material reality, lest a trace of one’s beloved appear. Anything can potentially remind the philosopher of Beauty itself, and this desire for recollection is driven by ἔρωϲ to pay a *closer* attention to material things, so that amongst the “thousands”¹¹⁰ of things that might draw his mind to the recollection of Beauty, he might not miss anything. The Forms are constantly returning through their traces in moments of non-identical repetition, and can only be loved *in time*, *by loving* those traces.

What it means, precisely, to “love” those traces could be understood in different ways, however. For example, it is interesting to note that, in Lysias’ speech, and Socrates’ first speech, the two opposites mentioned above seem to come together, but in an perverse way. There, the lover as he presents himself is interested in a merely “spiritual” way in the boy: he is not overmastered by the promptings of his body’s lust and so, rationally possessed of himself, he is capable of loving the boy for the sake of his soul, which is to say, of his self. However, the speech is designed to convince the boy to extend his “favours” to the speaker, to give the speaker “what [he is] asking for” (231a), by which we are to understand sexual

¹¹⁰ Cf. *Phaedo* 73d: “Well, you know what happens to lovers: whenever they see a lyre, a garment or anything else that their beloved is accustomed to use, they know the lyre, and the image of the boy to whom it belongs comes into their mind. This is recollection, just as someone, on seeing Simmias, often recollects Cebes, and there are thousands of other such occurrences. ‘Thousands indeed,’ said Simmias”

gratification. “Spiritual” love is feigned in service of a baser desire, which yet has every appearance of propriety. This is a perverse form of “loving” the traces of the Forms that destroys both the possibility of approaching reality via the mediation of materiality, and, at the same time, of a true appreciation of that materiality itself: perverse because it literally turns the terms of the relation on their heads. In its claim to be “spiritual” it is in fact more base than ordinary sensual love. It can thus be understood as a development and extension of the excessive attachment to pleasure and pain discussed in chapter one. There, as we saw, an excessive attachment to pleasure and pain has misogyny as its necessary corollary. Here, under the figure of the *Phaedrus*’s cynically deceptive lover, we see that an excessive attachment to pleasure and pain is actually carried to its nadir not in and by the merely bestial lover, but rather in combination with all the wiles and snares of the sophist. This is the love that Socrates condemns in his second speech, when he says that “a non-lover’s companionship ... is diluted by human self-control; all it pays are cheap, human dividends, and though the slavish attitude it engenders in a friend’s soul is widely praised as virtue, it tosses the soul around for nine thousand years on the earth and leads it, mindless [ἄνοον], beneath.” (256e), and its result is the psychic death of both “lover” and “beloved,” as they are led to Hades ἄνοον, without reason, and thus, without their selves.

As Socrates’ palinode makes clear, it is only from a certain distance from the beloved that the philosopher is capable of loving him at all. There, he lists two kinds of lovers. There is first the lover who has disciplined his dark horse, so that he is capable of resisting its urgings with “modesty and reason” (256a). Second, there is

the lover who follows ambition and not philosophy, and who, in a fit of drunkenness, succumbs to his dark horse's desire and sleeps with his beloved. Over the course of his life, however, he perhaps does this only a few other times (256c-d). The life of the philosophic lover, who does not give in to carnal pleasure, becomes one of "bliss and shared understanding" on earth, and thus lived allows the philosopher and his beloved to make a step towards escaping the 9000-year cycle. Interestingly, the life of the imperfect lover who follows ambition takes a step in the right direction¹¹¹, and his victory, though not complete, is yet "considerable". What is interesting about these descriptions is that they are the only two "kinds" of love given in the palinode, and they both involve some measure of sacrifice, their benefits being greater in proportion as the sacrifices made to live them are great. Immediately after these two are described, Socrates discusses the non-lover, whose love "is diluted by human self-control; all it pays are cheap, human dividends" (256e). There is a clear similarity between this description and Socrates' self-description in the *Alcibiades*: "I [Socrates] was your only lover—the others were only lovers of what you had [i.e. your body]" (Alc. 131e). The philosophic lover sacrifices love of the body for the sake of the soul, but this sacrifice is not a castration, but an act done out of love that allows the philosophic lover (the only one who deserves the name of lover) to *truly* love the beloved.

Truly loving the beloved entails sacrifice, understood in a paradoxical sense. Sacrifice keeps the truly philosophical lover from the pitfalls of erotic love and allows him to love his beloved according to the truth. This sacrifice consists, in the

¹¹¹ It is also one of the few places where Plato is not uncompromisingly negative regarding the effects and nature of sexual pleasure and intimacy.

first place, of the philosopher's sacrifice of the direct, bodily enjoyment of the other. He must sternly, even cruelly, discipline his soul's desire for bodily pleasure (*Phdr.* 254c-e) in order to earn the laurel of victory together with his beloved after a life spent together mastering their passions (256b). In the second place, however, the philosopher offers *himself* as a sacrifice for the sake of his friends. This element comes to light most forcefully in the *Phaedo's* discussion of the impermissibility of suicide (*Phd.* 61e-63c). Though it would be better for the philosopher to depart this life in order to live in the blessed company of the Forms, yet he must make the sacrifice of remaining in his body until his appointed time has come, both out of respect for his life's character as gift, and also, like the philosopher who returns to the cave after the vision of the good, in order to benefit his fellows. Finally, Socrates' death is itself "offered" for the sake of the city and its laws: he allows himself to be killed, even unjustly, in order to affirm the more fundamental justice of the form of law itself. He gives himself up to an unjust order so that he might by his willing death affirm order *as such*. The Platonic conception of philosophical life is a life given up to the service of the divine, serving it according to the inspirations of madness, in the person of the beloved, for the sake of one's friends and one's city. It is a sacrifice in a threefold sense: the senses must be sacrificed for the sake of the Forms, the Forms must be sacrificed for the sake of the beloved, and death is to be offered for the sake of the affirmation of the goodness of an ordered life in common.

This is the nature of "disinterested interest". But this stance entails a paradox that cannot be resolved into either one or the other extreme, either into the "true" world, or the world of appearances. Both have to be held at a maximum of intensity

at the same time in order for either one to be grasped. That is to say that there is no Aristotelian mean possible between love for a particular and love for a universal, but that, in a virtuously circular way, the more the philosopher loves the universal the more he loves the particular, and vice versa.

III. REASON AND ΤΕΧΝΗ

Finally, we shall take a brief look at what Plato has to say in the *Phaedrus* about the relationship between reason, philosophy, and art or τέχνη. This will help to bring our discussion “down to earth” so to speak. After all, an analysis of reason which has no “practical” consequences would in fact be, worse than incomplete, actually defective. Why? Because reason is a capacity which has to do with the whole, with the totality. As such, any exclusion of practical life from an account of reason would inevitably distort the account given of theoretical life¹¹². Much of what remains to be said is already contained *in nuce* in the foregoing: reason, as the faculty that receives the truth of things, is the necessary ἀρχή of art. Just as there is

¹¹² Hegel makes this point quite beautifully, but in relation to the concept of infinity: “the infinite, in the sense in which it is taken by that incomplete reflection, namely as standing opposite the finite, has its other in it precisely because it stands opposed to it, and is therefore already limited and itself finite. It is the bad infinite. The answer to the question, “how does the infinite become finite?,” is therefore this: *There is not an infinite which is infinite beforehand, and only afterwards does it find it necessary to become finite, to go forth into finitude; the infinite is rather for itself just as much finite as infinite.*” (123) G.W.F. Hegel, *Science of Logic*. The idea extends by analogy to our present discussion: a concept of theory which excluded practice would already fail to be a genuine concept of theory.

no art of speaking without knowledge of truth¹¹³, so can there be no art without the “highest kind of art,” (*Phd.* 61a), namely philosophy¹¹⁴.

However, the art of speaking is certainly a different kind of thing from most other arts. This could be because speech has some kind of essential relationship to truth. Whenever one speaks, one speaks either truth or falsehood. It is not obviously the case that whenever one builds a house, one does so either truly or falsely: false speech remains *speech*, while it is difficult to understand the sense in which a false house remains a house. So, amongst the crafts, truth and falsity seem to colour the making of speeches alone.

Furthermore, there is another attendant difficulty, which is the distinction between the ‘false art’ of speaking, and ‘speaking falsely’. That is, it may be possible for someone practicing the ‘false art’ of speaking yet to say something true, while one practicing the ‘true art’ of speaking may yet speak falsely. Even a broken clock is right twice a day, and so the sophist or mercenary speechwriter may accidentally stumble upon the truth every now and then - and at the same time, even Socrates is sometimes mistaken about what is the case: it seems implausible to claim (or to understand Plato as claiming) that the philosopher is *ipso facto* correct about everything on which he happens to discourse.

The key to unraveling these difficulties, which lie at the heart of the *Phaedrus*, lies somewhat afield of the *Phaedrus* itself. Despite this, it is clearly the principle operative in Socrates’ search for the true art of speaking in that dialogue. We are

¹¹³ Cf. *Phaedrus* 260e ff.

¹¹⁴ “Art” in the quoted passage of the *Phaedo* translates, not τέχνη, but μουσική. This would be art in the more “artistic” sense of the arts over which the muses preside.

referring to the brief mention in *The Republic* of “the uneducated who have no experience of truth”—“they will never adequately govern a city” because “they don’t have a single goal at which all their actions, public and private, inevitably aim” (*Rep.* 519b-c). This is not the place to discuss Socrates’ account in that dialogue of the aims and goals of political rule. We should rather understand the quotation as pointing to something inherent in the nature of philosophy itself as Plato understands it: its essential orientation towards the whole of being.

The theme is echoed in the *Phaedrus* near the end of Socrates and Phaedrus’ discussion of the art of speech. A doctor who does not understand what health consists in, no matter his “technical” expertise (being able to change the body’s temperature at will, for example), is simply ignorant of the art of medicine, just as a speaker who is ignorant of the nature of the soul will remain at the level of an artless, “empirical,” practice, and fail to attain to a “systematic art” (270b). The cure for clueless doctors and speakers is, unsurprisingly, to philosophize: “Do you think, then, that it is possible to reach a serious understanding of the nature of the soul without understanding the nature of the world as a whole?” (270b-c). Indeed Pericles is the model speechmaker precisely because he indulged in “endless talk and ethereal speculation about nature” with Anaxagoras (270a).

This conception of philosophy implies a clear hierarchy of the various τέχναι: descending from the greatest art of philosophy itself, the particular arts are evaluated according to the measure in which they address the whole of being as such. This explains the high-universal precedence given to medicine in the Platonic

corpus as the paradigm of art¹¹⁵. Since it deals with the human body—in some way the meeting-point of material and spiritual reality—it thus deals with all of the cosmos, both because the movements of the superlunary bodies have a direct influence on the body’s health, and because, since the body is related to the soul in a sense as tool to workman, the physician must know the end of man as soul in order to know his good as body (270b-d).

The lowest arts of this hierarchy achieve intelligibility only insofar as they are directed towards the goal discovered in an eminent sense by the philosopher. That is to say that housebuilding, and navigating, and all the other arts, only make sense if they “have a single goal at which all their actions” aim. There needs to be a ruling art, which would consist of the universal knowledge of how to apply the special sciences in light of the aim proper to human existence. One possible ambiguity of this reading is that a craftsman might be a master of his craft and know perfectly well that at which it aims (navigation at safely transporting ships from place to place, housebuilding at building houses adequate to certain exigencies, etc.), yet might that knowledge for morally dubious purposes. It makes little difference to the builder’s art *qua* art whether he lays the foundations of a schoolhouse or a concentration camp. It is at this point, however, that we ought to return to our distinction between speaking falsehood and speaking falsely. The ambiguity at hand disappears if we consider that, for Plato, the builder’s art, for example, is an art only and precisely insofar as it is given a particular direction by philosophy. Without that

¹¹⁵ Platonic references to medicine as the paradigm of art can be found in the *Phaedrus*, the *Gorgias*, the *Symposium*, the *Republic*, the *Timaeus*, and the *Philebus*, to our knowledge.

direction, we can at best say that the builder has the “preliminaries” of building, but not the *art* of building itself (269a-c). Speaking falsely is but a pale imitation of the true art of speaking, however sophisticated and technically proficient it becomes. There is thus a profound unity between the method and aim of art: the aim dictates the method, and the method is only the method of *this* art and no other when it is directed at its proper aim. There is, for Plato, no such thing as art for art’s sake. Art has always to aim at being more than merely technically masterful, and in this sense it does not exist for the sake of glorifying its own techniques. Rather, it must possess an interior principle of unity that directs it towards the good¹¹⁶, and this interior principle is not discoverable to art as such, but rather only to philosophy. A technically masterful poem that lacked an interior principle of unity in this sense would fail to be just that—a poem (269a).

¹¹⁶ Art may be something done for its own sake, and yet be directed toward the good. So, there is some sense in which art for art’s sake is possible, but this has to be qualified. The distinction hinges on what we mean by the phrase, “art for art’s sake”. In modernist literature of the 20th century, for example, the phrase is understood to mean a focus on technical proficiency as such, without any regard to the totality that art intends to communicate.

CONCLUSION

The question, then, that we are left with after all of the foregoing is: what *is* Plato's conception of reason? We have identified a number of salient features of this concept. In our chapter on the *Phaedo*, we discovered the relationship between reason as a desire for the true and for the good. Against Camus, we can say with Plato that "seeking what is true *is* seeking what is desirable"¹¹⁷, because reason essentially *is* this desire for the true. There is nothing to fear from the truth, because it is, in the final analysis, identical to the good. We also investigated the relationship between reason, pleasure, and pain. An excessive attachment to the senses will tend to distract reason from its search for the good and the true. So much so, in fact, that the soul that repeatedly seeks the satisfaction of violent pleasures, or is unduly afflicted by violent pains, will fail to attain to the knowledge it seeks. This is because the knowledge of the philosopher radically exceeds anything that can be known according to the senses, even if this knowledge presupposes the correct *use* of the senses along the itinerary of a philosophical education (for which, see note 1 in the appendix). Already in the *Phaedo*, generally believed to have preceded the *Phaedrus* in its composition, we see the idea of the divine ascent is working powerfully in the background of the dialogue's principle themes. We connected these two themes, the goodness of truth and the danger of the senses, to the intriguing passage of 89d on misology. Misology is the "greatest evil" one can suffer, but, quite coherently, so is submitting to violent pains and pleasures. This is because misology, or the hatred of

¹¹⁷ Cf. A. Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2012, p. 41.

reason, inevitably decouples the operation or functioning of reason from its ultimate concern with the truth. So, it is quite correct to state that, for the misologue, seeking what is desirable is *not* seeking what is true. This is the case, however, because the misologue, unlike the philosopher, has not learned to desire the truth. The misologue's lack of desire for the truth is eminently connected to the soul's submission in general to violent pains and pleasures. This is so because the misologue, absent an anchoring-point in the true and the good, will necessarily be swept every which way by the changing winds of pleasure and pain. The native ambiguity of pleasure and pain is a key theme of Plato's dialogues. This theme appears most characteristically in the *Gorgias*, in which Socrates forces the sophist Callicles to admit that, indeed, pleasure cannot be the good. If it were, we would be forced into the absurdity of admitting that some pleasures were bad or some pains good, which would contradict our hypothesis, or else the even worse absurdity of being unable to distinguish the pleasure of the catamite from that of the philosopher. The misologue, however, is unable to make that distinction, and, if he is to remain consistent with himself, will not do so. He is therefore exemplified by the "paid private teachers" of the *Republic* 493b. These care little for the true good of the people they are paid to educate, but rather seek only the most efficient and effective manner of administering pain and pleasure to the "huge, strong beast" that they're rearing. So long as the beast is happy, that is, so long as it is spared any pain and afforded any pleasure, the misologue will seem to be doing his job. However, the pains of a beast and the pains of a human being are of a different order. The misologue, in treating himself and others *as* a beast, causes them, ineluctably, to

become beasts. This we take it to be the significance of the reincarnation passage from the *Phaedo* 81a-83b.

In our chapter on the *Phaedrus*, we noted an essential element of reason for Plato: that it is an essentially receptive faculty. That is, reason reaches its fullest expression and realization not in *διάνοια* but in *νοήσις*. This distinction recalls the divided line analogy from the *Republic* book VI. Reasoning by hypothesis, as the geometers do, is inferior to *νοήσις* proper, the exclusive domain of the philosopher. And this *νοήσις* consists more in a receiving than a doing. It is first of all the soul's capacity of being struck by beauty, the most "radiant" of all the Forms. This relies on a cooperation between the eyes of the body and the eyes of the soul, in a movement that we call, along with Ferrari, "double vision". That is to say that, in the first place, the soul must traverse the beauty of the sensible in order to attain to the beauty of the insensible. There is no possibility of skipping this step, and so, *pace* many of his critics, Plato does in fact value material reality. In fact, on our reading, it is only with this kind of "double vision" that it is possible at all to value material reality. This is so because, as we note, a 'beautiful' thing that does not participate of the form of beauty, i.e. in a *higher* reality than its own, is, in point of fact, not even beautiful. It is merely a *thing*. The split between the material and the spiritual reality of a given thing parallels the discussion of misology from chapter 1: just as misology decouples reason from a concern with the good and the true, so only can a proper appreciation of spiritual reality (a concern for the good, analogously) lead to a proper appreciation of material reality. The material and the spiritual value of a given

reality thus cannot be safely disentangled. This would result in either a 'ghostly spiritualism,' or else a 'bestial immanentism', as we describe in sec. 2 of this chapter.

In all, our account could be said to be part of the broader task of elucidating the Platonic anthropology. That is, insofar as reason is a faculty of the human person, our account furnishes a piece of the puzzle of what Plato thought the human person essentially was. While this has no doubt been a major thrust of our effort, it would be reductive to describe the essay as attempting merely and only to do that. At this point we would return to our distinction between subjective and objective reason. We stated on page 56 that the relationship between these two things was not the focus of the present study. In some sense, this is certainly true. Insofar as we have attempted merely to draw out and to state what Plato's conception of reason was, the focus has been rather on the subjective side of things. It is after all incorrect to attribute the possibility of falling into misology to the objective reason that Plato describes in the dialogues, since this objective reason in many ways resembles his account of the deity, or the daimon. It would also be incorrect to say that this objective reason is essentially passive. In fact, something closer to the opposite of this is the truth: it is essentially *active*, and freely acts upon subjective action in a few ways which we have tried to clarify. All of that said, it is not altogether incorrect to state that the focus of the present study is nothing other than the relationship between subjective and objective reason. The reason why should by now be more or less clear. Attempting to give an account of subjective reason without also describing its relationship to objective reason would be like trying to wring water from a rock. This is because subjective reason, while steadfastly remaining its *own*,

is nonetheless comprehensively constituted by its relationship to objective reason. It is this objective reason that it desires, which constitutes its truth and its good, whose beauty it glimpses in fleeting moments amongst material realities. It is this objective reason that is the source and terminus of all of that it is and strives to be. This is not to say, however, that subjective reason is but a moment or a mode of its objective counterpart. This would be the Spinozistic or Hegelian error, and would attribute an unavoidable element of coercion on the part of the deity thus conceived. The divine madness that objective *voũç* visits upon subjective *voũç* does not overwhelm it as a tidal wave overwhelms the shoreline. Besides the fact that there is no textual evidence to suggest that Plato thought this, there is also the fact that it is inconsistent with the very experience of beauty that he describes. When a beautiful painting strikes the eye from across a room, given the appropriate subjective position of openness, there is a flood of emotion that reaches the beholder. The same thing happens before a beautiful person, and this experience results in the surge of affection called 'love'. But this 'inspiration' does not force one to behave in any particular way. Rather, it makes its appeal to the person's freedom. This beauty is therefore fragile, and vulnerable. Much like Socrates in book I of the *Republic*, it does not take hold of a person by the head and force itself down his throat¹¹⁸. Rather, it is the splendour of a truth that draws the eyes to itself by virtue of its correspondence to the person's as yet unremembered knowledge of the Forms. This description raises the inevitable and necessary question of how to distinguish

¹¹⁸ Cf. Rep. 344d: "Having emptied this great flood of words into our ears all at once like a bath attendant, Thrasymachus intended to leave."; 345b: "And how am I to persuade you, if you aren't persuaded by what I said just now? What more can I do? Am I to take my argument and pour it into your very soul?"

between true and false experiences of beauty. Plato himself has little to say on this exact topic¹¹⁹ and so a reliable account of his view is not forthcoming. However, it is clear that the capacity to discern between the true and the false in general is the result of a certain education. It is, after all, not the denizens of the cave, but rather the philosopher who has beheld the light of the Good, who is capable of separating image and reality. And this factor in turn gives rise to the unity of the affective and intellectual sides of philosophical education for Plato. The philosopher as a teacher is not a neutral dispenser of information or facts, but is rather the midwife who accompanies the student in the discernment and realization of that latter's own ideas and insights. And he cannot do this if the student does not love him, and vice versa¹²⁰.

It is thus difficult to render a synthetic account of Plato's conception of reason. It seems to be something that can only be glimpsed as it were in its reflections: both its distortions (i.e. misology, sophistry, etc.) and its brilliance (divine madness, the erotic ascent, etc.). In this, it most nearly resembles its objective cousin, which we would tentatively identify with the Good of the *Republic*. It is indeed 'nearest in kinship and likeness' to this, for which it is difficult if not impossible to put into words exactly *what* it is. We have seen what it does and what it must avoid doing, as well as how it gets where it desires to go. We have seen also what all of this implies for the understanding in general of Plato's philosophy, in particular as it has to do with *praxis* and *techne* (ch. 2 sec. 3). However, as Plato

¹¹⁹ He devotes much more attention to distinguishing between the true and apparent *good*.

¹²⁰ That this love implies the sacrifice of much sensual satisfaction we take for granted. See ch. 2 sec. 2 *supra*.

himself did, we must forbear trying to give a definition in words of exactly what it is.

A mere reflection such as this one will have to do.

Appendix: Note on the Seventh Letter

The authenticity of the *Seventh Letter* has been controverted in Plato scholarship since the 19th century at least. It seems that most modern scholarship has come down on the side of authenticity, though there are some dissenters¹²¹. A recent work by Michael Frede and Miles Burnyeat has attempted to comprehensively deny the authenticity of the *Seventh Letter*¹²² along several lines of argument: philological-stylistic, historical, and philosophical grounds. We lack the expertise to argue any points of philology, style, or Ancient Greek history with that book's authors, and so concede the possibility that the letter may well not have been written by Plato.

However, even if the letter was not by Plato, it displays such a remarkable agreement with the overall tone and sway of Plato's philosophy, as well as with much of our own arguments in this essay, that it would seem to have been written by one who, even if not Plato himself, was at the very least a close confederate of Plato's, and very well-versed in the master's works and method¹²³. In that sense, it serves our argument as an exemplary secondary source on Plato's philosophy

¹²¹ For example, Robert S. Brumbaugh claims that the philosophical digression represents Plato's "fingerprint or trademark" (86) ("Digression and Dialogue: The *Seventh Letter* and Plato's Literary Form"). Kenneth Sayre, in the essay following Brumbaugh's in that volume, also argues for the letter's authenticity ("Plato's Dialogues in Light of the *Seventh Letter*" pp. 93-109 in *ibid.*). Terence Irwin and Julia Annas, for their parts, both argue against the *Letter's* authenticity, though it is only Annas who explicitly denies its philosophical interest, doing so without devoting any attention to the *Letter's* actual content, claiming only that "the 'Seventh Letter' is so peculiar philosophically that it would be perverse to use it as a basis for interpreting the philosophy in the dialogues" (285). See T. Irwin, "The Intellectual Background," 75 n. 4; J. Annas, "Classical Greek Philosophy".

¹²² M. Frede and M. Burnyeat, *The Seventh Platonic Letter*.

¹²³ This is Francisco Gonzalez' position on the *Letter's* authenticity in *Dialogue and Dialectic*: "If the letter was written by a forger, it is my view that this forger had a better understanding of Plato than many other scholars, both ancient and contemporary." (246).

roughly contemporary with Plato himself. Therefore, the only grounds on which we aim to disagree with the arguments for inauthenticity are philosophical. Against Burnyeat, who is responsible for the principle philosophical objection to the *Letter's* authenticity, we claim that the argument of the *Seventh Letter* is neither invalid, nor incomprehensible, nor un-Platonic. We will aim to vindicate it on all points of philosophical contention by analyzing the relevant passages of the letter's "philosophical digression" (roughly from 341a to 344d) and answering Burnyeat's arguments as they arise.

"Every circle that we make or draw in common life is full of characteristics that contradict the fifth (i.e. the being of the circle), for it everywhere touches a straight line, while the circle itself, we say, has in it not the slightest element belonging to a contrary nature." (343a)

I take this to mean, very simply, that the essence of a circle (its τὸ εἶναι) transcends what we can know, say or represent about it, via name, definition, image, or 'knowledge'. This essence, furthermore, that is, the circle itself, would be that part grasped by reason (νοῦς), which is "nearest the fifth in kinship [συγγένεια] and likeness" (342d). This seems to be in substantial agreement with the *Republic's* description of the nature of the philosopher, even in its usage of the same word to describe the similarity of reason to reality: "[it is of the nature of the lover of learning] to struggle toward what is ... that, as he moves on, he neither loses nor lessens his erotic love until he grasps the being of each nature itself with the part of his soul that is fitted to grasp it, because of its kinship [συγγένεια] with it" (490a-b).

The passage about $\nu\omicron\iota\varsigma$ from the letter, moreover, confirms our theory about erotic reason's mediation between higher and lower levels of reality. Reason is to be taken as something "distinct both from the circle itself and from the three things previously mentioned;" it touches the higher at the point of its kinship and likeness to essence, and it touches the lower as in some way the consummation of their respective natures, since name, definition, and image are essential for knowledge.

"And we say that their names are by no means fixed; there is no reason why what we call "circles" might not be called "straight lines," and the straight lines "circles," and their natures will be none the less fixed despite this exchange of names." (343a)

This is clear enough, and Forms what Burnyeat refers to as the first premise of the only strictly philosophical argument contained in the *Seventh Letter*. The "premise" that Burnyeat distils from this passage is that names are purely conventional.

"Indeed the same thing is true of the definition: since it is a combination of nouns and verbs, there is nothing surely fixed about it." (343b)

This is what Burnyeat takes issue with, and is more properly speaking not a conclusion of the above premise, as he claims, but rather what the author of the letter takes to be a necessary corollary of the premise. The deduction would go like this: if words are purely accidental with respect to essences, then since definitions are composed of words and only words, they too must be purely accidental with respect to essences. Burnyeat takes this to mean that definitions cannot pick out

essences, a conclusion which he regards as absurd given not only the Platonic evidence weighing against such an interpretation, but also the plainer fact that picking out essences is, well, the definition of definition. Indeed if his interpretation were true, he would be quite correct. His error is in thinking that the corollary means that “no combination of words can capture the essence of a thing apart from its quality” (122). This is quite clearly not what the author intends. The much simpler interpretation is that definitions “are by no means fixed” since their building-blocks, so to speak, are not fixed either. We could “define” a circle as “a geometrical figure with four equal sides,” and as long as we gave different and appropriate meanings to each of the words of that definition, it could be perfectly correct. If I told you the revised meanings of each of the words in our new definition (provided their combined meaning could be expressed exactly in the words of the former version), then it would indeed define the essence of a circle. And so, Burnyeat is perfectly correct when he claims that “A counterfactual possibility like this does no damage at all to the perfectly good definition of circle we are discussing” (127), and this is because the author of the *Seventh Letter* is *not* attacking definition as such. The claim is that the essence of the circle radically transcends the attempt to put it into words. The words we use to describe and define the essence of a circle are incapable, excuse the pun, of *circumscribing* it. The point is more subtle than Burnyeat imagines: not that definitions are incapable of discerning essences, but rather that in order to do so, there is some extralinguistic, nonpropositional knowledge necessary on the part of the knower¹²⁴.

¹²⁴ This, substantially, is the central claim of F. Gonzalez’ book, *Dialogue and*

It is furthermore unclear where Burnyeat derives the further conclusion which he takes to be, worse than merely invalid, *unintelligible*: “What even *seems* to connect the fact that words have meaning by convention to the conclusion that definition is difficult or impossible, hence that knowledge of the essence is difficult or impossible?” (122-123; emphasis original). But if the text does not say that definition is impossible, much less does it claim that knowledge of the essence is impossible. The author claims, “there is no writing of mine about these matters, nor will there ever be one.” But this is because, far from being impossible, “this knowledge is not something that can be put into words like other sciences” (341c). That it cannot be put into writing is furthermore perfectly consistent with the claim that words are conventional and merely pick out quality when essence is what is sought¹²⁵, since the knowledge of essence is evidently the fruit of a relationship between master and student, and *not* the product of isolated study¹²⁶.

“Much more might be said to show that each of these four instruments is unclear, but the most important point is what I said earlier: that of the two objects of search—the particular quality [τὸ ποιόν τι] and the being [τὸ ὄν/τὸ τι] of an object—the soul seeks to know not the quality but the essence, whereas each of

Dialectic: “Can we have any real insight into what we are saying when we say that “virtue is good” if we refuse to inquire into what virtue or the good *is*?” (175). What virtue or the good *is* is precisely what cannot be put into words, on the reading we are proposing.

¹²⁵ Indeed, as Gadamer in his study on the Seventh Letter notes, it is words’ very “inessential” (*Unwesen*) conventionality that is their essence: “The intelligibility of the sign lies precisely in the fact that it points away from itself and *does not* assert itself as an independent reality but merely serves its function.” (107-108) Cf. H.-G. Gadamer, “Dialectic and Sophism in Plato’s *Seventh Letter*”.

¹²⁶ “After long-continued intercourse between teacher and pupil, in joint pursuit of the subject, suddenly, like light flashing forth when a fire is kindled, it is born in the soul and straightway nourishes itself” (341c).

these four instruments presents to the soul, in discourse and in examples, what she is not seeking, and thus makes it easy to refute by sense perception anything that may be said or pointed out, and fills everyone, so to speak, with perplexity and confusion.”

Burnyeat’s objections to the coherence of this passage are (1) that it is nonsensical to claim that name, definition, image, and knowledge (the four) are obstacles to knowing essence; (2) that it is incorrect to say that ‘image’ shares in the weakness of language, and that real Plato never seriously claims this anyway; (3) that the notion of a refutation “by the senses” is nonsensical; and (4) that all the above does nothing to explain “why it is a bad idea to put important thoughts into writing” (127) which was the point of the whole passage anyway.

To (1), we reply that it is not precisely correct to characterize the four as “obstacles” to knowledge. The author of the *Seventh Letter* clearly does not state this outright, since one through four are also necessary for five. It would be patently absurd for the author of the letter to have claimed that knowledge of the “fifth” depended on the knowledge of the preceding four, if he also believed that there was nothing among the four that resembled knowledge at all! Of course, it is precisely Burnyeat’s claim that the letter *is* patently absurd. In any case, the difficulty disappears if we consider that the author does not state that they are obstacles to knowledge at all. Rather, he laments that they can be made the instruments of manipulation, and thus occasions of “perplexity and confusion” (343c). And this consequence follows necessarily if we take it that “the fifth” consists of nonpropositional knowledge: “when it is ‘the fifth’ about which we are compelled to answer questions or to make explanations, then anyone who wishes to refute has

the advantage, and can make the propounder of a doctrine, whether in writing or speaking or in answering questions, seem to most of his listeners completely ignorant on the matter on which he is trying to speak or write” (343d). Because the four instruments partake of the “weakness of language,” a clever speaker can manipulate their use for the sake of self-seeking refutation¹²⁷. Clearly, this is meant to evoke both to the discussion of “eristic” from the *Euthydemus*, and to the misogyny passage from the *Phaedo*, about those “who spend their time studying contradiction” (*Phd.* 90c).

To (2), we reply that it is not clear how images are *not* linguistic in the relevant respect, and do not share in the weakness of language¹²⁸. To begin with, Burnyeat makes no serious attempt to understand what could be meant by “the weakness of language” (342e). Our own interpretation of that passage is that this weakness consists in language’s inherent inability to manifest essence (since essence is nonpropositional, and therefore extralinguistic). If that is true, then images clearly share the same weakness. This could be for a different reason, as, for example, that no visible image of a circle could manifest the idea of a circle known to reason (i.e. the ‘fourth’), much less the *form* of a circle itself (i.e. the ‘fifth’). But the

¹²⁷ Harvey Yunis notes that “what all forms of sophistic rhetoric have in common and what renders them all futile is the notion that a speaker can persuade by art without knowledge of the subject of his discourse” *Plato: Phaedrus*, “Introduction,” p. 2. This futility, when masked as philosophical/rhetorical expertise, can only cause mischief and confusion.

¹²⁸ Gadamer’s interpretation of the “weakness of language” holds that, since the winning and communication of understanding always takes place in the context of a conversation, that “the four” share the same weakness for this reason (*op. cit.* 104-105).

basic point is the same. If images are incapable of manifesting essence, just as language is, then they evidently share in this weakness of language.

To (3), a more complete adumbration of the relationship between reason and the senses would be required in order to understand what refutation “by the senses” might refer to. It is a phrase that, to our knowledge at least, appears nowhere else in the works of Plato¹²⁹. However, it is not inconsistent with our analysis of the two “greatest evils” in the *Phaedo*. A refutation for refutation’s sake, i.e. a misological argument, will be a refutation by the senses in at least two ways. In the first place, because someone inordinately affected by the senses (“violent pleasures and pains”) will tend to produce arguments of this kind, having no respect for the truth as such, and in the second place because arguments of this type will tend to produce this disrespect of the truth in people who take them seriously, and will thus cause them to become inordinately affected by the senses, taking these latter to be the sole criteria of truth. There is a kind of vicious feedback loop between the two greatest evils, a fact which is obscured by Burnyeat’s lack of attention to Plato’s anthropology.

To (4), we admit that we are not entirely sure how Burnyeat arrived at such a conclusion. That the argument shows what he claims it does not seem clear enough. If “the four” are incapable of manifesting essence, and if essence is what the soul of the true lover of wisdom is seeking, then it is clear that any written work that promised to deliver this essence to its reader would be a deception, as the author

¹²⁹ Notwithstanding *Phaedo* 79c: “Haven’t we also said some time ago that when the soul makes use of the body to investigate something, be it through [διὰ] hearing or seeing or some other sense—for to investigate something through the body is to do it through the senses ...”

himself claims: “each of these four instruments presents to the soul, in discourse and in examples, what she is not seeking, and thus [...] fills everyone, so to speak, with perplexity and confusion.” If someone were to try to depict essence via “the four,” failing to realize that this is impossible, confusion and perplexity are the necessary results. There is the further fact that the author’s claim is not that “important ideas” ought not to be put into words. That is obviously absurd, and besides, the author of the letter violates this dictum many times over, so we should not assume that is what he meant. The more careful interpretation is the one we offer above, not that the true philosopher ought not to put his most important ideas into books, but that he ought not to use any of the four “instruments” to manifest essences¹³⁰.

The question that should be put to such an interpretation is, obviously, how Plato believes we are to arrive at essences at all if not via language. The question is an extremely difficult one. The *Seventh Letter* should not be taken as a blanket condemnation of all language as such, since “the four” are indeed necessary for “the fifth”. An attractive solution would be to claim that they are necessary, but not sufficient. And this solution is borne out by experience, as well. Someone may know the name, definition, and image of, for example, Zeno’s proof of movement’s impossibility, without really *knowing* that movement is impossible. There is some necessary “fifth” which has to be gotten through other means than language in order that someone can truly be said to *know* that of which the proof is a sign or method.

¹³⁰ And perhaps should not even put these essences into words at all: consider for example the fact that Socrates in the *Republic* never says *what* the good is, but talks only about its qualities and effects.

But this only moves the question back one step: if “the four” are not sufficient, what *is*? The *Seventh Letter* itself claims that the knowledge of philosophy is “born in the soul”¹³¹ “after long-continued intercourse between teacher and pupil [συνουσίας]” (341c). But we have already established that this “long-continued intercourse” must consist of more than the exchange of words only, or else there would be nothing to distinguish the knowledge it produces from that of the “other sciences”. The answer must be sought in the *Phaedrus* and *Symposium*: the knowledge of essence (“things themselves”) can only be the result of *θεία μανία*. One arrives at them not via the manipulation and recombination of linguistic terms, but at the top of the ladder of erotic ascent, where it is granted him to see Beauty itself. A striking similarity between Diotima’s description of the object of love’s ascent and “the fifth” of the *Seventh Letter* should help to clarify this: “Nor will the beautiful appear to him [...] as one idea or one kind of knowledge.” (211b). There is thus an element of passivity at the apex of the ascent: the Beautiful impresses itself upon the sight of the philosophic lover, as a stamp leaving its mark indelibly upon his intellect. This, in short, we take it to be how one arrives at the knowledge of “the fifth”.

¹³¹ As Sayre notes, this being born in the soul means that philosophic knowledge does not come to be “in the form of conclusions to written or spoken arguments but in a flamelike flash of illumination not dependent upon discourse or other sensible phenomena” (102) K. Sayre, “Plato’s Dialogues in Light of the *Seventh Letter*”.

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