

# PLATO

David Talcott



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This book is dedicated to my colleagues in  
the Politics, Philosophy, and Economics department  
at The King's College (NY):

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Your collegiality, love for Christ, and intellectual seriousness  
was the greenhouse for many of the ideas in this book.

Teaching alongside you for the past decade  
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Truth and friendship really do walk together.

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## SERIES INTRODUCTION

Amid the rise and fall of nations and civilizations, the influence of a few great minds has been profound. Some of these remain relatively obscure even as their thought shapes our world; others have become household names. As we engage our cultural and social contexts as ambassadors and witnesses for Christ, we must identify and test against the Word those thinkers who have so singularly formed the present age.

The Great Thinkers series is designed to meet the need for critically assessing the seminal thoughts of these thinkers. Great Thinkers hosts a colorful roster of authors analyzing primary source material against a background of historical contextual issues, and providing rich theological assessment and response from a Reformed perspective.

Each author was invited to meet a threefold goal, so that each Great Thinkers volume is, first, *academically informed*. The brevity of Great Thinkers volumes sets a premium on each author's command of the subject matter and on the secondary discussions that have shaped each thinker's influence. Our authors identify the most influential features of their thinkers' work and address

them with precision and insight. Second, the series maintains a high standard of *biblical and theological faithfulness*. Each volume stands on an epistemic commitment to “the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27), and is thereby equipped for fruitful critical engagement. Finally, Great Thinkers texts are *accessible*, not burdened with jargon or unnecessarily difficult vocabulary. The goal is to inform and equip the reader as effectively as possible through clear writing, relevant analysis, and incisive, constructive critique. My hope is that this series will distinguish itself by striking with biblical faithfulness and the riches of the Reformed tradition at the central nerves of culture, cultural history, and intellectual heritage.

Bryce Craig, president of P&R Publishing, deserves hearty thanks for his initiative and encouragement in setting the series in motion and seeing it through. Thanks also to Sean McKeever, who was active in the series’ initial development. Many thanks as well to P&R’s director of academic development, John Hughes, who has assumed, with cool efficiency, nearly every role on the production side of each volume. The Rev. Mark Moser carried much of the burden in the initial design of the series, acquisitions, and editing of the first several volumes. And the expert participation of Amanda Martin, P&R’s editorial director, was essential at every turn. I have long admired P&R Publishing’s commitment, steadfast now for over eighty-five years, to publishing excellent books promoting biblical understanding and cultural awareness, especially in the area of Christian apologetics. Sincere thanks to P&R, to these fine brothers and sisters, and to several others not mentioned here for the opportunity to serve as editor of the Great Thinkers series.

Nathan D. Shannon  
Seoul, Korea

## FOREWORD

“Who in this room,” I asked a group of more than one hundred college freshmen, “has ever seen a circle?” The question seemed so absurd to them that they suspected something must be up. Eventually someone raised a timid hand.

“So, you have seen a circle?”

“Yes,” he said, not at all sure what was coming.

“What is a circle?”

Eventually we got around to the definition of a circle: a set of points equidistant from a given point on a plane surface. And since a point is beneath dimension, taking up no space, the student admitted that he’d never seen a circle, or a point, or a circumference, or anything so defined.

“And yet you do know things about circles, things you have never seen with your eyes, things that no one has ever seen or ever will see, except by the mind.” Here the student got a bit nervous again, and I had to remind him and his classmates that yes, they did know things about circles. For example, they knew or ought to have remembered that any triangle whose base is the diameter of a circle, and whose opposite vertex lies on the circumference,



must be a right triangle. And that of course is just one of the elementary features of a circle.

I have long believed that all mathematicians are disciples of Plato when they work, regardless of what they say about it in public. That is, they believe that they are investigating the properties of really existent things and not just working out the implications of a set of mental constructs. That is why they so often delight to show the mathematics of the natural world, and when they do so, perhaps without knowing it, they draw near to the notion so close to the heart of Augustine and to Christian philosophers, composers, and artists for well over a thousand years, that God has made the world in measure, weight, and number. It was the same Augustine who, as David Talcott notes in this excellent and eminently sensible introduction to Plato, drew near to the Christian faith by his reading of the Platonic philosophers of his age. For in his *Confessions*, he says that he read in their works, not indeed in the same words, but with the same meaning, that “in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” He does go on to say, however, that he did *not* read there that “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” Plato could, then, help to clear away some of the most pernicious errors that plagued Augustine, among them this one in particular: that matter was the sole constituent of the world. And that error, Talcott rightly shows, was not new to Augustine’s time and is not new to ours.

Talcott understands the errors to which the modern mind is prone. They are, he shows us carefully and patiently, interrelated. In our philosophy of being, if it warrants to be so called, our default is materialism: matter alone exists. That is no new position. Talcott cites the examples of Thales, Anaximenes, and Anaximander, predecessors of Plato, and of Democritus and Epicurus afterward, and then their reductive error reappears in Hobbes and other early modern philosophers before our peculiar time. Plato, Talcott

shows us again and again, was at pains to show both the inadequacy and the self-contradictions inherent in that belief. Why we still entertain it, with the remarkable and beautiful results of mathematics so influential in our lives, and with many Christian mathematicians testifying to the reality of immaterial things and to the profound implications of their reality, I cannot tell. And some of those mathematicians have names like Euler, Riemann, Cauchy, Cantor, and Goedel, among the greatest giants of the field.

In epistemology, the default is empiricism: we are led to believe that we can know only what we can subject to material observation and testing. Talcott calls our common sense, before we even come to look at Plato, to testify that it cannot be so. We know about beauty, though beauty cannot be reduced to any particular material constituents—what material stuff or material properties, says Talcott, can possibly be common to the Empire State Building and a gold ring? We know persons, yet a person is obviously not the stuff that happens to make up his body at one particular moment, and that stuff is also in a constant state of flux. Thus it is that empiricism can lead to skepticism about all the most important questions in human life. Despite what appears to be the skepticism of Socrates in the early dialogues, Talcott suggests that Plato himself was never content with that, nor, perhaps, did he intend that those dialogues themselves represented his full beliefs even at the time he wrote them. They were but stages on a quest, and this we can say with some confidence, because in those early dialogues Socrates himself is by no means content merely to show that some traditional belief or other was incorrect or incomplete. He clearly intends to go further, to press on.

But we see how bad ideas in epistemology lead to bad ideas in moral philosophy. Our default here is relativism. “Man is the measure of all things,” said Protagoras the sophist, as Talcott reminds us; or, as the modern relativist Pirandello put it in the title of one of his plays, “It is so, if it seems that way to you.” And that would

reduce man's world to chaos. We have seen as much. "Your number one person" is what John Corvino, a cheerleader for the biological and anthropological absurdity of same-sex marriage, calls a spouse—and I am grateful to Talcott for the citation. It is as if the reality of a marriage should rise and fall with the fortunes of affection; but then, for the relativist there is no stable and objective reality when it comes to questions of good and evil. The cheerleading is but a political or rhetorical ploy, or an emotional outburst.

And that brings us into the arena of absurdism and atheism. Talcott shows us again and again that Plato, like his student Aristotle, and like most of the pagan thinkers of their time, and indeed like most human beings everywhere, held that things have a purpose, an end they are aiming for, a goal or target, a state of full flourishing and completion. Nowadays, I suppose, people would respond that each person's aim is a private thing and is a matter of his own decision, but if that is the case, if the aim is merely arbitrary, then it has no inherent meaning, and there is no common goal that unites us all. If the world around us is but a congeries of mindless atoms and empty space, then nothing has meaning, and any meaning we assign to a thing is but a comforting fiction. But we do not assign meaning. We discover it, and if it is there to be discovered, it must preexist those who discover it; though it does not preexist God, who made all things and in making them provided them with their aims, their purposes. More than that, to discover the purpose of man is to draw near to the divine. Plato thought that the stories told about the Homeric gods were in error—not because there were no gods, but because the gods, or the divine, the form of the good, lay far beyond them.

Plato, then, can take us far; and yet, if we conclude with Plato, as I believe David Talcott freely concedes, we have not moved one inch. That is not a self-contradiction. Plato saw much, and we cannot know, nor should we pretend to know, what knowledge of the true God he was granted in his inmost heart, beyond

words, perhaps beneath words. You will not find in Plato's works the God who, in the beginning, created heaven and earth from nothing, from his pure and utterly personal will for goodness, giving itself forth in being. You will not find in Plato's works the Son who humbled himself, taking upon himself the likeness of a man. You will not find the wedding feast that is the kingdom of God. To be outside of the kingdom by an inch is to be outside of it by a million miles; outside is outside. But perhaps, reader, if you will allow me to make a suggestion that arises from what I know is only an analogy: if you are at the gates, but still shut outside, even though you cannot see the celebration within, you may be granted strains of strange and beautiful music, and laughter, and these may move you to beg for admittance. Let us not set bounds to the mysterious grace of God. In any case, let us also not scorn the guide who, though he cannot bring us within the gates, can take us safely through many a marsh of error. That too is a gift, a grace of God, not to be despised.

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been the testing ground as my thinking about Plato continued to develop. Students often got the “first draft” of my thoughts, and they often kept me grounded in the immediate and practical issues of life. The exercise of walking with them through the dialogues of this great thinker has been a joy.

# 1

## INTRODUCTION

Atheism. Materialism. Relativism. Skepticism. Impiety. Disobedience to parents. Revolutionary fervor. Blind pursuit of passion. Self-love rather than love of neighbor. If any of these things are concerning to you, and you would like to see rational arguments against them, you will be interested in studying Plato. For these were Plato's chief concerns as well. He dedicated his life to the pursuit of truth, goodness, and justice, and to doing so through rational arguments, not mere instinct or preference.

In this book, you will get a glimpse of some of the great arguments from the past. When you do, I hope you will find that they are incredibly relevant to our present time. Human circumstances are constantly changing, but human nature never changes. Therefore, our problems remain fundamentally the same, regardless of the time and place in which we live. The goodness of creation and our fallenness in sin present each generation with the same kinds of moral and intellectual challenges.

Plato is not perfect, and along the way we will see significant shortcomings. As a pagan, his view was very incomplete. His theology is lacking, and, apart from Christ, we have no reasonable

hope in this world. But just as Christians can learn from Newton, Einstein, and others, so too can we learn some things from the philosophers. God did not reveal all things to us at the beginning, but he created us with the ability to gain knowledge. God did not name the animals, but rather brought them to Adam to see what he would name them. Adam had to do the work of investigation, of looking out at the world, of categorizing and seeking to understand. Pagans have eyes and ears like us, and though they are at war with God in their hearts, he has granted them a measure of common grace by which they can learn many truths about the world. What truths did Plato learn?

### **Approaching Plato**

“You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you.” If you think about these famous words of Augustine, and consider how they indicate a transcendent destiny for mankind, you will begin to approach Plato’s philosophy. Plato unremittingly insists that the material world is not all that exists; rather, we came from another, nonphysical realm, and long to be reunited with it in the end. At our core, we want to dwell with the gods. The hit song “Meant to Live” by the band Switchfoot highlights that same inner longing by reminding us that we “were meant” to live for much more than this world can offer, and, correspondingly, that “we want” more than the world can possibly offer—our hearts scream for a “second life.” The world, and humanity within it, is active and searching. We are searching for the divine, and our hearts restlessly seek it through pleasure, goodness, unity, nobility, and truth.

This transcendent orientation unlocks many features of Plato’s philosophy: where everything came from, why the world works the way it does, what human beings are and what the physical world is like, the limits of human understanding and how we



acquire knowledge, the desires and aspirations that animate our very lives, how we should organize ourselves internally and socially, and the nature of the divine realm.

The reality of human desire, that we long for things higher than ourselves, permeates Plato. It leads him to write poetically and artistically. It leads him to reflect on love. It leads him into rigorous rational arguments. In *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis writes, “If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world.”<sup>1</sup> As we encounter Plato, we will be encountering a man with this kind of human aspiration.

### Influence and Controversy

Plato has been incredibly influential and incredibly controversial. Alfred North Whitehead, a British idealist, famously said: “The safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato.”<sup>2</sup> That is a man who is worth understanding. Not long before Whitehead, a more infamous philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche, grouped Plato with Christianity as part of the old, dead world that he was leaving behind in the dust. As he considers how he and other radicals are pressing forward with their nihilism, he writes this in *The Gay Science*:

But you will have gathered what I am getting at, namely, that it is still a *metaphysical faith* upon which our faith in science rests—that even we knowers of today, we godless anti-metaphysicians, still take *our* fire, too, from the flame lit by the thousand-year-old

1. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), bk. 3, ch. 10, pp. 136–37.

2. Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology* (New York: Free Press, 1978), 39.

faith, the Christian faith which was also Plato's faith, that God is truth; that truth is divine. . . . But what if this were to become more and more difficult to believe, if nothing more were to turn out to be divine except error, blindness, the lie—if God himself were to turn out to be our longest lie?<sup>3</sup>

Why does Nietzsche lump together Plato and Christianity—seeing them as a joint target? Perhaps you already have an idea, but by the end of this book the reasons will hopefully be clear.

Turning to Christian authors, we see Christians with both positive and negative views of Plato. It is common today for Christians to criticize Plato for his purported dualism, or for his rationalism, or for one of many other supposed intellectual maladies. James K. A. Smith, for instance, writes this in a recent article in *The Christian Century*: “After millennia, it remains hard to shake the baseline Platonic picture of the human person in which reason rules the passions and emotions. . . . I’m skeptical.”<sup>4</sup> Perhaps closer to home, Reformed theologians such as Cornelius Van Til and John Frame have not exactly been kind to Plato, arguing that his view is man-centered and untenable. Van Til claims that Plato, along with many other philosophers, has “a man-centered view.”<sup>5</sup> In his *Survey of Christian Epistemology*, Van Til writes:

We hold that both Plato and Aristotle stood diametrically opposed to Christianity, and that it is out of the question to speak of Christianity as having developed out of either of their philosophies. This does not deny the fact that Greek thought in

3. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, ed. Bernard Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 201.

4. James K. A. Smith, “I’m a Philosopher. We Can’t Think Our Way out of This Mess,” *Christian Century*, Feb. 25, 2021, <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/how-my-mind-has-changed/i-m-philosopher-we-can-t-think-our-way-out-mess>.

5. Quoted in Greg L. Bahnsen, *Van Til’s Apologetic: Readings and Analysis* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1998), 60.

general and the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle in particular has been of great *formal* value to Christianity. Nor do we mean to intimate that Christianity has, in many of its exponents, not actually been influenced by the pagan motif. But the genius of Christianity is a reversal of the genius of the Greeks.<sup>6</sup>

We will see below some of the reasons for these concerns. In anthropology, cosmology, and soteriology, Plato has glaring blind spots. And Van Til is clearly correct that the saving message of Jesus Christ did not emerge out of Platonism. Salvation is from the Jews (John 4:22).

Yet many Christians of the past did not approach Plato in quite this way. They had a more positive overall assessment of Plato, particularly in relation to other non-Christian writers. Augustine famously claims that God used the “Platonic books” to cast out a range of philosophical errors. He says he learned “from them to seek for immaterial truth.”<sup>7</sup> Later, however, in his *Retractions*, Augustine wrote that “the praise with which I so greatly extolled Plato and the Platonists (or the Academic philosophers) was most inappropriate for these impious persons and has rightly displeased me.”<sup>8</sup> He thought he had gone too far. Martin Luther was famously critical of philosophy, particularly of the scholastic philosophers of his age. But the Reformers were not uniformly opposed to all philosophy, nor to the ideas of the ancient Greeks. The great Lutheran reformer Philip Melancthon said, “Let us love both Plato and Aristotle.”<sup>9</sup> Luther himself said, “The philosophy of Plato is better

6. Quoted in Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic*, 321.

7. Augustine, *Confessions: A New Translation by Henry Chadwick* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 123, 129. Chapter 7 as a whole describes Augustine's early engagement with Platonism.

8. Augustine, *Revisions (Retractationes)*, pt. 1, vol. 2 of *The Works of Saint Augustine*, ed. Roland J. Teske (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2010), 29.

9. Quoted by Lewis W. Spitz, *Luther and German Humanism* (Aldershot, UK: Variorum, 1996), II, 44.

than the philosophy of Aristotle.”<sup>10</sup> In comparison to other ancient philosophers, Plato was highly regarded among the early church fathers. Justin Martyr thought that Plato must have borrowed from Moses, so Christian was his thinking.<sup>11</sup> More recently, a number of authors have defended what they call Christian Platonism, arguing that it is not only valuable, but perhaps even essential to orthodox Christian theology.<sup>12</sup>

Does he deserve this reputation? Shall we love Plato or scorn him? Before we can answer that question, we must first understand him. We will seek to understand him as sympathetically and as realistically as possible; only then will we be in a position to praise and criticize him accurately.

### Plato’s Life

Plato was born in Athens in 427 B.C. and died in 347 B.C.<sup>13</sup> He lived during a time when Athenian power was waning. In the early 400s, Athens had led a Greek coalition in a war against Persia, successfully resisting Persian conquest. That victory brought the Athenians incredible power and wealth, resulting in the monumental achievements that survive to this day. But they then fought a multi-decade war with Sparta, which they ultimately lost, and in the 300s none of the Greek cities were able to achieve their former glory or power. After Plato’s death, Alexander the Great,

10. Quoted by Eric Parker, “The Platonism of Martin Luther,” *Calvinist International*, May 20, 2013, <https://calvinistinternational.com/2013/05/20/the-platonism-of-martin-luther/>.

11. Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, 44.

12. See Hans Boersma, *Five Things Theologians Wish Biblical Scholars Knew* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2021), 40–67; Craig Carter, *Interpreting the Bible with the Great Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018), 66–90; Louis Markos, *From Plato to Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2021); and the articles in *Credo Magazine* 12, no. 1 (2022).

13. For a short biography of Plato, see W. K. C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, 6 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962–81), 4:8–31.

who spoke Greek but was a Macedonian from the north, gained control of the Greek-speaking world and rapidly expanded his empire into Persia and India. Alexander was a firecracker, dying at a young age after conquering vast territories; he burned out nearly as fast as he had caught fire.

During Plato's life, Athens was a powerful, but declining, city-state. The Athenians lived in the midst of architectural and cultural greatness, created by the generations of the past, but they themselves had fallen from their heights. In their art, politics, and philosophy, they grappled with their glorious past and their somewhat less glorious present.

Plato's family was wealthy and successful. He was born into money and bred for political leadership in a society that, while officially democratic, still had leading families in its day, just as the American democracy has had its Rockefellers, Clintons, and Bushes. But despite ample opportunity for financial and political success, he decided instead to follow the paths of philosophy. We'll see why.

## Plato's Works

Plato's works are unique in the ancient world because they appear to have survived in their entirety. With most ancient authors, only a fraction of their original work still survives today. For example, the biographer Diogenes Laertius records that Aristotle wrote nearly 450,000 lines of text in his published works.<sup>14</sup> But only a little over 100,000 lines survive today. We have lost entire works that he wrote, such as *Of Justice* (in four books), *Concerning Love*, and *Of Prayer*. For most ancient authors, the story is similar: ancient testimony about their works often refers to books that are now lost. But Plato is different. As far as we can tell, at least one copy of every work that he ever published has

14. Diogenes Laertius, *The Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*, V.1.27.

survived. So we have the remarkable good fortune of being able to evaluate the totality of his public writing.

This does not mean that there are no questions about Plato as author. On the contrary, difficulties abound. For one, almost all of Plato's surviving writings are dialogues, each one with its own character. Some are brief and argumentative (*Euthyphro*), while others are long and meandering (*Phaedrus*). Some are dramatic and fantastical (*Symposium*), while others are technical and dry (*Philebus*). Compared to standard philosophical treatises, the dialogues are engaging—they draw you into the arguments as if you were right there and part of a great conversation.

In none of the dialogues is the author himself a character. So we are left with a serious puzzle: are some of Plato's characters mouthpieces for his own view, representing his own ideas within the dialogues? Or, instead, is each character simply a character, constructed by Plato to represent a distinct viewpoint, not the author's own? To complicate things, the main character in most of these dialogues is Socrates, Plato's beloved mentor. Socrates himself wrote nothing, but Plato's dialogues are good sources of information about him. How much of the dialogues express Plato's own ideas, and how much of them express Socrates's viewpoint?

There are two general strategies for resolving that puzzle. Both of them involve dividing Plato's writings into three periods: early, middle, and late. Scholars are reasonably confident that we can make such a division, at least in general terms, because linguists have made very thorough analyses of Plato's grammar and vocabulary, which show that he progresses through three phases.<sup>15</sup> His early dialogues tend to be shorter and have a more hesitant Socrates, who disavows claims to knowledge. This period includes the dialogues *Euthyphro*, *Apology*, *Crito*, and a number

15. For an accessible overview of this issue, see Leonard Brandwood, "Stylometry and Chronology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Plato*, ed. Richard Kraut and David Ebrey, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 82–116.

of others. The middle dialogues are generally longer and have a more confident Socrates, who is guiding the conversation. These include the classic dialogues *Republic*, *Symposium*, *Phaedo*, and a number of others. Finally, there are the late dialogues, in which Plato develops increasingly sophisticated vocabulary and no longer makes Socrates the main character. This period includes the dialogues *Sophist*, *Statesman*, *Laws*, and a number of others.

How do the three periods relate to one another? The standard view is developmentalism. Here are the three phases of his writing career, on this view: At first, Plato recounted “conversations with Socrates,” popularizing and memorializing the dazzling brilliance of his teacher. But then he realized that Socrates didn’t have answers to many of his questions. By the time Plato reached his middle period, he started to develop answers and explain them in systematic ways. Thus, the dialogues of the middle period represent a mature Plato, coming into his own voice, putting forth his great ideas, like his famous forms, into a grand picture of the world. Finally, in his third period, he started to cautiously reconsider his grand picture. Was it really as good as he thought? His late dialogues raise some questions about it and give us a “record of honest perplexity” about how to resolve these puzzles.<sup>16</sup> He finished his career with a number of unresolved questions of his own. On the developmental view, the historical Socrates speaks in the early dialogues, while Plato himself comes forward in the middle and later dialogues.<sup>17</sup>

16. This phrase comes from Gregory G. Vlastos, “The ‘Third Man’ Argument in the *Parmenides*,” *Philosophical Review* 63, no. 3 (July 1954): 319–49.

17. For a full, but concise, overview of developmentalism, see Richard Kraut, “Introduction to the Study of Plato,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Plato*, ed. Richard Kraut (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 1–9. For the distinction between the character of Socrates in the early and middle periods, see also Gregory Vlastos, “Socrates *contra* Socrates in Plato,” in his *Socrates, Ironist and Moral Philosopher* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 45–80. For a partial response to Vlastos, see William Prior, “Socrates Metaphysician,” *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 27 (2004): 1–14.

This view has a lot going for it, but it is not the only way to relate Plato's three periods of writing. The other option is unitarianism. According to unitarianism, the shifts in the three periods do not primarily reflect a change in Plato's ideas, but rather reflect his literary genius. Plato adopts different authorial strategies at different times for different purposes. Charles Kahn summarizes the view this way:

The unitarian tradition tends to assume that the various dialogues are composed from a single point of view, and that their diversity is to be explained on literary and pedagogical grounds, rather than as a change in the author's philosophy. Different dialogues are seen as exploring the same problem from different directions, or as leading the reader to deeper levels of reflection.<sup>18</sup>

True, in the early dialogues the character of Socrates denies having knowledge himself, but is that because Plato the author does not know the answer, or because Plato the author does not want to share it with us right now? The unitarian might argue that Plato's goal in the early dialogues is to provoke us into a discussion, just like Socrates did. Before he tries to answer our questions, he wants us fully engaged. So, on the unitarian reading, there is far more commonality between the three periods than might initially be suggested. The partial picture presented in each of the three phases, and the potentially contradictory claims in various dialogues, are, for the most part, simply by-products of Plato's literary genius. The unitarian is saddled with the challenge of explaining purported contradictions, but the view gains strength by showing the strong interconnections between the

18. Charles Kahn, *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue: The Philosophical Use of a Literary Form* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 38.



three periods and the difficulties in sharply distinguishing one period from another.

The large number of Platonic works that survive only makes the interpretive process more difficult. And, on top of that, there is a massive historical controversy over exactly how much of his own deepest beliefs Plato actually wrote down at all. Aristotle tells us in his *Physics* that there were “so-called unwritten doctrines” of Plato that actually represented his highest and deepest beliefs.<sup>19</sup> Plato in a number of places expresses real concerns about the limits of writing in comparison to speaking.<sup>20</sup> In writing, you cannot carry on a genuine dialogue. The page is not a person, so it can’t talk back to you and engage with your questions. You can’t be friends with a page. You can in a sense dialogue with the author, and the best writing creates lively personal encounter, but it can never be the same as talking with another living being.<sup>21</sup>

For the most part, we are going to ignore the nuances of these issues and approach Plato with a focus on the dialogues of his middle period. I will occasionally bring in earlier and later dialogues in a way that smacks of unitarianism, but hopefully the developmentalists will not think I am overreaching. The unwritten doctrines will make their appearance in a few places, but I think that some of the main unwritten doctrines are at least directly hinted at in the text itself, and therefore even someone skeptical of the unwritten part should still take the doctrinal part seriously. Hopefully all the camps will be able to get along in this book.

19. Aristotle, *Physics* 209b13–15.

20. See, for example, *Phaedrus* 274b–279a.

21. See the chapter on Plato in Leo Strauss’s *The City and Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978) for a sensitive discussion of Plato’s authorial intent.

## 2

# FOR THE SPIRITUAL, AGAINST MATERIALISM

The *Republic* is Plato's best-known work, magisterial in its size and scope. Next well known is his *Apology*, short and pithy. In the *Apology*, he describes a courtroom scene in Athens where his teacher, Socrates, defends himself against charges of impiety and corrupting the youth. Its centerpiece is an ethical argument that the health of the soul is more important than the life of the body. Socrates rebukes the Athenians for being more concerned with power, status, and bodily health than they are with making their souls as excellent as possible. In an ethical way, this illustrates the most fundamental commitment of Platonism, which is an unrelentingly spiritual orientation to the world. For a Platonist, the spiritual is more fundamental and more real than the physical. The contrast between body and spirit is perhaps the distinctive mark of Platonism. There are further twists and particularities that distinguish Plato's view from Eastern thought, but understanding this basic orientation at the outset makes a number of his other arguments more comprehensible.

This has huge ethical and social implications, which we will examine in later chapters. Initially, let us focus on the implications for metaphysics (what things exist at the most fundamental level and the fundamental relations of those things) and epistemology (how we know about what exists). Contrasts can often help bring clarity, and so we will also be introduced to Plato's primary intellectual targets. We will learn about the intellectual thought-world he was encountering and how he fought back against that world. He did not come to his ideas in a vacuum, but built on earlier Greek philosophy and responded to what he saw in his time as new, troublesome developments.

## **Against Materialism**

To dig into Plato's metaphysics, consider that the clearest target he seeks to critique is materialism. Materialism is the idea that physical stuff, called matter, is all that exists. You might think that materialism is a recent idea, perhaps invented in the twentieth century by modern scientists or atheistic philosophers. I can assure you it was not. It was alive and well in the fifth century B.C. From the time philosophy emerged in ancient Greece, materialism remained a constant temptation. The earliest philosophers—Thales, Anaximander, and Anaximenes from Miletus—produced accounts of the world that made matter the fundamental explanatory principle. Thales argued that everything was made of water. Anaximander taught that an indefinite, indeterminate physical substance controlled and steered everything. Anaximenes argued that air, either more compressed or more rarified, was the material substance underlying everything. These early philosophers explained the universe by its material properties.<sup>1</sup>

1. See the "Further Reading" section for suggestions for further reading on these early Greek philosophers.

Only a few years later, during the lifetimes of Socrates and Plato, the philosophers Leucippus and Democritus introduced the idea of an atom. Atomism is the paradigmatic materialism in the history of Western thought. An atom, prior to the nineteenth century, was simply a tiny, uncuttable piece of material. It's a miniscule particle that cannot be divided into smaller pieces. Democritus argued that everything we perceive is composed of atoms, and the changing arrangement of the atoms explains the changing perceptions that we experience. When atoms are packed closely together, the material feels hard; when atoms are sharp and pointy, the food tastes bitter. At the most basic level, atomism holds, all that exists are atoms and the void (empty space). All change occurs because atoms move through empty space and bump into one another, and sometimes clump together. Democritus famously wrote, "By convention sweet, by convention bitter, by convention hot, by convention cold, but in reality: atoms and the void."<sup>2</sup>

Plato saw materialism as profoundly problematic. In the first place, it leads to the dissolution of morality. Materialists tend to become relativists or hedonists, and this Plato found deeply problematic.<sup>3</sup> Further, it is an inadequate explanation of the world around us. Plato makes it a central task of his to refute materialism and to show that a spiritual, nonphysical world exists—in fact, it exists more than anything else in the world and is the fundamental ordering and structuring principle of all physical things. What the earliest philosophers thought could be explained by matter, Plato argues can only be explained by spirit. He does this by arguing that there are features of our experience that cannot be explained by matter alone. When we look at the world with our eyes, and then reflect on the world with our minds, we can see that materiality cannot be the entire story.

2. Democritus 69B9, in Robin Waterfield, *The First Philosophers: The Presocratics and the Sophists*, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 176.

3. For further discussion of the ethical issues, see chapter 4.

Plato argues that there are some things that clearly are real, but which clearly cannot be physical. Take beauty, for instance. We say there is such a thing as beauty. (Plato often starts discussions with his interlocutors by having them agree that “we say there is such a thing as X,” such as beauty, virtue, or justice.) A sunset is beautiful, a diamond ring is beautiful, and the Empire State Building is beautiful. Can the beauty of these things be physical? It is hard to see how. Whatever physical property we seek to identify as the beauty-making property will not do the trick. A diamond ring is tiny, so is beauty in the smallness of size? But the Empire State Building is huge and overwhelming. It cannot be the size. The ring is circular, but the Empire State Building is blocky. Beauty is not in the shape. If being circular is what makes things beautiful, then that would rule out the sunset or the Empire State Building from being beautiful. Perhaps you’re thinking: it is the color. The sunset has a rich color that makes it beautiful—the purples, oranges, and reds. Yet the Empire State Building is gray, almost drab. Beauty is not in the color.

There is no physical attribute, perceivable by the senses, that is shared by these various beautiful things. Plato argues that beauty is real, that it is present in the world, and that we can perceive it with our minds, but it itself is not physical. Its fundamental being is not physical, but rational and spiritual. It resides in a realm that is more than physical.

Beauty is not the only thing like this. Take another example: human beings. You as reader and I as author are both human beings. And yet, human beings come in a vast array of sizes, colors, shapes, etc. Some humans are born missing limbs. At a purely physical level, it is difficult to see what we have in common. At an atomic level, we do not have any physical material in common at all. Your body is composed of one set of atoms, while my body is composed of a different set. And yet, we are both human beings. There must be something that we share, if we are right to call both

of us by the same name. At a *structural* level, there clearly is something shared. We all possess a certain *order* or bodily organization that is the same. We are the same, not because of the atoms we're made of, but because of the *form* or *organization* that we possess. We're the same because of what we are—the *kind* of thing we are, not just the matter our bodies are composed of. That “what we are” is something present in the physical, but is not itself physical. Plato calls it the form of human being. It is that nonphysical thing which, when it comes to be present in something physical, makes that physical thing to be of a certain kind or category: human. When the form is imposed on the matter, it becomes a new thing.

Plato has other arguments and examples, but the root idea is this: things have a rational structure to them that gives them order and makes them what they are. This rational structure has being beyond the physical, and the physical is only what it is through participation in this greater rational and spiritual realm.<sup>4</sup>

## Two Worlds

Plato famously creates “two worlds”: the world perceived by the senses and the world perceived by the mind. The world of the senses is impermanent and shifting (more on that later), while the world of reason is eternal and unchanging. Individual things may become more or less beautiful, but beauty itself never changes. Individual dogs may come and go out of existence, but *what it is to be a dog* never changes. These two worlds are, of course, only two different aspects of the same world—there is only one world. But the spiritual realm is more fundamental and real than the physical. The one is eternal and unchanging, while the other is transitory and quickly shifts. The physical realm derives its being and reality from the spiritual. If beauty didn't exist, nothing could

4. Plato's *Phaedo* and *Symposium* contain examples of this style of argument.

be beautiful. If there were no such thing as *what it is to be a human being*, then no human beings would exist. Even the colors and shapes that are basic to physical objects have a nature or essence that makes them what they are. There are such things as redness and being square.

This view explains what is otherwise a very puzzling feature of our language. We have nouns that are names for individual things like “Bob Dylan” or “the Empire State Building,” but we also use nouns for things that are not individual, but are common to multiple individuals, such as “house,” “dog,” “red,” and “beauty.” The name “Bob Dylan” refer to only one object. But “house” is quite different. There are many houses, each of which is equally a house. There’s only one thing that is truly Bob Dylan. So why do we call multiple things by the same name? The most natural explanation is that there is something in common to all those things, by virtue of whose presence we apply the same name. There is something *shared* by all houses by virtue of which we call them a house. This shared thing, Plato says, is a “form” (*eidōs* or *idea*, sometimes translated “Form” or “Idea”) or “essence” (*ousia*). The form or essence is what the thing *really* is.

We cannot explain the world around us without including these forms or essences. They make things what they are, even more than the material out of which they are composed. They tell us what kind of thing something is—where it fits into the overall scheme of the world. It’s not just “that thing”; it’s “a book.” Yes, it is a concrete, specific thing, but its essence tells us what kind of thing it is—where it fits in our taxonomy of being. Things would not be what they are without the presence of these essences. And individual things *become* what they are through participation in these nonphysical essences.

The relationship between these two worlds is one of dependence—the material depends on the spiritual—though Plato famously waffles on the precise language we should use to

express this relationship. He generally calls it “participation”; the physical and temporal *participates in* the spiritual and eternal. The spiritual and eternal comes to *be present in* the physical as things change over time. So a pile of lumber, when acted upon by an agent with the knowledge to bring about the change, can be transformed into a house. “House” comes to be present in the wood through the activity of the homebuilder. What a house is imposes limits and constraints on how the builder can build it. A house can only come into being if it fits in with *what it is to be a house*, something that is eternal and unchanging. The spiritual *structures* the physical, and the physical is what it is only through its incomplete though genuine participation in the more than physical realm.

The spiritual world is the rational world. The nymphs and centaurs of Greek mythology were spiritual beings present in the Greek imagination. Plato, like philosophers before him, rejects these mythological entities in favor of rational, organizing structures. Without the spiritual and rational, the physical world would be disorganized chaos, with no structure whatsoever. In his dialogue *Gorgias*, he says it would be a “world-disorder,” rather than a “world-order.”<sup>5</sup>

Christians can appreciate this insistence upon the spiritual, while still recognizing that Plato’s view is ultimately unsatisfying. That there is a pervasive spiritual aspect to creation, present everywhere, is certainly true, but because Plato does not have an adequate theology, the complete nature of the spiritual world is unknown to him.<sup>6</sup> Compared with materialism, this view is attractive. But it is a long way from a recognition of the true Creator.

In Christianity, there is room for both angels and natural laws, but always derived from the sovereign hand of their Creator.

5. *Gorgias* 508a. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations of Plato in this book are taken from *The Complete Works of Plato*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 1997).

6. See chapter 8 for additional discussion of Plato’s theology.



At creation, God made everything out of nothing, by the word of his power. Creation is the manifestation of the glory of God's eternal power, wisdom, and goodness. That it is structured rationally and orderly is implied by its being caused by wisdom. Platonism, in its insistence on the reality and fundamentality of the nonphysical, concurs with this part of Christian truth. There is an orderly, rational world, which consists of more than the material and which is ultimately comprehensible only when we see the eternal, yet imminent, source of that order.

Later philosophers will question whether Platonic forms are the only way to explain the rational structure of the universe. Aristotle, for example, agrees that there are forms, but he disagrees that they exist in a separate realm or world. For Aristotle, the forms are real and nonphysical, but are only immanent in physical things. There is an essence of beauty, but that essence only exists in beautiful things—it does not and cannot exist anywhere else.<sup>7</sup> Aristotle also draws a distinction between essential forms, which tell us what kind of thing something is, and accidental forms, which tell us an attribute of a thing, but not what kind of thing it is.<sup>8</sup> So “red” and “book” are both forms, but they are not quite the same kind of forms. If something is a book, we know what category of being it falls into, since being a book tells us about its essential nature. But if something is red, we don't yet know its essence. There are red books, red cups, and red dresses. Each of those is a different kind of thing, though each is red. Furthermore, there are not only individual things and forms, but also different kinds of forms: essential ones (which are necessary to the object and are what the object is) and accidental forms (which are not part of the object's nature but are still truly present in the object).

7. See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, I.6, for one example of this argument, which is present in a number of places in Aristotle.

8. See Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Book VII, for one place where he discusses this distinction. Aristotle's discussions of these issues are notoriously dense and difficult.

Plato himself seems to be moving toward this distinction in his later dialogues.<sup>9</sup>

### Teleology

There is one further antimaterialist aspect of Platonism to note before we move on to new subjects: a commitment to teleology. Something is teleological if it is goal oriented—if it moves for the sake of some purpose or end. In a materialist world, nothing moves teleologically. If atoms and the void are all that exist, then the only causes that exist are chance and necessity. Ancient atomists like Leucippus and Democritus recognized and embraced this materialist view of the world. Plato rejected it. He argued instead that purposes and ends are present in the world. Things move *toward goals*; they aren't just pushed from behind by raw force and power.

The clearest examples of this are human beings themselves. We move not just by force, but rationally and intentionally. You decided to sit down and read a book when you had alternative courses of action available. Why did you do this? Whatever your specific reason may have been, generally speaking you did so because you judged this course of action to be the best one.

Imagine if I were to ask you, “Why are you sitting down right now?” and you gave me an answer like this: “I am here because my body is made of flesh and bones, and my limbs have large joints connected by tendons and ligaments, and when the muscles of my legs contract, the bones flex and swivel, and so legs are bent upon the chair.” How would I respond to that answer? I would presumably say something like this: “OK, that is an interesting account of the orientation of the physical parts of your body, but it doesn't give the best explanation for *why* you are sitting.” You are sitting because you judged it best to do so, from among the

9. See, for example, *Sophist* 226b–231d.