Chapter 2

Plato

If you got past skipping Jesus, then it may still seem strange that we leap into earlier pagan philosophy instead of continuing from Judaism into Christianity. You might consider it as a parallel side path, where we can see (and therefore examine) Judaism and Christianity and Greek philosophy from either path.

Plato’s (427-347 BC) philosophical language grounds much of what we think of as Western thought.[[1]](#footnote-1) If you have read the previous philosophy survey in this series then some of this, and next the few chapters, will be something of a repeat, but hopefully there will be some new nuances which come to light in the all theology version.

Most of Plato’s thought is based in his mentor, Socrates (470-399 BC), who is used by Plato to argue and state his own case (sometimes for and sometimes against Socrates). Socrates wrote nothing down while Plato used Socrates as his protagonist in what are known as ‘dialogues’ but really were Socrates just asks questions which are designed to teach the point as much as explore it. In that sense, almost everything we know about Socrates and his thought is filtered through Plato, and for that reason we treat the two as one.

*Plato’s Stepchildren*

As said, Plato who lived in Athens during the early heyday of Greek mainland culture, was Socrates’ student. It is still a time of transition from the development of Athens as a cultural center for Greece to becoming the cultural center of an empire. Athens has triumphed and its form of democracy, though denounced by Socrates, has given a fertile field to the arts and the sciences.[[2]](#footnote-2) The influence of the philosophers of this age on Western thought cannot really be measured. In addition it also produces an impressive pedigree: Alexander the Great (356-323 BC) was the student of Plato’s student Aristotle (384-322 BC) whom we will meet later. A fantastic perfect storm of history, but at this time this protégé was not yet at the height of his power, and the world still had yet to meet Greek culture on a large scale. For now, Socrates has challenged all of the thinkers of his time and found them wanting; Plato takes up the challenge and brings it to fruition; Aristotle changes the game and Alexander introduces it to the world.

The final offspring of Plato is the Academy, an institution he created for the study of mathematics, philosophy, the natural sciences, law and government, where Aristotle and many others studied for 900 years until it was closed by the Christian emperor Justinian in 529 AD.

Plato’s God

At the time of Plato’s though the Jews have not been Hellenized, meaning there has been no real exchange of cultures, so the question can be rightly asked (as did Tertullian) what does an ancient pagan philosopher have to tell us about the Judeo-Christian God? As discussed in the earlier work on religion and in our earlier chapters here, God, at least the one we know, did not suddenly pop into human consciousness with the appearance of the Jews. We are created with a sense of God. It stands to reason that all of humanity was created with that sense. We saw earlier that Justin Martyr came to Christianity through Plato so there must be something, right?

In this quest the first question one usually asks after reading Plato is “*what the heck is he talking about?*” The second one, basic to our theological journey, is more along the lines of “*how does he uses the word ‘god’?*” Plato actually utilizes several terms for ‘god’, and he employs them very specifically, something often lost in translation. When he speaks of the traditional ‘gods’ (*hoi theoi*), or ‘*the* god’ (*ho theos*) he does so in a somewhat conversant way, as in, more down to earth and less up in heaven, using the word as a generic description of some idea. This probably reflects less a movement toward monotheism and more a personal disenchantment with the old Greek myths. Instead he replaces these with the idea of ‘the divine’ (*to theion*), that is, a sense of something which is beyond us yet at the same time is embedded within us, a sense of something which became known as the ‘divine spark’.

So, when it comes to Judeo-Christian theology you have to be somewhat careful when you read Plato. What ‘god’ you are looking at, his or ours? Is it the concept of a single, monotheistic ‘god’ of Judeo-Christianity? Is it the Judeo-Christian Creator concept of "…God the maker of heaven and earth, of all that is visible and invisible"? Is it the concept of the ‘Logos’, as in Jesus, that was in the beginning ‘with God and was God’, or simply Plato’s sense of Reason and Order and the ‘divine spark’? While we do not want to get caught in the trap of saying that Plato is talking about the Judeo-Christian God, we can, like Justin Martyr apply the language of Plato about the god to our understanding of God; we just cannot expect Plato to be talking about God as we understand Him.

The Divine Sense

In order to explore this sense of ‘god’ we need to examine (in brief) Plato’s concept of cosmology. Plato has a sort of dual notion of reality: the world of ‘*becoming’* and the world of ‘b*eing’* (c.f. *Symposium*). The world of *Becoming* is the physical world we perceive through our senses. This world is always in motion, which is his way of saying that it is always changing. We are very familiar with this world, in that we spend the majority of our time there. The world of *Being* on the other hand, is the place of ideas, not sensation. It is absolute, independent, and transcendent. Unlike the world around us, it never changes and is the objective template of things we perceive here in the world of *Becoming*. Because he is more concerned with the ‘effect of’ than the ‘reasons for’, Plato was sometimes vague about the exact relationship between the two worlds. In a sense we humans are the boundary between the two layers. Through our reason we can understand that objects in the material world are imperfect copies or imitations of those in the ideal. Following from that, is the objects participating in the essence of the Form they are representing. This knowledge is key.

On a final side note, for Plato the world of Being precedesthe world ofEssence, meaning that *essence* precedes *existence* – that the definition, the Form, comes before an instantiation of that Form. That is to say, the Forms, the perfect ideals are already in place before something comes into being. There can be not physical table if no such Form already exists. Plato is seeking to describe reality in terms of ideals that are the real essence that is dimly reflected in physical existence.

All of that said, what is the meat of some of the concepts and language of the divine which Plato brings to the table that have theological bearing? While we can find many within his woks, we will highlight a few here with a brief description.

**The Forms**: Despite being a very down to earth kind of fellow, especially as seen in his discussion of the old gods[[3]](#footnote-3), Plato thinks the material world we see, hear, taste, and touch is NOT the real world. That is to say not that there is nothing real around us, but that for him the world of sense and sensation is a kind of shadow world, imperfect and only one in a state of *Becoming*, one that is a pale reflection of the other, *true* world. Plato calls this true world of *Being*, the *Forms*, things which are the ‘actual form of’ and foundation of the shadows of this world. Sense and sensation can deceive us which is why the things of this world cannot be trusted to be the actual things; they are created, they age, they break, they are flawed. The Forms are the perfect form of the imperfect things we see around us, like circles, or tables, or dogs. There is not a Form for every example of a dog, but every dog is a reflection of that Dog Form – we are able to recognize that something is a dog because Dog Form is inherent in each example of dog. That means that since the forms are beyond sense (how we perceive ‘dog’), the world of the Forms can be apprehended only through reason or intelligence (I *know* that every dog is a Dog).

**Logos:** This is the source of that reason and intelligence. The *Logos* is a Greek term we translate as “the Word” but for the Greeks it has several meanings. Plato uses it to signify not only the spoken word but also of the unspoken word, the words in our mind, reason. The verb *lego* means both ‘to speak’ and to ‘put together’; logos can mean the words spoken, ‘an accounting’, that is, an enumeration of a thing’s elements, or even the definition of how one thing is different than another. You can get the sense of versatility of the term in describing an epistemological system. Words are how we convey meaning. But it is more than that; it is how we use words and thoughts. Plato uses *logos* to make a distinction between his proposed newer kind of thinking about ‘the divine’ (*to theion*) and the traditional thinking put forth in *muthos* (what we transliterate into ‘myth’) which we have already discussed as signifying a ‘true’ story that makes clear the ‘truth’ about creation and humans. Plato broke to some extent from the philosophical tradition of the previous two centuries of Greek thought in that he uses both traditional myths *and* myths he invents to promote his philosophy. By doing so, he gives the impression of trying to bring *muthos* and *logos* together. He seems to be saying that both are necessary to understand the divine.

**Demiurge**: In a kind of definition of this notion of ‘divine’ Plato produces a *muthos* using the ‘demiurge’ (a Greek word initially meaning “artisan” or “master craftsman” and later “producer” and eventually “creator”) who is the source of order (which is another way of saying ‘reason’). It is the basis for why the divine spark is within us – not in a direct way, as with the sense of a Form but perhaps more like a ‘rational form’, an indirect result of the order it created. According to Plato once the demiurge came into being it wanted to make the world like in its image. That is to say, because he is good, he wants the world to be good like him. The Greeks, similar to most cultures around them, did not have a concept of creation *ex nihilo* (out of nothing), but of a sort of primary god who rises out of the muck of primordial soup and sets things in motion. The demiurge is that primary god, the force which changes “*disorder into order*” (*Timeaus*). In order to engender the good, it creates a world which is “*a living creature with soul and reason*” in “*which all other living creatures are parts.*” (ibid) That is to say that everything is created with order in mind, and that order is imparted to everything created.

The Demiurge creates because being good, the Demiurge wishes to expand that goodness to something outside of himself, desires order and perfection for everything. What source within the chaos can he use to do so? Why the objective, perfect Forms of course. So, using the Forms as a model, he shapes the initial chaos into the best possible image of these eternal and immutable archetypes. E voila! The result is the visible world around us. In order to accomplish this, it makes the world out of the four basic elements: earth, air, fire, and water, each, on their own, unformed and chaotic. By combining them, order is brought forth.

But alas the imperfections of creation also show us the Demiurge’s limitations as well. Even though he is the primary god and the primary cause of the visible world he is nonetheless part of the stuff that he molds. The goodness of the Demiurge is relative to the Good. He is the primal god who creates the world and the other gods who run the world but is not above the stuff of creation; the material he shapes isn't created by him and, because it is disorderly and indeterminate, it partially resists his ordering. In the end the demiurge is lower than the Forms, even the Form of the Good of which he is the best representative.

Plato’s Man

Humans have a special place in creation. We possess a somewhat different nature than the rest of creation. While we, like the rest of creation is based in the Forms, we have the unique ability to discern the Forms, to rise above the shadows on the cave wall and move into the light of the Forms, to see both the world and the Forms for what they are. We have the ability to live in two worlds you might say, on the one hand part and parcel of the imperfect physical world of Becoming and yet intellectual, rational beings who can seek perfection guided by the Forms which takes us beyond this world of Becoming. This is because Humanity was created by the children of the Demiurge which has produced in us this ‘dual nature’. Just like the Demiurge is limited because he is from the primordial stuff, since we are not directly created by the Demiurge, we have the limitation of not being gods ourselves. Nonetheless there exists within us something ‘divine’ and ‘immortal’ because of this heritage: our rational souls, which are *god-like*.

Humans are sandwiched between the realities: the ever-changing material, physical realm of sensation and the Forms, the eternal, unchanging realm of rationality. By this two-edged sword we have desires, what he calls ‘appetites’, born of both realms. This is how it works: because we have one foot in the material realm we desire material sensation and pleasures and because we have the other foot in the immortal, divine realm, we desire to understand the eternal and unchanging truths of the Forms. But therein also lays the problem. We may be a duality, body and soul, but we cannot separate our souls from our bodies. From our sensual foot we are subject to physical ‘appetites’: food, money, power, sex. We are subject to emotions, anger, envy, and the like that cloud our rational judgment and drag us away from the world of Being. Fortunately from our other foot, we have a hunger for the things not of this world: mathematics, the concepts of justice and goodness, and other such good things of the Demiurge. This is the soul, and our soul is the Logos within us (divine spark).

The Path Of Wisdom

This reflects a Judeo-Christian concept known as “Natural Law”. In a nutshell, within each of us lies an innate, hard-wired knowledge of how things should be, and a rational ability to discern it. This law differs from derived or ‘secular’ or ‘human law’ in that human law is imposed from the outside. Natural Law is often used as basis for secular law. To the Sophists a contemporary natural enemy of Socrates from which we get the term ‘sophomoric’, Natural Law meant “the right of the stronger” (*Republic*), that is the one who can impose his will (*usually* through rhetoric). Plato saw it more as an innate understanding of right and wrong.

Before we jump into the follow up to this idea, Grasshopper, let us take a short side path of understanding into one more aspect of Plato’s thinking. We first encounter the idea of Wisdom when Socrates is told by the Oracle that he is the wisest of men. In all humility[[4]](#footnote-4) Socrates sets out to find out how that can be because he is so ignorant. What he discovers is that he is the wisest because he knows that he knows not.

But just what is Wisdom and why is it important to us? Through his *Allegory of the Cave* from the *Republic*, Plato tells us that wisdom is enlightenment, the tossing off of the chains of sensual perception and seeking rational knowledge of the Forms and understanding them as *the* reality. In his rendition of Socrates’ *Apology*, he tells that *“…the unexamined life is not living…*” and so we see the truth of his statement *"…when I do not know, neither do I think I know; so I am likely to be wiser than he to this small extent, that I do not think I know what I do not know."* (ibid)

But is that Wisdom? No not really. What Plato is talking about is the understanding that knowledge does not come from within us, we merely ‘re-collect it’. For Plato Wisdom is a Virtue, a thing or goal to be striven for. What that means is that knowledge i.e. the Good, is an objective thing as it comes from the Forms and is therefore within our semi-divine nature, is the goal of the Demiurge and by extension of ourselves. Wisdom is the result of the search for the knowledge of the Forms. This seeking of perfection is the goal of our actions and informs our actions.

The Journey Of A Soul

Our purpose then is to seek perfection and it is ignorance that is the definition of evil. The question becomes is perfection something we find and then we are done? Wisdom and knowledge of the Good are all well and good but to what end? And that is the question, right? What good is knowledge if there is no consequence for knowing or not knowing. Epicurus (341 BC – 270 BC) in a reaction to this kind of thinking later taught that there was no tomorrow, that the teachings of the gods and the afterlife were the true evil. Friendship was the ultimate truth and good, not some un-knowable intangible idea. Acting well now meant that you had good friends and therefore all of the happiness you needed. But Plato, not so much. The soul was on a journey through not just this life but toward a larger goal. The soul seeks perfection and not just perfection as an end in itself but that the more perfect souls return to continue to teach and aid other souls to perfection.

What is perfection? Let us wander back for a moment. For Plato, when it came to questions of morality, the old *muthos*, the old gods, because of their chaotic and arbitrary ways were of no use; what could they teach us about morality? Their reality of conflicting, unbridled by reason passions created only chaos. Instead, the universe was guided not by capricious gods but by a god with a sense of purpose, the Demiurge, the source of both consciousness and morality in humans. The Demiurge used knowledge of the Forms to craft the world of living beings from the chaos of the primal soup. So basically, a knowing, rational god created the world based on perfect ideals, and that gives the world order and order is the means of establishing the good. Knowledge of the Good therefore gives knowledge of right action. Evil on the other hand, as said, is the absence of knowledge. This entire rehash becomes important because Plato espoused the idea that humans possessed immortal souls distinct from their bodies. This is known as the concept of *dualism*, a ‘duality’ of a spiritual and a physical aspect of human beings. This notion ties directly into the ideas of order and purpose.

For Plato, the immortal human soul possesses pre-existing knowledge, knowledge known to the Demiurge and passed to us in our nature, which it is our duty to re-collect[[5]](#footnote-5). Since we have a soul, something which sits in the spiritual outside and of the physical and its appetites and yet is still attached to the physical, we have goals in life, mainly to learn. We can see evidence of this objective *logos* knowledge in the very make-up of the universe. We see it in animals automatically adapting to their environments in order to flourish. Since the Demiurge echoed the perfect order of the Forms in the material world, that the proper goal for human beings is to seek perfect order and purity in their own souls. We do so to offset the imperfection of the material, shadow-of-the-Forms Becoming world by making rational desires control their irrational counterparts.

The soul is the vehicle for perfection. The body, material and imperfect must be held in check to allow the soul to flourish. It is drawn to the Good. The soul therefore moves toward perfection and has the ability to move toward perfection because of this inherent knowledge. The problem is in the irrational desires of the material body, the ones that can rule us before we recollect the rational knowledge within us. To not live an ‘examined life’ is to be governed instead by these irrational desires. To fail to do so is to miss the purpose for life, which is perfection and immortality or some vague drifting off into nothingness because you are of no use to the Demiurge. To do so is to imperil both the body and the soul. Wisdom alone helps the soul to remain immortal.

The immortality of the soul plays itself out in something called the “transmigration of souls” (*metempsychosis*), the movement of the soul from one living thing to another, the rebirth of the soul in a new body mainly for the purpose of leading other souls to perfection. The imperfect body on the other hand is not immortal, but if we live right now, our imperfect physical existence is only one passing phase in the life of our soul.

Platonic Themes

So for our purposes, you can see that we focus on things like Plato’s language and concepts of the body and soul; the mystical nature of Creation and of the Demiurge; his concept of good and evil, the purpose of the human soul and the nature of the *logos*. This is not to say that Plato did not say a bunch more about things like societal makeup and laws but he was kind of vague about some of the issues which later thinkers took on. For this reason we consider him an ‘ethical philosopher’ in that morality and right action are what concern him most, not essence or being. While he does address them it is only through the *muthos*, and for the purpose of understanding why we what to do the right thing. What the wise man does is virtue and what the virtuous man does is wisdom. Ignorant and unwise people are not virtuous because they cannot act virtuously. Still, they are not evil, because since they are ignorant they are not responsible. It is really impossible to do wrong voluntarily because once you ‘know,’ you would really only do good voluntarily. Any discussion of things like the soul is more for understanding morality.

At the same time some of his language is contrary to the Judeo-Christian Tradition. The idea of transmigration or reincarnation is foreign to the nature of the soul in Scripture. The same is true of the idea of Creation. God is one God and God creates all things, He is not the product of something else, and He does not create lesser gods to do His work for Him. The sense of God a subject to something else, the Forms for instance, is completely alien in that the mind of God would be the source of the Forms. Any discounting of the material world in favor of only a spiritual plane is to lessen both the meaning of Creation and God’s power.

Putting It Together

We can see the appeal of Plato’s thinking and language to the Hellenist Jews, early Christians, and early Christian Apologists and theologians like Augustine. We can also see some of the struggles that his thinking can instigate. Early gnostic groups latched on to ideas like reincarnation or other such ‘mystical’ aspects which crossed over from secular philosophy and mystery cults.

His greatest asset to theology was that Plato was more of a ‘virtue-centered’ thinker. The problem for Plato is not existence but *relations*. How do we interact? How do we know what is right and wrong? What is our purpose? How do we accomplish the Good? Virtue is right action and right action is right thinking and right thinking is Virtue. He is not concerned with the parsing of words or the nature of how we exist. We are, and we are wonderfully made, but at the same time we are flawed, clouded by emotions and desires. To the extent we wallow in the material world is the extent we are unhappy and that evil can exist. Because we turn a blind eye to the reality, we desire more to wear the chains of ignorance and apathy and be fed on shadow images. The struggle with the material world is a quandary for Plato; we are physical beings but it is only by controlling and rising above our material natures that we reach true fullness.

Plato seeks to explain the ineffable, immaterial side which we sense but can miss while being bound up in the cares and desires of the world. He seeks to wrench meaning away from outside, arbitrary agents and bring it more down to earth; we know what we should do, we just cannot remember it. This pulling of thinking out of the older mystical, *muthos* of myth and placing it within each person using a new *muthos/logos*, is itself imperfect. There still exists an objective reality beyond us of which we are but a shadow. This transition in Greek thought from *muthos* to *logos* is held tightly in Christian thought, with both being combined in Christ, who is mystical and physical.

*WANDA*: What would Plato do?

*OTTO*: Apologize.

***A Fish Called Wanda* (1988)**

1. “*The safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato*.” Alfred North Whitehead - *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology* (1929) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Philosophy being a science. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. And parties. (c.f. the *Symposium*) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. At least with all the humility that Socrates can muster…. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The basis for the Socratic Method®, which is the asking of a series of questions by the teacher until the pupil remembers what they already know. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)