

PHILOSOPHY AS A RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE IN PLATO

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## **DECLARATION**

It is important to state that this thesis and the research it contains are entirely my own work, and that I take full responsibility for the argument which follows.



## DEDICATION AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis is given and dedicated to many who have remained in the thoughts of my soul throughout the process of study and writing. The thesis is first of all dedicated to my family: to my parents, Samuel Joseph and Barbara Sue Newman, ‘Mom’ and ‘Dad’, whose abiding and ever present love and support has given me the basis upon which I could follow and build an aspiration and a dream. To my grandparents, The Reverend Earl and Garnet Bazell, ‘Moss and Pops’, whose love and example showed me the way to my own calling and life. To my uncle, and ‘buddy’, Larry Bazell, or ‘Wimp’, whose listening ear and wise thoughts gave me directions on many unseen paths.

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## ABSTRACT

Plato is a philosophical theologian in whom philosophy and theology are synonymous, and the way of philosophy a religious endeavour. However, contemporary scholarship overlooks the importance of the religious dimension of Plato's philosophy, and in particular, neglects an examination of the theological ideas that are involved in this understanding. In answer to this, the thesis argues that, in Plato, philosophy is a religious human experience, that it is within such a perspective that Plato's philosophical theology can be properly understood, and that such a perspective provides both theological and philosophical insights. The thesis offers a unique contribution to scholarship in that it examines the issues of Plato's philosophical theology from the perspective of Plato's philosophy as a religious experience. Secondly, it relates the question of the religious nature of Plato's philosophy to the issue of humanity by seeing Plato's philosophy as a means of human transformation and as a religious way of life and existence. And thirdly, by interacting with recent scholarly interpretation and commentary, seeks ways in which such a perspective provides insights for contemporary theological and philosophical thought. To examine these issues, the thesis employs two overarching themes: philosophy as a religious experience as involved directly with the question of the human situation and life, and the human experience of the divine in Plato. Chapters One and Two consider, respectively, Plato's philosophy as a way of salvation and transformation in the individual and society, and the idea of the philosophical life. Chapters Three through Five examine the religious experience of the Forms as divine reality and the meaning to human existence, the idea of the personal relationship between the philosopher and the divine, and the philosophical experience of divine inexpressibility. Lastly, in the Conclusion, I seek to apply the idea of Plato's philosophy as a religious experience to a contemporary context by raising several of the important issues that are involved when Plato's philosophy is realised as a religious way of life today. The thesis concludes that what is manifested in Plato is a deep interrelation between philosophical and religious thought which gives rise to a vibrant and insightful philosophical theology of Plato's philosophy as a religious human experience.

*Philosophy as a Religious Experience in Plato*

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Now, had Tashtego perished in that head, it had been a very precious perishing; smothered in the very whitest and daintiest of fragrant spermaceti; coffined, hearsed, and tombed in the secret inner chamber and sanctum sanctorum of the whale. Only one sweeter end can readily be recalled – the delicious death of an Ohio honey-hunter, who seeking honey in the crotch of a hollow tree, found such exceeding store of it, that leaning too far over, it sucked him in, so that he died embalmed. How many, think ye, have likewise fallen into Plato's honey head, and sweetly perished there?

— Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*

## INTRODUCTION

In Plato, philosophical and religious thought interrelate. As Iris Murdoch reflects,

Plato...would not have made any sharp distinction between philosophy and religious reflection....Plato's work is full of images and myths at which we must work to see what they mean in terms of everyday morals. Plato is not a remote or abstract or purely 'intellectualist' thinker. He is very close to our own religious and moral tradition, being indeed one of its founders. The mythology of religion does not necessarily vanish but finds a new and different place as religion is newly understood.<sup>1</sup>

This interrelationship between religious reflection and philosophical thought is so profound in Plato, that for the ancient writers, Plato is looked upon, in the words of Gerard Watson, 'not as the philosopher but as the theologian par excellence.'<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, a well-known notion is that the word 'theology' (θεολογία), or 'speech about the gods', is the invention of Plato himself.<sup>3</sup> But, further, it is the endeavour of philosophy (φιλοσοφία) itself, literally as the 'love of wisdom' which, in Plato, proves just as seminal as a religious idea. Such a meaning is reflected in Diogenes Laërtius who writes in his, *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*, that Plato's definition of philosophy is,

the science of those things which are objects of thought and really existent, the science which, he [Plato] says, is concerned with God and the soul as separate from the body. And especially by wisdom he means, philosophy, which is a yearning for divine wisdom.<sup>4</sup>

In a more modern commentary, André-Jean Festugière comments that it is the quest

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<sup>1</sup> Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (Penguin Books, 1992), 510. Murdoch suggests that the blurred boundaries of philosophy and religion can be witnessed in modern times in Indian thinkers.

<sup>2</sup> Gerard Watson, *Greek Philosophy and the Christian Notion of God*, 29.

<sup>3</sup> *Republic* 379a, which is centred in a discussion about the restraining of poets from saying things that are untrue about the gods. See J. O. Urmson, *The Greek Philosophical Vocabulary* (Duckworth, 1990), 164.

<sup>4</sup> Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*, vol. 2, The Loeb Classical Library (William Heinemann: London, 1925), 333. R. J. Hawkins in *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy* (Oxford University Press, 1995) notes Laertius as having, 'a taste for anecdote and paradox, but no talent for philosophical exposition.' (202) Some have even termed him as 'gossipy'. Some have said that Laertius' definition reflects that which is part of his time: Platonic thought of the second century. Yet, his words reflect the nuance of Plato's *Dialogues* at face reading. Also, historically, it reflects the thought of what those who are chronologically closer to Plato think, which would be foolish to simply toss aside as irrelevant.

for the 'Eternal' that is the 'profound current which moves the Platonic doctrine'<sup>5</sup> as, only the eternal exists because it alone is unchanging. All else that the sense perceive, is fleeting and corruptible. They pass, the Eternal remains.<sup>6</sup>

What philosophy is, in Plato, is that which is directly involved with a religious dimension, even a religious quest in which the love of wisdom is, to borrow James Mackey's phrase of Greek philosophy in general, 'basically coterminous' with religion.<sup>7</sup>

For Plato, philosophy is not only the contemplation of the divine, but is a way of life and existence in light of that contemplation. As Pierre Hadot establishes throughout his work, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*,<sup>8</sup> the ancient conception of philosophy is a way of life for the philosopher and not simply an exercise of the mind. In the case of Plato, Plato's philosophy is given so that humanity may have a better existence, so that it may be transformed by the philosophising. As Werner Jaeger notes, the word 'conversion' itself arises in Plato, as the adopting of a philosophy meant a change in a person's life.<sup>9</sup> A similar point is made by Ilham Dilman who points out in his, *Philosophy and the Philosophic Life* that, to Plato, 'philosophy was like a person's morality or religion, something that could inform and change the whole of his life.'<sup>10</sup>

This 'religious' dimension of Plato's philosophy may be defined by the interrelation of two ideas: one, that Plato centres his philosophy upon the encounter with, and experience of the divine and eternal, and secondly, that philosophy is a way of existence and life that is lived in light of this divine encounter. Although no full or exhaustive definition of the term 'religious' exists, these two aspects are central to the use of the term in connection with Plato. Bernard McGinn is helpful in establishing this understanding of 'religious' when he defines the term 'mysticism' in

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<sup>5</sup> André-Jean Festugière, *Personal Religion Among the Greeks* (University of California Press: Berkeley, 1954), 42.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> James Mackey, *The Christian Experience of God as Trinity* (SCM Press Ltd: London, 1983), 282 n. 34.

<sup>8</sup> Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, Arnold Davidson, editor, translated by Michael Chase (Blackwell, 1996).

<sup>9</sup> Werner Jaeger, *Early Christianity and Greek Paideia* (Belknap Press: Cambridge, Mass., 1961), 10. Jaeger notes that A.D. Nock and his work, *Conversion* (Oxford, 1933), compares the conversion of new followers with the psychological attitudes of the quasi-religious philosophical sects of Hellenistic times.

<sup>10</sup> Ilham Dilman, *Philosophy and the Philosophic Life: A Study in Plato's Phaedo* (Macmillan, 1992), 14.



a similar understanding as an ‘attempt to express a direct consciousness of the presence of God’, and in conjunction to this, being ‘a process or way of life’.<sup>11</sup> The two ideas of that which is religious, and that which is mystical, employing McGinn’s definition, convey how that Plato’s philosophy can be seen as a religious experience. Further, and relatedly, Plato’s philosophy seeks to transform humanity. Here, Keith Yandell provides a further helpful commentary that the definition of ‘religion’ implicates, ‘a *diagnosis* (an account of what it takes the basic problem facing human beings to be) and a *cure* (a way of permanently and desirably solving that problem)...’<sup>12</sup> It is in Plato that we find all of these meanings involved, in that Plato’s philosophy is characterised by an encounter with the divine that involves a way of life, and one in which philosophy leads to humanity’s transformation.<sup>13</sup>

However, the religious dimension that Plato’s philosophy displays by its very nature is greatly overlooked or, in some cases disregarded, in theological and philosophical consideration today. On one hand, it is cast aside through a rejection of the religious meaning of Plato’s philosophy itself, and on the other, even though accepting Plato as a religious thinker, Plato is rejected as being a part of the past, and the religious thought, even the theology, he provides, and the philosophically religious way of life he espouses, is considered as unliveable for today. For many, philosophy is not defined by the religiously nuanced and ancient meaning of the ‘love of wisdom’ which involves a way of life, but is defined as a rational activity divorced from its religious and theological meaning altogether. As John Kekes reminds us in the *Oxford Companion to Philosophy*: ‘although wisdom is what philosophy is meant to be a love of, little attention has been paid to this essential component of good lives in post-classical Western philosophy.’<sup>14</sup> For some, we have rightly moved away from this understanding to even regard philosophy as simply the study of the use of words and language. Such an opinion is exemplified in one such as A. J. Ayer, who writes in his *Language, Truth, and Logic* that the true form or definition of philosophy is not a search for an idea of wisdom, but is the analysis of

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<sup>11</sup> Bernard McGinn, *Foundations of Christian Mysticism* (SCM Press: London: 1992), xv-xvi.

<sup>12</sup> Keith Yandell, *Philosophy as Religion: A contemporary introduction* (Routledge: London, 1999), 17.

<sup>13</sup> Catherine Zuckert writes in her work, *Postmodern Platos* (The University of Chicago Press: London, 1996) reflecting on Nietzsche that: ‘[Plato] hoped to change the world entirely.’ (11)

<sup>14</sup> *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, Honderich, Ted, ed. (Oxford University Press, 1995), 912.



terms, which is a way to which even Plato himself belongs.<sup>15</sup> Recently, in another example, the work of Jacques Derrida, so influential in postmodern thought, declares an end to philosophy as we have known it,<sup>16</sup> seeing the individual, as Iris Murdoch comments, ‘as submerged in language.’<sup>17</sup> In such understandings, philosophy is far removed from its meaning in Plato who sees it as intertwined with theology as a contemplation and experience of the divine and the eternal, and as a religious way of life and existence. In reference to these considerations, no one, of course, can deny that a basis for the Platonic dialogue is one of defining and terminology, as Ayer’s words establish, but such an act of definition is not in Plato an end in itself, but a means to wisdom as a description of that which is divine reality. For Plato, the words of the dialogue itself lead the reader to love to that search for wisdom which lies beyond the words, that eternal reality to which his words point. By not understanding this religious dimension of the meaning of philosophy in Plato, theological and philosophical thought has become impoverished of the theological and philosophical insights that the understanding of philosophy as a religious experience provides.

Further, what is also faced in contemporary scholarship is an idea that even though Plato may be regarded as a religious thinker, Plato’s religious, and even theological thought is no longer tenable, offering nothing of insight to theological or philosophical thought today. Exemplified by those such as Don Cupitt, such an opinion sees Plato as a religious thinker, one who even urged others toward a certain way of life, but is one who no longer holds any insight for today, and never really should have had at any time. For Cupitt, philosophy ‘is in turmoil’,<sup>18</sup> and, for him, we have rightly moved beyond Plato in our thought. Cupitt summarises that,

So far all the varied movements of the day have a common theme, it is *anti-platonism*. Plato impressed upon the entire history of Western thought what now looks like a wholly unjustified and superstitious supernaturalism of thought, a supernaturalism of our intellectual standards, a supernaturalism of meanings (essentialism) and of knowledge, and finally *a supernaturalism of philosophy itself* – all of which has suddenly come to seem utterly absurd and unendurable.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Alfred Ayer, *Language, Truth, and Logic* (Victor Gollancz Ltd: London, 1936), 59.

<sup>16</sup> Murdoch, *Metaphysics*, 185.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Cupitt, *Radicals and the Future of the Church* (SCM Press: London, 1989), 41.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

Even the doctrine of Forms, Cupitt comments, are linked to a past anthropological era: ‘The Paleolithic hunter called this thing that guided him a spirit, Plato calls it a Form... and I call it just a word.’<sup>20</sup> As Cupitt goes on to say, all of philosophy for Plato was, and still is a ‘flight’ away from existence as a whole: ‘Philosophy, capital-P Philosophy, had from the beginning been in headlong flight from time and from everything changeable; in flight from the earth, in flight from the body and the passions, in flight from biology and history.’<sup>21</sup> What he and ‘everyone else’ loves, says Cupitt, is that which Plato does not: the ‘changing, watery, once-only, volatile, ephemeral, shadowy, trembling, emotional, and briefly glimpsed.’<sup>22</sup> For Cupitt, Plato is one who is part of the past, one who misses the true and helpful understanding of life and existence by desiring some eternal realm out of touch with life in general.

However, the argument put forward by those such as Cupitt is founded upon a failure to see that what is termed as Plato’s weakness is actually the strength of his philosophy; Plato’s philosophy is not a means of escape from life, but is a way of dealing with human existence, and Plato’s philosophical theology is a means in which a philosophically religious way of life is established. Cupitt’s point, that Plato engages in ‘superstitious supernaturalism’ loses its lustre when this true understanding of Plato’s philosophy is obtained – as Iris Murdoch writes, to accuse Plato of such is simply to misunderstand Plato’s philosophy altogether.<sup>23</sup> Interestingly, it is this very aspect and appreciation of philosophy being a way of wisdom and way of life that has led some philosophers to seek help in Plato himself. As Catherine Zuckert writes in *Postmodern Platos*, philosophers as varied as Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Leo Strauss, and even Jacques Derrida, though all strong critics of Plato, have ‘been primarily concerned with philosophy,’ and in so doing, ‘have all gone back to Plato to discover what philosophy originally was.’<sup>24</sup> As Zuckert notes reflecting on the thought of Nietzsche particularly, philosophy, for Plato,

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<sup>20</sup> Don Cupitt, *After God: The Future of Religion* (Weidenfield and Nicolson: London, 1997), 38.

<sup>21</sup> Cupitt, *Radicals and the Future of the Church*, 41.

<sup>22</sup> Don Cupitt, *The Revelation of Being* (SCM Press: London, 1998), 18.

<sup>23</sup> Murdoch, *Metaphysics*, 455.

<sup>24</sup> Catherine Zuckert, *Postmodern Platos*, 7.

did not consist simply in the formulation of arguments and doctrines. On the contrary, philosophy was way of life; indeed, philosophy constituted the only form of human life that was truly satisfying and, as such, could be affirmed to be worthwhile in and of itself.<sup>25</sup>

Conveying an overall dissatisfaction, Zuckert notes that, ‘these thinkers are not interested so much in what Plato meant to his contemporaries as they are in what his work has meant and still can mean for later generations.’<sup>26</sup> To add to Zuckert’s comment, the most creative thought of recent scholarship in Plato has been not only to address the question of philosophy as a way of life, but to address this understanding in its religious terms in Plato.

For some thinkers the idea that Plato is a religious thinker for the modern day is one that is deeply considered. Iris Murdoch has set forth in her work, particularly through the idea of the Good, a treatment of Plato as a religious thinker which raises the issue once again of Plato not only as a theologian, but one whose philosophy offers a philosophical-religious perspective for the modern age. Exemplified in her *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, and *The Fire and the Sun*, Plato is seen as one in whom philosophy and religious thought, metaphysics and morality meet. As Fergus Kerr has written, Murdoch is one who, ‘insists that Plato is a deeply religious thinker...’<sup>27</sup>; but not a thinker simply of the past but one who speaks even to the present age, as Murdoch herself has said, ‘Plato is not only the father of our philosophy, he is our best philosopher.’<sup>28</sup> Not only in Murdoch, but also in others is the quest seen to understand more fully the religious dimension of Plato’s philosophy. Scholars such as Gerard Watson, Karl Jaspers, Simone Weil, Eric Vogelin, and others, have seen the study of Plato to be that which offers religious insight.

With this in mind, this thesis addresses the lack of understanding of the religious dimension of Plato’s philosophy that is found in recent theological and philosophical scholarship by examining Plato’s philosophy as a religious human experience and a way of life, and engaging with the theological-philosophical ideas that are manifested in this perspective. Born out of my own experience of reading

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>27</sup> Fergus Kerr, *Immortal Longings: Visions of Transcending Humanity* (SPCK: London, 1997), 86.

<sup>28</sup> Iris Murdoch in a conversation with Bryan Magee; Iris Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1997), 6.

Plato, I take the perspective that Plato provides an interrelation of philosophical and religious thought which establishes Plato as a religious thinker and his philosophy as a religious experience. Further, such a perspective in turn provides a basis for not only understanding Plato's philosophical theology, but sees this experience and his philosophical theology as establishing both theological and philosophical insights for contemporary thought.

To examine Plato in this way, I concern myself with three underlying issues: the theological ideas that are involved in considering philosophy as a religious experience in Plato, the ways that these involve humanity and human existence, and thirdly, the possible insights these provide based upon an interaction with contemporary interpreters and commentators. One of the primary considerations of the thesis is examining the issues of Plato's philosophical theology from the perspective of Plato's philosophy as a religious experience. In adopting such a perspective, I have not sought simply to rehash long considered theological ideas, but to raise these theological issues as they apply to human existence and within a contemporary context. Even the use of Plato's texts is one which seeks these religious ideas by interacting with what is being stated in the text, but adopting a thematic approach and not a treatment of one specific dialogue. By employing this thematic approach, I am able to examine various issues of Plato's philosophical theology in depth by employing different texts instead of being limited to the depth of one particular dialogue, examining Plato's philosophical theology as a whole. The issues involved within the idea of Plato's philosophy as a religious experience blend and correlate philosophical and religious ideas together to the point that the theological becomes the philosophical and vice versa.

The thesis also contributes to a perspective of Plato's philosophy as a whole as one that is a religious experience which involves itself within the human situation. The question of philosophy as a religious experience as one of an encounter with the divine is centred upon and involved directly with humanity in Plato, providing meaning and as a way of life and existence. The religious nature of Plato's philosophy is one that is for Plato fulfilled in not simply being an idle speculation about the divine, but one which addresses and applies itself directly to human existence. In his work, *The Religion of Socrates*, Mark McPherran argues that the

religious nature found in Socratic-Platonic philosophy is one which comes from the human response to life in general:

without meaning to define it, religion is in its essence simply part of the common human response to the uncharted territories of life (trying to comprehend their mysteries and terrors, trying to express gratitude for their joys), and in that broad sense we are all of us religious and surrounded by coreligionists.<sup>29</sup>

Plato's concern for the human question is a central theme in the *Dialogues* as a whole, and the experience of the divine to which his philosophy strives is one that applies directly to, and is directly involved within, the human experience.<sup>30</sup>

Finally, the thesis also attempts to raise the ways in which the theological ideas within the perspective of Plato's philosophy as religious experience give insight to theological thought today. Employing contemporary scholarly commentary and interpretation, the thesis attempts to bring Platonic philosophical theology to give insight upon current theological endeavour. To do this I interact with those such as Iris Murdoch throughout the thesis who represent an interpretation of Plato that is aware of him as a religious thinker, but one that also seeks to bring such an interpretation to bear upon contemporary thought.

The structure of the thesis is built upon two over-arching themes: one is the question of the religious nature of philosophy and the philosophical life and secondly, the question of the human experience of the divine in Plato's philosophy. In the first two chapters I explore the question of humanity in Plato and the issue of Plato's philosophy as a way of salvation and transformation. In this, I discuss Plato's views of humanity, addressing what Plato perceives to be the human situation of facing evil and how that philosophy leads to a transformation of the soul. I show through Plato's texts, as well as commentary and interpretation, that Plato perceives his philosophy to be as a salvation for humanity which makes a way of ascent to the

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<sup>29</sup> Mark McPherran, *The Religion of Socrates* (Penn State University Press, 1996), 11. Because of his emphasis on this human aspect, some have even regarded Socrates as an early representative of the existential approach to philosophy. See Emmanuel Mounier, *Existentialist Philosophies: An Introduction* (Rockcliff: London, 1948), 134-135: 'Socrates became the founder of a doctrine of absolute morality... not of man as an Athenian or a Greek, but of *man as man*,' he is regarded as a predecessor to existential enquiry.' Also see, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 'Existentialism' (1978), vol. 7, page 78, where Socrates is mentioned.

<sup>30</sup> Bryan Magee's words echo to Plato's quest in that Magee describing his attraction to 'humanist-existentialism', that it was based partly on that he, 'had always believed that the most important questions in philosophy concern not knowledge but existence.' Bryan Magee, *Confessions of a Philosopher* (Phoenix: London, 1997), 331.



divine necessary. Yet, I argue, such an ascent is not an escape from the world, but an ascent which is to be followed by a turning toward the world to address the human situation. The chapter raises the issue that, for Plato, philosophy applies to human existence and is the way in which humanity finds meaning and value in existence. In the second chapter I examine the importance of the idea of philosophy in Plato as a religious way of life. In this, I take up the five themes of philosophy as learning to die, knowing oneself, the idea of the dialogue, the idea of embodiment, and the notion of becoming like God, *homoiosis theo*, as being respectively the symbol, dictum, practice, embodiment, and goal of the philosophical life. As I show in the chapter, the philosophical way of life for Plato is one of human existence, a way of living that is necessary, to Plato, for humanity to live in order to find truth and meaning in life. To Plato, such a life is a necessary carrying out into existence of all that philosophy is and represents so that it is not simply metaphysical speculation, but a carrying out of the philosophical ideal into human existence.

In the third chapter, I argue that a proper understanding of the doctrine of the Forms must see it as conveying a religious encounter with the divine. Beginning with the religious experience of the reality of the Forms, I discuss as well the aspects of participation (*methexis*), the immanence and transcendence of the Forms, the striving of union with the divine, culminating in the relationship of the human soul to the Forms in the idea of *anamnesis* as a notion which betrays the soul as returning to the divine. I argue, as well, that, based upon contemporary commentary, there is an existential meaning of the Forms as Plato sees them as applicable to life. In this I explore the topics of the nearness and distance of the Forms both metaphysically and existentially, as they involve and attach themselves in relation to the soul. Following on from this aspect of relationship, I explore the personal devotion of the philosopher, and the experience of relationship between the philosopher and the divine in Plato. In light of this, I examine the philosopher's relationship to the Forms, to a personal God, and the relationship of God to the Forms focusing upon the scholarly interpretation of the Forms as pictures of God. Following from the work of Karl Jaspers, I establish that Plato speaks of a God of many names, but, taking on the ideas of Iris Murdoch as well, that it is an idea of a divine which goes beyond a personal God altogether.

Lastly, in chapter five, I argue that one of the ultimate expressions of the divine in Plato is the doctrine of the divine as inexpressible and that this is the culminating experience of the philosophical life and the culminating understanding of the divine in his philosophical theology. In this chapter I argue that Plato speaks of the divine as one that is beyond expression, a divine which words cannot fully make known. Yet, I view this theological notion to be one governed by the idea of experience in that what Plato expresses in the Forms and most poignantly in the *Seventh Letter*, is the inexpressibility of the divine as a philosophical experience of the soul. This experience, based upon the *Seventh Letter*, represents the culmination of Platonic philosophical theology as it joins together a profound expression of the divine to the depth of philosophical experience.

Finally, in the Conclusion, I examine Plato's philosophical theology in a contemporary theological context by raising several of the important theological issues that arise when Plato's philosophy is realised as a religious way of life today. I argue that Plato's is a theological perspective that centres upon a theology of the human experience of philosophy as a religious endeavour and from this there arises not only a theological perspective regarding the human experience of the religious endeavour of philosophy itself, but it is such an experience that leads to a conception of the divine that goes beyond traditional understanding. Plato's philosophical theology is insightful for today, it is argued, in that it expresses a theological understanding of the human experience of philosophy in general that, though going beyond traditional theological constructs, forms an insightful religious way of life today.

What is shown in this thesis is that in Plato, philosophy is a religious experience. And it is within such a perspective that a means is provided of understanding Plato's philosophical theology as a whole. What is seen through this perspective is that in Plato is a profound interrelationship of philosophical and religious ideas that manifests a vibrant and insightful philosophical theology.

## CHAPTER ONE: PHILOSOPHY AND THE WAY OF HUMAN TRANSFORMATION

Plato's philosophy is a religious experience in that it is a transformation of the soul through an encounter with the divine, involving itself directly in the question of humanity as a quest for salvation. Characterised by the ascent of the soul to envision the divine and eternal, Plato's philosophy is not a turning away from the world and existence, but one which sees philosophy as that through which humanity finds meaning, and as that which directly transforms human life and existence. In this chapter we examine the idea of Plato's philosophy as a way of transformation through the way that it approaches the human situation, and the way that the meaning of human existence is given through the endeavour of philosophy and the ascent to the divine.

### The Human Situation and the Search for Salvation

To begin to see Plato's philosophy as a religious experience is to understand Plato's philosophical and theological view of the human situation. For Plato, humanity constantly faces the flux and evil of the world in which it lives. Human society is plagued by the love of materialism, power, and prestige that causes the injustice and evil in the world, which pulls the soul to its destruction. Yet, for Plato, it is through philosophy that such a situation is addressed, and within philosophy does humanity find its true existence, a means to live in the light of the eternal, which in turn, provides the only meaningful existence.

The dramatic nature of the human situation for Plato is seen in the way that Plato's philosophy confronts humanity with the choice between the philosophical way of life and the way of the world and its system. In the *Apology*, the reader is implicitly given a choice in Socrates' words to either join with him or to side with his accusers. Socrates describes the importance, and even the religious undertaking of the philosophical life:

This, I do assure you, is what my God commands, and it is my belief that no greater good has ever befallen you in this city than my service to my God. For I spend all my time going about trying to persuade you, young and old, to



make your first and chief concern not for your bodies nor for your possessions, but for the highest welfare of you souls.... (30a-b)<sup>1</sup>

For Socrates, the pursuit of philosophy is a divine command (κατὰ τὸν θεόν; 23b), even a fulfilment of the cause of God (23c) calling individuals to lead the philosophical life, to ‘let no day pass without discussing goodness’, to examine one’s own soul through philosophy, and that it is only such a life that is worth living. (*Apology* 38a) Similarly, in the *Republic*, Socrates, recounting the tale of Er and the judgement of one’s soul after death, establishes the true meaning of what philosophy accomplishes:

But if we are guided by me we shall believe that the soul is immortal and capable of enduring all extremes of good and evil, and so we shall hold ever to the upward way and pursue righteousness with wisdom always and ever, that we may be dear to ourselves and to the gods both during our sojourn here and when we receive our reward.... (621c-d)<sup>2</sup>

What is clearly seen is that philosophy, in Plato, is a means of transformation for humanity, a way of life that is centred in the divine, one that is not simply an option or a mental exercise, but one that involves the depth of the human soul. For Plato, it is only through philosophy that one encounters the divine and gains wisdom, which is ultimately necessary for humanity to have.

The idea of the transformation through philosophy characterises Plato’s work as a whole. Reflecting upon the meaning of such passages and the understanding of Plato’s philosophy as a whole, a number of commentators observe that Plato’s philosophy takes on a deeper religious aspect in that it is a search for salvation. Gerard Watson writes that such an understanding of philosophy had been learned by Plato from Pythagoras who understood that, ‘Salvation would come through philosophy.’<sup>3</sup> This salvific nature is seen in that it answers the dilemma that humanity suffers in the Heraclitean flux, as James Mackey notes: ‘it was the evils associated with flux and change that sent Plato... on the quest for wisdom – and salvation.’<sup>4</sup> Iris Murdoch comments that such a quest characterises Plato’s work as a

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise stated, texts are taken from *The Complete Dialogues of Plato*, Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, eds. (Princeton University Press, 1961).

<sup>2</sup> Paul Shorey notes that σωζειν ‘is here used in its higher sense, approaching the idea of salvation....’ *Republic II*, (Loeb Classical Library, William Heinemann, Ltd: Cambridge, Mass., 1935), 519.

<sup>3</sup> Watson, *Greek Philosophy and the Christian Notion of God* (The Columba Press: Dublin, 1994) 13.

<sup>4</sup> James Mackey, *The Christian Experience of God as Trinity* (SCM Press, Limited: London, 1983), 107.

whole in that it is largely concerned with how one may know ‘salvation’<sup>5</sup> as seen in Plato’s *Republic* with ‘the persistent questioning of Socrates by the young men’ as to what is the ‘salvation of the individual’, seen in the questions of, ‘What is justice?’ or ‘How are we to become virtuous?’<sup>6</sup> The philosopher in Plato is literally the individual who loves wisdom, the one who travels, as Eric Voegelin puts it, ‘the road toward salvation.’<sup>7</sup> The philosopher is a representative of ‘man in the anxiety of his fall from being; and philosophy is the ascent toward salvation for Everyman’.<sup>8</sup> This salvific aspect is not seen by simply examining how often Plato uses the word ‘salvation’ (σωτήρια), but arises from an understanding and interpretation of what philosophy is, and means for humanity in Plato, as one involves oneself within the *Dialogues* as a whole. If we concentrate upon what philosophy means to Plato, taking into account various interpretations which raise this issue, we see that Plato sees his philosophy as answering the problems of human existence.

As it is a reflection upon salvation for humanity, Plato’s philosophy is a deep pondering of human existence. Through his philosophy Plato attempts to confront the evil that is within the world and to establish a stability and meaning for life through a quest for wisdom that is ultimately found in the divine. According to Aristotle, Socrates perceived a lack in previous thinkers in addressing the human situation, and it is this that sent him, says Aristotle, to look away from the study of the physical universe to the question of morality,<sup>9</sup> or in other words, back to the soul. In fact, the question of humanity is one that appears even before Socrates in many Presocratic philosophers especially those such as Xenophanes, Pythagoras, Parmenides, Heraclitus, and Empedocles, whose impetus is to help humanity through their philosophy. Reflecting on this idea, Eric Voegelin in his essay, ‘Reason: The Classic Experience’ writes that the ancient philosophers as a whole, ‘engaged in an

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<sup>5</sup> Iris Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1997), 414.

<sup>6</sup> Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (Penguin Books, 1992), 24. As Michael Morgan notes, through the Orphic-Bacchic rites, the transformation of the soul was achieved through emotional excitement which Plato changes to be a transformation that is achieved through rational inquiry, or philosophy, so that ‘a life aimed at salvation takes the form of... a philosophical life.’ Michael Morgan, ‘Plato and Greek Religion’, *Cambridge Companion to Plato*, edited by Richard Kraut (Cambridge University Press, 1992), 232.

<sup>7</sup> Eric Voegelin, *Plato and Aristotle* (Louisiana State University Press, 1957), 70.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics* I. 987b, *Loeb Classical Library*, William Tredennick, transl. (London: William Heinemann, 1933).

act of resistance against the personal and social disorder of their age.<sup>10</sup> Yet, it is Plato who represents an acute emphasis upon humanity through his attention given to the soul and how that humanity may be transformed through philosophy. As Voegelin continues, reflecting on Plato, ‘Philosophy is not a doctrine of right order, but the light of wisdom that falls on the struggle; and help is not a piece of information about truth, but the arduous effort to locate the forces of evil and identify their nature.’<sup>11</sup>

At the basis of Plato’s thinking about human existence is an assumption that there is something wrong within the world, namely that humanity suffers from the actuality of evil that pervades society, and that there erupts from this a meaninglessness of existence which only the contemplation of the divine can remedy. As an ancient Greek, Murdoch writes that Plato takes, ‘a fairly grim view of the human situation’,<sup>12</sup> but it is the human situation without philosophy. Through the love of wisdom, Plato desires to move the individual beyond the human dilemma toward the divine wherein is found the remedy for humanity, and the point at which all things find meaning and full existence. However, such a desire does not mean an escape from reality, as Nietzsche wrongly determined when he wrote, ‘Plato is a coward in face of reality’ as he ‘flees into the ideal.’<sup>13</sup> What Plato sees, contrary to Nietzsche, is that philosophy addresses human existence providing for it a guide to truth and justice. Indeed, Plato involved himself within human existence even in his own time, as Murdoch reminds us, as he lived an active life during some of the most violent times in history:

Plato lived, and lived dangerously, as an active participant through one of the beastliest and most violent periods of recorded human history. His philosophical imagination, though much concerned with politics, does not focus on these historical details, the rare references to which (for instance at *Symposium* 220-21 and *Theaetetus* 142) are in effect aesthetic.<sup>14</sup>

His involvement in human existence is seen even on a more personal level, as Plato was profoundly affected by the sense of injustice that surrounded the death of

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<sup>10</sup> Eric Voegelin, ‘Reason: The Classic Experience’, *Anamnesis* (University of Notre Dame Press: Notre Dame and London, 1978), 89.

<sup>11</sup> Voegelin, *Plato and Aristotle*, 62-3.

<sup>12</sup> The Pythagoreans regarded the body as a prison; Murdoch, *Existentialists*, 397.

<sup>13</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols and The Anti-Christ*, R. J. Hollingdale, translator (Penguin Books: 1968), 107.

<sup>14</sup> Murdoch, *Metaphysics*, 123.

Socrates who was, in Plato's mind, put to death by the will of those who loved their possessions and fame rather than philosophy and the truth it conveyed.<sup>15</sup> Thus, Plato's philosophy is a reaction to the injustice and evil of society and meaninglessness that this brings, through the contemplation of the eternal and divine which attempts to establish goodness and meaning *within* the human dilemma. In this regard, philosophy for Plato is never divorced from its societal impact. As Goethe writes,

Difficult though it might be to detect it, a certain polemical thread runs through any philosophical writing... Thus Plato's discussions are often not only directed *to* something but also directed *against* it.<sup>16</sup>

Plato's philosophy is not only an acknowledgement of the meaninglessness that life without philosophy presents, but is a polemical response to that meaninglessness as well. As Nicolas Berdyaev writes,

Philosophy not only wants to perceive meaning, it desires that meaning shall be triumphant. Philosophy will not come to terms with a meaningless world datum, it seeks either to break through to another world, a world which has meaning, or to discover the wisdom which brings light into the world, and changes human existence in it for the better.<sup>17</sup>

To Plato, philosophy 'breaks through' the lack of meaning in the world to envision the divine which is the only ideal that can transform existence, and through this envisioning of the divine, alone, does humanity find meaning. Because of its reflection upon the divine, Plato's philosophy is a theological statement addressing societal and even existential concerns.

In her essay, 'God in Plato', Simone Weil reflects upon the role of philosophy in society in Plato's *Republic* by examining how that philosophy in Plato is a source of salvation standing against the evil perpetuated by society. For Weil, the pull of society is the greatest obstacle against wisdom, even more than the flesh, and the image that Plato portrays of society is as a 'terrible' force.<sup>18</sup> In fact, such a theme is 'of first importance', writes Weil, one that runs throughout Plato's works, though an idea not always specifically expressed and one that is never given enough

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<sup>15</sup> The *Apology* is Plato's great record of this injustice.

<sup>16</sup> Gadamer, Hans-Georg. *Dialogue and Dialectic: Eight Hermeneutical Studies on Plato*. Christopher P. Smith, transl. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), 39.

<sup>17</sup> Nicolas Berdyaev, *The Beginning and the End* (Geoffrey Bles: London, 1952), 4.

<sup>18</sup> Simone Weil, *Intimations of Christianity*, Elisabeth Chase Geissbuhler, ed. & transl. (Routledge: London and New York, 1957 – reissue 1998), 84.

importance.<sup>19</sup> In the *Republic* Socrates asks, ‘...do you see any salvation (σωτηρίαν) for someone who is by nature a philosopher, to insure that he’ll practice philosophy correctly to the end?’ (494a) For Socrates, the philosopher’s ‘salvation’ depends upon divine protection, as Socrates says, ‘if anything is saved and turns out well in the present condition of society and government, in saying that the providence of God (θεοῦ μοίρα) preserves it you will not be speaking ill.’ (493a)<sup>20</sup> The theological meaning of these words is noticed by Weil as she writes, ‘it is impossible to affirm more categorically that grace is the unique source of salvation, that salvation comes from God and not from man.’<sup>21</sup> On this account, Weil sees Plato’s philosophy as not a philosophy at all, nor even ‘a search for God by means of reason, but ‘an orientation of the soul toward grace.’<sup>22</sup> For Weil, wherever it can, ‘public opinion imposes itself under one form or another in every society without exception,’<sup>23</sup> but it is the philosopher who is called away from the popular opinion to seek salvation in divine truth.

Though we can say Weil’s comments are deeply penetrating, we cannot however gather from this that Plato attempts to throw society to the side using his philosophy as a means to flee from society, but that Plato seeks to transform the individual and society through his philosophy. In Plato, it is philosophy as the contemplation of the divine that provides the contrastual element to the evil that pervades society, and the philosophical life as the model that counteracts a life given simply to pleasing societal norms. In this, the philosophical life provides a radical way of existence that sees the knowledge of one’s own soul as the true mark of existence (*Alcibiades I*). Without such qualifications, Weil’s argument is too strong against society as a lost cause, for to Plato society is transformed through philosophy and not cast away. The objective, for Plato, is to change society not overlook it. As Socrates says in the *Republic*:

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Paul Shorey in his translation of the *Republic* (Loeb Classical Library, William Heinemann, Ltd: Cambridge, Mass., 1935) translates θεοῦ μοίρα as God’s providence and gives various references of the providence of God mentioned in other dialogues: *Apology* 33c; *Phaedo* 58e; *Protagoras* 328e; *Meno* 99e; *Phaedrus* 244c; *Laws* 642c, 875c; *Ion* 534c. (Vol. II, 38) Liddell and Scott note that *moira* indicates a ‘part, portion, division’ of something as opposed to the whole (*A Lexicon: Abridged from Liddell and Scott’s Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford, 1926), 450).

<sup>21</sup> Simone Weil, *Intimations*, 85.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*



No one whose thoughts are truly directed towards the things that are, Adeimantus, has the leisure to look down at human affairs or to be filled with envy and hatred by competing with people. Instead, as he looks at and studies things that are organized and always the same, that neither do injustice to one another nor suffer it, being all in a rational order, he imitates them and tries to become as like them as he can. Or do you think that someone can consort with things he admires without imitating them? (500b)<sup>24</sup>

The philosopher is a model to society, one who affects the society by being a part of it as an example of life, but one who stands outside of the society's influence by envisioning and imitating the divine in justice and order in life. The philosopher thus becomes an embodiment of the divine *within* the society offering a contrast to the regular life that simply follows society blindly. Plato is not nihilistic, but realistically challenges the society with a call to wisdom that is founded upon the divine, which, for him, offers a transformation of existence. The salvific nature of Plato's philosophy is that it offers meaning to human existence in that through philosophy humanity finds the true way of life. Plato's 'philosophical imagination', Iris Murdoch writes, is fostered by a desire to bring meaning and help to the individual and society.<sup>25</sup> Reflecting upon ancient philosophy as a whole, Eric Voegelin writes that, 'the reality experienced by the philosophers is specifically human' in that it is 'man's existence in a state of unrest.'<sup>26</sup> This experience is seen in Plato in the *Republic*, as Voegelin writes, that it is 'the anxiety of the fall from being' that forms the underlying theme of the dialogue.<sup>27</sup>

This question of the meaningfulness of philosophy for humanity in Plato's mind is, at least in part, a reaction to the philosophies of his predecessors Heraclitus and Parmenides. Acutely aware of the lack of existential meaning that Heraclitus' notion of flux presents, Plato perceives the dilemma of all things being in the throes of change, seeing no rest for the soul except in a notion of changeless Forms and an unchanging God. (*Republic* 379ff.) On the other hand, Parmenides' philosophy,

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<sup>24</sup> G. Grube translation, revised by C.D.C. Reeve, *Plato: Complete Works*, John M. Cooper, ed. (Hackett Publishing Company: Indianapolis, 1997).

<sup>25</sup> Another example of such a persuasion is Boethius who, feeling tragedy on a personal level after being cast away into prison by Theodoric, penned the *Consolation of Philosophy* to not only bring help to himself, but to offer a philosophical light to his society as well. His work takes on a vivid personal tone of passion as he finds salvation through the vision of the lady Philosophy.

<sup>26</sup> Voegelin, *Anamnesis*, 92.

<sup>27</sup> Voegelin, *Plato and Aristotle*, 62.

though satisfying a search for unity,<sup>28</sup> is for Plato in need of a principle of life so that it is applicable to human existence. (*Sophist* 249ff) Karl Popper, though one of the strongest critics of Plato in modern times, reflects upon this perception, and calling to mind the influence of both Heraclitus and Parmenides on Plato's thought, writes that,

Much as he (Plato) disliked and despised this empirical world of flux, he was, at bottom, most deeply interested in it. He wanted to unveil the secret of its decay, of its violent changes, and of its unhappiness. He hoped to discover the means of its salvation. He was deeply impressed by Parmenides' doctrine of an unchanging, real, solid, and perfect world behind this ghostly world in which he suffered....<sup>29</sup>

Popper admits that though Plato attempted to look constantly away from the world to find wisdom in the divine, there is also the deep search for meaning within the world which involves him within an equally deep interaction and pondering of existence. It is a deeply felt realisation of human existence that governs Plato's philosophy as the attempt to rectify the acute sense of change and evil by the philosophical contemplation of the divine.

The answer for giving meaning to human existence for Plato is found in the contemplation of the divine. In the *Apology*, as well as in the *Republic*, and even the *Laws*, human existence is depicted as having no intrinsic meaning on its own, but a worth that is found in reference to the divine. In the *Apology*, considering the worth of human wisdom, Socrates declares that,

Real wisdom is the property of God, and this oracle is his way of telling us that human wisdom has little or no value... The wisest of you... is he who has realized, like Socrates, that in respect of wisdom he is really worthless. (23a)

The reciprocal effect is that through knowing one's own worthlessness in regard to wisdom one begins to know wisdom itself, and only in the loss of the sense of one's self-importance is wisdom found. Stated in the *Republic*, human life in and of itself is not something important at all: 'Do you think that a mind habituated to thoughts of grandeur and contemplation of all time and all existence can deem this life of a

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<sup>28</sup> Murdoch writes that the idea of a self-contained unity of limited whole is a fundamental instinctive concept. The urge to prove that where we intuit unity there really is unity is a deep emotional motive to philosophy, to art, to thinking itself. Intellect is naturally one-making. (*Metaphysics*, 1) We naturally cannot tolerate chaos, or the chaotic derivatives of violence, or the tearing apart of all knowledge, as Murdoch writes, for there is an implicit fear in us of chaos, which is the fear of 'plurality, diffusion, senseless accident....' (*Metaphysics*, 1)

<sup>29</sup> Karl R. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, vol. 1 (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd, 1952), 28-29.

man a thing of great concern [μέγα τι; of any great importance]?’ (486a)<sup>30</sup> Further, in the *Laws*, the way of wisdom, says the Athenian, is to:

keep our seriousness for serious things, and not waste it on trifles, and that, while God is the real goal of all beneficent serious endeavor, man, as we said before, has been constructed as a toy (παίγνιον) for God, and this is, in fact, the finest thing about him. (803c)

Human life, says the Athenian, is about ‘play’ (τῶν παιδῶν) (803d), making proper sacrifices but not to be too serious about the entire matter. We are to encourage the children to, ‘live out their lives as what they really are – puppets in the main, though with some touch of reality about them, too.’ (804b) When accused of having a low view of humanity, the Athenian replies that his mind has been upon God and not with humanity at all:

Marvel not, Megillus, but forgive me. For when I spoke thus, I had my mind set on God, and was feeling the emotion to which I gave utterance (πρὸς γὰρ τὸν θεὸν ἀπιδῶν καὶ παθῶν εἶπον ὅπερ εἶρηκα νῦν). Let us grant, however, if you wish, that the human race is not a mean thing, but worthy of serious attention. (804c)

Although there is an apparent dearth of meaning to human existence conveyed in Plato, human affairs, though not serious, are, as Iris Murdoch writes, to be taken seriously.<sup>31</sup> Defending Plato’s stance, Murdoch writes that by the time he wrote the *Laws*, Plato ‘had plenty of reasons for thinking poorly of mankind.’<sup>32</sup> However, she writes, Plato’s tone ‘suggests a religious attitude rather than a resentful one,’ one that sees God as the ‘measure of all things and not man.’ (Laws 716b)<sup>33</sup>

For Plato, humanity must have its attention drawn toward the eternal and divine before life is truly lived and existence is to have any significance. As the wisdom that is needed is found in the divine, humanity, for Plato, must ascend beyond the physical to glimpse the intangible in order for existence to be worth living. Philosophy is a means of salvation and transformation as it is the soul’s ascent toward the divine in which it finds its true existence. It is to this subject we now turn.

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<sup>30</sup> Ἡ ὄν ὑπάρχει διανοία μεγαλοπρέπεια καὶ θεωρία παντὸς μὲν χρόνου, πάσης δὲ οὐσίας, οἷόν τε οἶει τούτω μέγα τι δοκεῖν εἶναι τὸν ἀνθρώπινον βίον;

<sup>31</sup> Murdoch, *Existentialists*, 397.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*



## The Way of Ascent as Transformation

For Plato, the remedy of the human situation is the soul's ascent to the divine and it is philosophy that provides the medium through which this ascent takes place. Such an ascent is not, for Plato, an option but a necessity, a need within humanity to find wisdom within a world given to flux and meaninglessness.<sup>34</sup> As Hans Urs von Balthasar writes, 'for Plato, no philosophy can exist without it [ascent].'<sup>35</sup> Because wisdom is only found in the knowledge of the divine, the experience of ascent is one in which the philosopher goes beyond the physical and sensual and encounters the divine, an encounter that directly affects existence. In this idea, Plato addresses what he perceives as a need of human existence to ascend from a world of flux and change and be transformed, but from this transformation to live in the world. In the images conveyed in Plato's Myth of the Cave, the notion of wonder, and in the seminal doctrine of Eros, we find the human aspect of transformation and salvation through ascent deeply conveyed.

### *The Cave: Periagoge and the Journey of the Soul*

In the parabolic myth of the Cave (*Republic* 514-517), Plato gives a picture of humanity and the situation of the world. Situated with the exposition of the Good (*Republic* 507ff) and the image of the dividing line (*Republic* 509dff), the myth of the Cave presents a picture of the human situation and its salvation in turning from the 'shadows' of the world to the 'light' of the divine. Socrates pictures human beings living in a cave, with the entrance 'a long way up, open to the light and wide as the cave itself', chained and fettered to the wall of the cave, unable to turn. The only light in the darkness is a fire far above and behind them, and in front of the fire is a low wall on which people, some talking and others in silence, carry statues of all sorts of things. All that the prisoners see are the shadows of the objects cast by the dim light of the fire, and all they hear are the voices of those who in the background

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<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> Erik Davis in his *Techgnosis: myth, magic, and mysticism in the age of information* (Harmony Books: New York, 1998) links the longing felt in the soul for transcendence above the world as articulated in philosophical terms in Plato. Davis argues that there are religious impulses within the history of technology and even in the information technology of the modern era.

<sup>35</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics* (T. & T. Clark: Edinburgh, 1989), 181.

carry the objects. However, one of the prisoners becomes free, and stretching, turns around, but the light of the fire pains his eyes and he wishes to return to the wall and shadows. All that he is starting to behold seems to be a dream. But the freed prisoner is forced to ascend out of the cave into the sunlight where gradually he begins to see all things in their true reality, finally beholding the sun itself which gives light to all things. Yet, even with this vision, the freed prisoner wishes the others to know and see what he does, so he descends back into darkness of the Cave. However, says Socrates, those in the cave react against him because of his 'upward journey' (ἀναβάσις)<sup>36</sup> saying that his eyes are ruined. If he tried, says Socrates, to free any of them, they would kill him in the end.

The myth of the Cave portrays the philosophical life in its transforming power. The various elements of the myth demonstrate this: the cave is the world, the prisoners are representative of humanity, the freed one is the philosopher, the fire is the light of this world, and the sun is the divine, the Good. Socrates himself explains the myth by saying that the

visible realm should be likened to the prison dwelling, and the light of the fire inside it to the power of the sun. And if you interpret the upward journey and the study of things above as the upward journey of the soul to the intelligible realm, you'll grasp what I hope to convey.... (517b)

Once this upward journey is taken, says Socrates, it isn't surprising that one wishes to remain there, to spend time above and not return to the world of shadows. It is when we return back to the shadows of the world that we become lost for it is difficult to go from the 'divine study' to the evils of human life. (517d)

One cannot read the myth of the Cave as a simple image of a world of illusion over against a world of reality, but must see the more universal elements within the myth as they apply to humanity as a whole. The myth portrays both a picture of humanity in its choice of existence, and also the philosophical soul in its unrest, knowing the divine world but living among the shadows. The prisoners in the Cave, as Socrates says, are 'like us (ὁμοίους ἡμῖν).' (*Republic* 515a) Julia Annas writes that Plato does not show 'just the degraded state of a bad society' but shows

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<sup>36</sup> The act of going up, ἀναβαίνω, has the connotation of 'mounting', literally to ascend a mountain (abridged *Liddell and Scott's Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1926), 47). The way up and out of the Cave is illumined by such an image in that it is a steep path that one must

‘the human condition’<sup>37</sup> as a whole. Reflecting on the meaning of the myth for human existence as a whole, Iris Murdoch writes that the Cave is a parable of human life.<sup>38</sup> Murdoch writes, we all have our place in the myth, like those in the Cave, we all face the wall seeing at first the shadows, but some turn around and see the objects as imitations of real things. Murdoch writes,

They (we) may perhaps go no further, taking the fire to be the only source of light. Some of us may venture on, glimpsing another light beyond, and emerge into the sunlight, where we are dazzled and can only look down at shadows and reflections, then raising our heads, see the real things themselves and then (if finally enlightened) the sun.<sup>39</sup>

Yet further, as the myth of the Cave concerns human existence, it is more than a picture of the epistemological distinction between appearance and reality but involves deeply religious analogies. Annas in her commentary, though admitting the myth concerns the ‘human condition’, fails to follow through the religious implications of her statement. To understand the full gist of the Cave is to recognise the religious implication and imagery of the ascent of the soul from a world of shadow to light. As Eric Voegelin writes, ‘Plato’s philosophy... is not *a* philosophy but *the* symbolic form in which a Dionysiac soul expresses its ascent to God.’<sup>40</sup> Plato’s philosophy occupies a place beyond simply defining it as a philosophy but a philosophical-religious expression that applies to human existence as a whole. Even Anders Nygren writes that, as exemplified in the myth of the Cave, Plato unifies philosophy and religion together:

we see, too, that it is quite impossible to decide whether Plato’s teaching is primarily philosophical or religious; the truth is, that both sides work in together and form an inseparable unity. This fact is plainly shown in the famous parable of the Cave... The substance of this parable is the doctrine of the Forms; but its colouring is that of a doctrine of salvation.<sup>41</sup>

The ascent out of the Cave cannot be simply a matter of the rationale, but is one which includes states of existence and of the soul. The distinction of appearance and reality, which is the theme of Plato’s myth, has in itself, as Catherine Wilson

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ascend out of the Cave. To take the symbol farther, the path is not easy but difficult, it is a scaling of a height, and literally to walk and ascend as up a mountain.

<sup>37</sup> Julia Annas, *An Introduction to Plato’s Republic* (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1982), 252.

<sup>38</sup> Murdoch, *Metaphysics*, 10.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> Voegelin, *Plato and Aristotle*, 70.

<sup>41</sup> Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, Part I, transl. by A. G. Herbert (London: Society For Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1941), 128.

writes, ‘moral/theological overtones.’<sup>42</sup> Iris Murdoch writes it well when she insists the myth signifies the restoration of our knowledge of the real world.<sup>43</sup> ‘The details of what happens in the cave are to be studied seriously’, writes Murdoch, ‘the ‘lower half’ of the story is not just an explanatory image of the ‘higher half’, but is significant in itself.’<sup>44</sup> Murdoch writes that, ‘We see in our lower things the shadow of higher things, and thereby our continual (daily, hourly, minutely) sense of the connection between the good and the real can lead us to believe in the supreme reality of what is perfect: the unique place of God, or Good, in human life.’<sup>45</sup>

Murdoch writes that the myth of the Cave,

portrays a spiritual pilgrimage from appearance to reality. We turn around, we climb up, we raise our heads. At each stage we see at first the *shadows* of what is more real and true.<sup>46</sup>

The prisoners who face the wall of the cave, those who see only the shadows, are in a state of *eikasias*, a state of vague image-ridden illusion.<sup>47</sup> It is a picture of the world and those who do not see beyond the veil of shadows, change, and opinion to the philosophical world of reality. In her own dialogue, *Art and Eros*, Murdoch provides a more individualised and personal interpretation of such a problem. The soul, she has Plato say, is one in which the vast region is dark. There are different levels of the soul, says Murdoch’s Plato, ‘dark low levels where we are hardly individual people at all.’

Eros is there. This darkness is sex, power, desire, inspiration, *energy* for good or evil. Many people live their whole lives in that sort of darkness, seeing nothing but flickering shadows and illusions, like images thrown on a screen – and the only energy they ever have comes from egoism and dreams. They don’t know what the real world is like at all. Not only could they not understand any difficult thought, they cannot even *see* ordinary things – like that wine cup or the face of Socrates – because anxiety and selfishness are making them blind, they live behind a dark veil.<sup>48</sup>

Murdoch writes that the ‘pilgrim’ is seen as ‘passing through different states of awareness whereby the higher reality is studied first in the form of shadows or

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<sup>42</sup> Catherine Wilson, *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy* (Oxford University Press, 1995), 42.

<sup>43</sup> Murdoch, from *The Fire and the Sun in Existentialists and Mystics*, 389.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> Murdoch, *Metaphysics*, 397-398.

<sup>46</sup> Murdoch, *Metaphysics*, 10.

<sup>47</sup> Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 389.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 488.

images.<sup>49</sup> Some raise up and go toward the light; some are simply satisfied to stay within the cave, but all of us are there in one place or another.

A crucial image given in the myth of the Cave is the transformation that is given in the turning, the *periagoge*, away from the world of shadows to encountering the world of light and knowing wisdom. Socrates asks,

Consider then, what would be the manner of the release and healing from these bonds and this folly (αὐτῶν λύσιν τε καὶ ἴασιν τῶν δεσμῶν καὶ τῆς ἀφροσύνης) if... When one was freed from his fetters and compelled to stand up suddenly and turn (περιάγειν) his head around and walk and to lift up his eyes to the light...? (*Republic* 515c)

As Karl Jaspers notes, the insight to divine reality that is found in the Cave is one which ‘requires a turning around (*metastrophe, periagoge*).’<sup>50</sup> It is this image of *periagoge* and the idea of the turning around of the soul that raises the religious connotations of what Plato is describing.<sup>51</sup> As Socrates later indicates, the very aspect of turning is one that elicits an image of the soul’s conversion to philosophy. To turn the soul, as Socrates later speaks, is the art of philosophical discourse which is:

of the speediest and most effective shifting of conversion (τῆς περιαγωγῆς) of the soul, not an art of producing vision in it, but on the assumption that it possesses vision but does not rightly direct it and does not look where it should, an art of bringing this about (τοῦτο διαμηχανήσασθαι). (518d)<sup>52</sup>

In her essay, ‘The Republic’,<sup>53</sup> Simone Weil illumines the link between the symbol of the soul’s turning toward the divine and its salvation. Weil writes that Plato in the *Republic* 518c-d describes the ‘metaphorical description of conversion.’<sup>54</sup> Yet, what must theologically be said in this aspect is that the transformation offered in the *periagoge* of the soul is not based on that which comes from the outside inward but a turning of the soul toward that which is already known.

The power to learn is present in everyone’s soul... the instrument which each learns is like an eye that cannot be turned around from darkness to light without turning the whole body... without turning the whole soul until it is

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<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 389.

<sup>50</sup> Jaspers, *The Great Philosophers*, Volume I (Harcourt, Brace & World: New York, 1962), 143.

<sup>51</sup> Werner Jaeger, *Early Christianity and Greek Paideia* (Belknap Press: Cambridge, Mass., 1961) 111, n. 25. Jaeger notes that Plato conveys a religious conversion in the turning toward the Light of true Being.

<sup>52</sup> Shorey, *Republic I*, 134-5.

<sup>53</sup> Simone Weil, *Intimations*, 132-150.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 132-133.



able to study that which is the brightest thing that is namely, the one we call the good.’ (*Republic* 518d)

For Plato there is no import of revelation, but a turning of the soul toward the truth that is already found within it. Weil raises the issue through her translation of Socrates’ words:

The instruction [of the soul] is not what some declare it to be. For they affirm that knowledge, not being in the soul, they will put it there, as if one might put sight into blind eyes. Whereas the theory which I will expound teaches that the faculty of understanding, and the organ of this faculty, is innate in the soul of each one. But it is as if one were unable to turn one’s eye towards the light, away from darkness, without turning the whole body. Likewise it is with the whole soul that one must turn oneself from what is becoming (the temporal) until the soul becomes strong enough to endure the contemplation of reality, and all that is most luminous in that reality; which we have already declared to be the good.<sup>55</sup>

The soul possesses within itself the ability to turn, and the process of salvation for the soul in the *periagoge* is one that is based upon the soul’s turning upon itself.

Within the *periagoge* of the soul within itself is the aspect of its journey (τὴν πορείαν) – a journey known literally in the illustration of the one who ascends from from the Cave, but also in the experience of the soul within itself. Recalling the parable of the Cave, Socrates describes the philosophical discourse itself as a ‘journey’ by asking, ‘What, then, will you not call this progress of thought dialectic (οὐ διαλεδικήν ταύτην τὴν πορείαν καλεῖς)? (*Republic* 532b) Considering this image, philosophy in Plato is characterised by a progression, a search, a *journey* and process of coming out of the Cave. The turning commences the journey, or in Murdoch’s more religiously laden term, a ‘pilgrimage’ through philosophy from illusion to that which is truly real.<sup>56</sup> The philosopher, exemplified in the *Republic*, and reminiscent also of the *Phaedo*, is one who partakes in this pilgrimage, the ‘upward journey’ (*Republic* 517b), in order to know wisdom and, dramatically speaking, to seek relief from the world’s evil. Such an understanding prompts even Anders Nygren to observe that, ‘In the *Republic* as in the *Phaedo* philosophy and religion meet together and become one.’<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> See quote above from Murdoch’s, *Metaphysics*, 10. Italics mine.

<sup>57</sup> Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, Part I, 129.

The words that Murdoch employs of ‘pilgrimage’ and a movement from ‘appearance to reality’ are significant in that they convey the religious nature within Plato’s philosophy not only in the metaphorical coming out of the Cave, but also as an image of human life. Firstly, as we have discussed above, the movement is one of ascent to the divine, a journey of the soul from the world of shadows and darkness to the world and light of the divine. But there is a second meaning within the idea of journey which speaks of philosophy and the philosopher’s life as one that never really arrives at the full comprehension of the wisdom or divine that is sought, or at least until one dies, as Socrates indicates in the *Phaedo* (68 a-b).<sup>58</sup> On this issue, the philosophical journey never really ends for Plato, for it is implicit in the soul’s constant movement in philosophy to the world beyond the shadows, and in the soul’s constant desire to encounter the divine. This idea of journey is taken up by some modern thinkers as a symbol of the philosophical experience itself. Karl Jaspers says it well when he writes that philosophy itself, ‘means to be on the way.’<sup>59</sup> Even at the end of life, the philosopher is one who is still searching, as Jaspers writes:

As an individual, each of us reaches the end of his life without really knowing what is. He achieves nothing definitive, but remains on a road which merely breaks off and ends in no absolute goal.<sup>60</sup>

Similarly, Sam Keen in his biography of Gabriel Marcel writes of Marcel’s view of philosophy, which is telling of Plato’s description of journey, that,

Its [philosophy’s] starting-point is a metaphysical dis-ease, like that of a man in a fever who shifts around searching for a comfortable position, and it seeks a unification of experience which will allow a more integrated and full life. Philosophy, however, never achieves its end. It remains a quest, an activity undertaken by *homo viator*, by man who is always in the process of becoming.<sup>61</sup>

Laden within the myth of the Cave and implicit in this idea of journey is the aspect of the *pathos* of humanity. For Plato, humanity suffers in the world of shadows and must struggle to get out of the Cave. The pilgrimage and journey itself is a difficult one, not only because the initial turning is difficult (*Republic* 515c), but

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<sup>58</sup> Death itself is called a ‘journey’ at *Phaedo* 68b as Socrates asks, will not the philosopher ‘be glad to make that journey (death)’, since he is going to know the wisdom that he or she has longed for. (See Hugh Treddenick’s translation in Hamilton and Cairns, *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*.)

<sup>59</sup> Jaspers, *Way To Wisdom* (Victor Gollancz Ltd:1951), 12.

<sup>60</sup> Jaspers, *The Perennial Scope of Philosophy* (Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd.: London, 1950), 150.

the way of ascent out of the Cave is rough and steep, and the prisoner is one who is dragged up the steep path (*Republic* 515e). Plato indicates that to achieve the divine vision is not easy, no matter how inclined we are to it within the soul. Yet, once the individual has come into the light of the divine outside of the Cave there is a longing to remain there (516d), but through compassion the philosopher returns to those who are still in the shadows. Even though benevolent, the philosopher suffers the humiliation of being mocked and even killed for speaking to those still chained of the journey to the divine (517a). Such *pathos* is seen throughout the *Dialogues* most specifically in the story of Socrates, a picture of the philosopher challenging those he meets, and suffering for that which he practices.

The *pathos* of the philosophical journey is not an escape from the world, but an ascent to wisdom in order that life is transformed. The one who ascends out of the Cave remembers those still enslaved (516c). As Socrates says to Glaucon,

each of you in turn must go down to live in the common dwelling place of the others and grow accustomed to seeing in the dark. When you are used to it, you'll see vastly better than the people there. And because you've seen the truth about fine, just, and good things, you'll know each image for what it is and also that of which it is the image. (*Republic* 520c)<sup>62</sup>

Marking Jaspers's and Murdoch's insistence, we come to a picture of a true knowledge of the world in Plato, and not the avoidance of it. We cannot, and do not, leave the world behind in Plato, but live in the midst of the world of shadows, seeing beyond the sensibly perceived and changing world to the reality of Ideas. As Jaspers writes, Plato indicates a two-way path:

[The thinking mind] can move from the world of appearance out in to the eternal world (*Phaedo*); and again from the eternal world it can look back at the world of appearance with a view to understanding it and shaping it (*Republic, Laws, Timaeus*). Plato's philosophizing moves in both directions, toward being and from being. Man is 'here' in the world; he must look beyond the world in order, by touching on the essential, to become essential himself. But then he comes back to the world.... Plato does not rise to the higher regions in order to abandon the world; his transcending does not lead to solitary ecstasy, deification... Plato's philosophizing takes up its task in the world... Plato is equal to his work in the world only because he is at home in the supracelestial realm that is the source of norms and guidance.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Sam Keen, *Gabriel Marcel* (London: The Carey Kingsgate Press Limited: 1966), 4.

<sup>62</sup> G. Grube's translation in *Plato: Complete Works*, John M. Cooper, ed. (Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 1137.

<sup>63</sup> Karl Jaspers, *Great Philosophers*, 145.



In Plato, humanity through its ascent reaches an understanding of the world as it is – not an escape, but an ascent, of going above the Cave in order to see in full that which is below in the shadows.

### *Wonder and the Essence of Philosophy*

If the ascent of the soul to encounter the divine is one of the main objectives of Plato's philosophy, it is the idea of philosophical wonder that is the vehicle. The notion of wonder is a strong and influential motif within Plato's philosophical theology.<sup>64</sup> In the *Theaetetus* (155d) Plato gives the vivid account of the transformational and religious nature of wonder to the soul when Theaetetus, confessing to Socrates that philosophical questions starts him 'wondering' and make his 'head swim', is given the lesson that it is just such a passion that is the essence of being a philosopher. As Socrates says, it is 'this feeling (τὸ πάθος) of wonder (τὸ θαυμάζειν)' that shows one is a true philosopher, since wonder is 'the only beginning (ἀρχὴ) of philosophy....'<sup>65</sup> As Socrates declares, wonder is both the basis upon which philosophy builds itself in the soul and is the passionate force of philosophy as well. Even more, it is a religious idea that plays an important part in Plato's philosophical theology as a whole.

The idea of wonder in Plato attaches itself directly to the question of humanity. The feeling of wonder and its place in philosophy, especially within Plato, is given by Martin Heidegger in his *What is Philosophy?* when he discusses the passage of the *Theaetetus* giving his own translation of the passage and lifting the issue of wonder to a prominent place. In Heidegger's rendition, Socrates says, 'Very much is this especially the *pathos* of a philosopher, namely, to be astonished; for there is no other determining point of departure for philosophy than this.'<sup>66</sup> For Heidegger, it is the word 'astonishment' that better captures the sense of 'wonder' that Plato employs. Whatever the case, one is able to detect the deep emotion that is associated with the concept in Plato. As Heidegger comments, wonder

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<sup>64</sup> Aristotle, echoing Plato, says that, 'through wonder... men now begin and originally began to philosophize. *Metaphysics* I. II. 9sq., translated by Hugh Tredennick (*The Loeb Classical Library*, London: William Heinemann Ltd, 1933), 13.

<sup>65</sup> H. Fowler's translation in the Loeb series of Plato.

<sup>66</sup> Martin Heidegger, *What is Philosophy?* (London: Vision Press Limited, 1972), 79.

(astonishment) is a feeling, an emotion, which is the beginning point for the philosopher:

Astonishment, as *pathos*, is the *arche* [the beginning] of philosophy. We must understand the Greek word *arche* [beginning] in its fullest sense. It names that from which something proceeds. But this 'from where' is not left behind in the process of going out, but the beginning rather becomes that which the verb *archein* expresses, that which governs. The *pathos* of astonishment thus does not simply stand at the beginning of philosophy, as, for example, the washing of his hands precedes the surgeon's operation. Astonishment carries and pervades philosophy.<sup>67</sup>

Heidegger raises a valid point that wonder is not only the beginning of philosophy but also that wonder sustains philosophy, upholds it, and is the constant basis upon which it rests:

Astonishment is an *arche* – it pervades every step of philosophy.  
Astonishment is *pathos*.<sup>68</sup>

Wonder is then atemporal in the philosophical process, a passion which is not only a means of entrance to philosophy, but the very necessity to maintaining the philosophical life in Plato as well. Although wonder elates the soul, there is also the implication of it being that with which someone is burdened, as 'anything that befalls one, a suffering, misfortune, calamity'.<sup>69</sup> If we interpret this into Plato's meaning, then the passion of wonder, though not, of course a physical burden, is still an internal unrestfulness of the soul. Heidegger interprets the philosophical wonder as enduring or undergoing something; 'to be borne along by, to be determined by.'<sup>70</sup> If this meaning is accepted and interpreted, then Socrates' words to Theaetetus carry a connotation of bearing a weighty responsibility. Thus, wonder is not only the philosopher's joy, but is also her or his burden as well, as the philosopher is captivated by the questions of philosophy.

Wonder represents, then, the ascent in relation to the divine encounter and also the descent into the burden of life that it is part of existence – the philosopher's wonder gives life but it is also that with which the philosopher, in one sense, suffers. Both connotations unite to form a conception which describes the experience of

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<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>69</sup> Lexicon abridged from *Liddell and Scott's Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1926), 511.

<sup>70</sup> Heidegger, *What is Philosophy*, 83.

philosophical wonder for Plato. The wonder that begins philosophy is also that which, for some, is a source of the philosopher's derision. The theme of the philosopher's dying overshadows the *Theaetetus* as it begins with Theaetetus years after the discussion with Socrates which the dialogue recounts, being taken back to Athens badly wounded in battle. Reflecting this theme in the last lines of the dialogue, Socrates is shown to be on his way to meet the indictment that Meletus<sup>71</sup> has brought against him (*Theaetetus* 210d) which is told in the *Apology* which results in his death. Even in Aristophanes in the *Clouds*<sup>72</sup> the philosophical wondering becomes a lampoon. What Plato pronounces through all of these is that society by its laughter is part of its own folly of neglecting its transformation in philosophy through wonder.

What can be seen is that the idea of philosophical wonder in Plato illumines two notions which implicate the ways of the soul: philosophy as a journey in an inward and outward turning of the soul, and as an idea of theological insight. Gabriel Marcel gives a term describing humanity as a *Homo viator* which associates the ideas of journey and *pathos* together in that Man is a 'wayfarer in time', 'wondering as we wander.'<sup>73</sup> Such a phrase captures an idea reflected in Plato that wonder is necessary to the journey of the individual being a philosopher. Wonder, by its nature, signifies the deficiency of human wisdom in that as one wonders, what is conveyed is that one does not fully understand. Yet, this is what the nature of Plato's philosophical theology is characterised by, a love for wisdom which is a constant and never-ending search. Wonder is characterised by an inward and outward turning of the soul. Karl Jaspers writes that 'wonderment' gives rise to three drives within the human soul: 'question and insight', and from the questioning, 'doubt' in the knowledge that is attained giving rise to critical examination and certainty, and from this 'awe and forsakenness' a sense to 'inquire into himself.'<sup>74</sup> For Jaspers, wonder represents a turning towards the questioning and insight, and a turning away in doubt, and then a turning inward in knowing oneself. Thus, for Jaspers, wonder represents all that philosophy entails: the insight that comes from enquiry, the questioning certainty,

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<sup>71</sup> Meletus was angered says Socrates on behalf of the poets. (*Apology* 23e)

<sup>72</sup> *Apology* 18d.

<sup>73</sup> Sam Keen, *Gabriel Marcel* (London: The Carey Kingsgate Press Limited: 1966), 17.

<sup>74</sup> Jaspers, *Way To Wisdom*, 17.

and lastly, from the doubt an 'awe and forsakeness' which causes a looking inward to oneself.

Secondly, it is this wonder that proves to be a central motif within Plato's philosophical theology. The wondering in Plato's philosophical theology leads us to conceive of the divine, to realise it in the philosophical way of life, but it is that for which one constantly searches never realising its full essence. However, Maurice Merleau-Ponty comments that wonder, though welcome in philosophy, does not prove helpful in theology:

Theology makes use of philosophical wonder only for the purpose of motivating an affirmation which ends it. Philosophy, on the other hand, arouses us to what is problematic in our own existence and in that of the world, to such a point that we shall never be cured of searching for a solution, as Bergson says, 'in the notebooks of the master.'<sup>75</sup>

Yet, Merleau-Ponty misinterprets the nature of the theological task, especially as it is conveyed in Plato. It is Plato who offers the counter to Merleau-Ponty by representing the use of wonder as a foundation to both philosophical and theological thought. To wonder in Plato's sense is to find one's attention drawn to the divine not repelled away from it. Wonder becomes the very impetus for further reflection which Merleau-Ponty rightly notices, but he places theology within a box disallowing any speculation whatever, which in turn does not give wonder its place in theology as it does within Plato. For Plato, to wonder is to sense the mystery of ultimate reality, and it is through wonder that the notion of God is conceived. To feel the *pathos* of wonder, to be in awe, is the beginning of philosophical and theological reflection. The ancient theologian, Clement of Alexandria, is helpful to offer this point when he writes, 'The beginning (of truth) is to wonder at things, as Plato says in the *Theaetetus*...', and quoting a line from Matthias in the *Traditions*, continues, 'Wonder at the things that are before thee, making this the first step to further knowledge'.<sup>76</sup> The source within the ascent of wonder is one which gives rise to the very essence of appreciating, and contemplating the divine, a worshipping of the divine through the act of philosophy.

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<sup>75</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *In Praise of Philosophy* (Northwestern University Press: 1963), 44-45. As was pointed out to me, this comment is posited before Vatican II and represents a more cautious response to wonder than falls after Vatican II in which the idea of wonder in regard to theology is much more welcome.

<sup>76</sup> Johann Quasten, *Patrology*, Vol. I (Spectrum Publishers: 1953), 126.

For Plato, wonder is known as both an awe, but also a desire for that which is divine. The idea of philosophical wonder illumines an aspect of the philosopher's life in which the divine is both contemplated, but also that which is desired to be known. This desire fuels the unrestfulness implicit in wondering, a constant searching and longing which is never actually satisfied. Such wonder is to be filled with love for that which is contemplated, a desirous love, an *eros*, which gives ascent and transformation to the soul.

### *Eros and the Way of Transformation*

As the soul ascends through philosophy and wonder, in Plato, it is transformed. In considering the aspect of transformation, and even salvation in Plato's philosophy, it is the concept of Eros, or loving desire, that forms one of the essential characteristics of Plato's philosophy, and one of the most significant concepts in understanding Plato's philosophy as a religious experience and Plato's philosophical theology. As Gerard Watson writes, it is this 'loving desire' that 'is central to the philosophy of Plato.'<sup>77</sup> Richard Tarnas, in his work, *The Passion of the Western Mind*, describes Eros as the 'complex multidimensional archetype'<sup>78</sup> which runs through the entirety of Plato's thought. Indeed, the concept of Eros stretches over Plato's philosophy, underlying and saturating it. In Plato, Eros is a cosmic reality that pervades through all things and in which all things participate. For Plato, to speak of Eros is to explore that which is essential to the universe itself. Seen in the dialogues of the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus* respectively, Eros is the medium of ascent to the divine and the soul's transformation. It is an aspect of Plato's philosophical theology which is expressed in its centrality in Plato's philosophical theology as a way of transformation and salvation as an essential part the philosophical life, embodied in the world and in the life of the philosopher, and as an expression of the interrelationship of the intellectual and the passionate, forming an essential aspect of the religious experience of Plato's philosophy.

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<sup>77</sup> Watson, *Greek Philosophy*, 18.

<sup>78</sup> Richard Tarnas, *The Passion of the The Western Mind* (Harmony Books: New York, 1991), 13-14.

In the *Symposium*, Eros is depicted as pervading the entirety of the universe, affecting all forms of being,<sup>79</sup> the ‘preeminent force in human motivations.’<sup>80</sup> Tarnas describes the concept of Eros as found in the *Symposium* as expressing itself in the ‘sexual instinct, but at higher levels impels the philosopher’s passion for intellectual beauty and wisdom, and culminates in the mystical vision of the eternal, the ultimate source of all beauty.’<sup>81</sup> The *Symposium* represents an exploration of the true expression of what love is, as Socrates, recounting Diotima the priestess’ words, says that she ‘taught me the philosophy of love (τὰ ἐρωτικὰ ἐδίδαξεν).’ (201d)

The characteristic of Eros as depicted in the dialogue is one as of a mediator<sup>82</sup> through which the philosopher experiences the divine, but it is also one in which the characteristics of the philosophical life and the philosopher are known. Eros is depicted as one who is filled with constant desire, need, and passion, ‘in between wisdom and ignorance.’ (202a)<sup>83</sup> He is a ‘great spirit’ (δαίμων μέγας) as everything that is spiritual lies between god and mortal (καὶ γὰρ πᾶν τὸ δαιμόνιον μεταξύ ἐστι θεοῦ τε καὶ θνητοῦ). (202e) He is a *daimon*, the child of Poros (‘way’ or ‘resource’) and Penia (‘poverty’), bearing the characteristics of both. But Love is also a schemer and a lover, a pursuer, ‘resourceful in the pursuit of intelligence’ (203d), and because he loves what is beautiful, he is lover of wisdom (204b) which is ‘extremely beautiful.’<sup>84</sup>

The goal of Eros is in the idea of relationship with that which it desires, in order that its own love come to fulfilment. Love desires to be with that which is the object of his love, to make the beautiful his own. (*Symposium* 204d) Diotima explains that, ‘All of us are pregnant... both in body and in soul...’ (*Symposium* 206c) and the object of love is, ‘giving birth in beauty, whether in body or in soul (ἐστι γὰρ τοῦτο τόκος ἐν καλῷ καὶ κατὰ τὸ σῶμα καὶ κατὰ τὴν ψυχὴν).’

<sup>79</sup> Watson, *Greek Philosophy*, 18.

<sup>80</sup> Tarnas, *Passion*, 13.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>82</sup> The middle way is a notion that Plato employs several times. Interestingly, thought is considered as a middle way between opinion and understanding in *Republic* 511d, and in the *Laws* 792d-e God is said to be in a state of neither seeking pleasure nor strictly avoiding pain, in other words in the middle between the two. As the Athenian further says, that is the way of anyone who would become like God.

<sup>83</sup> Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff translation in *Plato: Complete Works*.

<sup>84</sup> *Symposium* 204b.



(*Symposium* 206b)<sup>85</sup> It desires the beautiful but beauty is not enough in itself, for Eros by its nature seeks fulfilment in union with the beautiful through procreation. (*Symposium* 206d). As Diotima says, 'Love is not exactly a longing for the beautiful,' but for 'the conception and generation that the beautiful effects.' (*Symposium* 206e) Our mortality constantly longs for immortality, and it is through Eros and its desire for the divine that this desire is fulfilled.<sup>86</sup>

Eros leads to an inexpressible vision. The vision of Beauty which the philosopher seeks, says Diotima, is one beyond the tangible manifestation: without a face, or hands, or anything of the flesh, of which no words can be spoken, nor knowledge of it as that which exists in other things but that which is 'of itself and by itself in eternal oneness (αὐτὸ καθ' αὐτοῦ μονοειδές). (211b) 'Led toward the 'sanctuary of Love,' (211c), carried from various beauties and instances, the human lover is brought within reach of the 'final revelation' (211c), mounting the 'heavenly ladder' (211c) until he comes at last to know what beauty is. Only in this ascent through love, says Diotima, is a man's life ever worth living (211d), and only in this can this one know true virtue (212a), for 'he shall be called the friend of god, and if ever it is given to man to put on immortality, it shall be given to him.'(212a)

All of these expressions which characterise Eros, also characterise the philosopher. Like Eros, the philosopher for Plato lives as one in the middle way between earth and heaven, even ignorance and understanding. The philosopher exists in the world, but the soul longs for the divine which is beyond that which is physically held and seen. The mind of the philosopher knows the wisdom that he or she seeks, but does not know the divine in its fullness. As Eros, the philosopher is a lover of wisdom, but never satisfied but is in constant want and need, ever seeking fulfilment and ever desiring. Seen in Eros, the philosopher is able to know the characteristics of the philosophical life, but also to see that life in relationship to that which is loved. As the *Symposium* shows the singular and individual characteristics,

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<sup>85</sup> As John M. Cooper notes, 'The preposition is ambiguous between 'within' and 'in the presence of.' Diotima may mean that the lover causes the newborn (which may be an idea) to come to be within a beautiful person; or she may mean that he is stimulated to give birth to it in the presence of a beautiful person.' *Plato: Complete Works*, 489.

<sup>86</sup> Iris Murdoch comments that, 'Eros is a form of the desire for immortality, for perpetual possession of the good, whatever we may take the good to be.' – Murdoch, *Existentialists*, 415.

so the *Phaedrus* shows more fully that love in correspondence to others in the philosophical life.

In the *Phaedrus*, Plato carries the themes of the love of Beauty, erotic love, and the movement and interaction of the lover with the beloved, to outline the disposition and character of the philosophical life. In Plato's philosophical theology, loving desire saturates all of existence, and it is this desirous love which represents the love of the philosopher for the vision of the divine characterising the philosophical life. Employing eternal Beauty as the theme, the philosopher to Plato is the true lover, one whose soul is engaged in love and one who is transformed by the love of the divine. Edith Hamilton, in her opening comments to the *Phaedrus* notes that in Plato loving Beauty is, 'the first movement to philosophy, the impulse to seek what is higher – in Plato's phrase, 'the beyond' – comes from falling in love with visible, physical beauty.'<sup>87</sup> The love which enlivens the philosophical life is one is a constant desirous love in which the physical becomes the channel to the eternal in an ever-abiding movement. 'All that is soul is deathless (Ψυχὴ πᾶσα ἀθάνατος)<sup>88</sup> because it is ever in motion. (*Phaedrus* 245c) Symbolised as a winged team of horses and a charioteer, the soul desires to ascend to the divine (*Phaedrus* 246aff) drawn by a love for that which is found 'beyond the heavens... (where) true being dwells, without color or shape, that cannot be touched; reason alone, the soul's pilot, can behold it, and all true knowledge is knowledge thereof.' (*Phaedrus* 247c) It is to this place that the soul in its love ever strives to reach.

The love of which Plato speaks is one that brings an ascent for the soul through the love of the Beautiful, an ascent borne from a transposing of the common Eros for physical beauty to that which is heavenly and divine which, in turn, transforms all love. In the *Symposium*, Pausanias speaks of two types of Eros,

love of the heavenly Aphrodite (ὁ τῆς οὐρανίας θεοῦ ἔρωτος), heavenly in himself and precious alike to cities and to men, for he constrains both lover and beloved to pay the most earnest heed to their moral welfare, but all the rest are followers of the other, the earthly Aphrodite (τῆς πανδήμου). (185c)

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<sup>87</sup> Edith Hamilton, *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, 475.

<sup>88</sup> Eric Voegelin, *Plato*, 136.

In Plato, the love for the divine is the only true love, for it is the one that allows for virtue in the loving relationship. The way of the divine Eros is a cleansing of love to be one that is not bound by simply the physical, but a love which is of the soul.<sup>89</sup> In this the idea of Eros presents *a choice* of a way of life: a way of being bound simply to the earthly or ascending to the true love known in loving the divine.

The essential difference between these two lives is the way of memory. Exemplified in the *Phaedrus*, the way of the ‘heavenly’ Eros is a way of the soul remembering the vision of the divine it once beheld. It is a way of recollecting, ‘those things which our soul once beheld, when it journeyed with God and, lifting its vision above the things which we now say exist, rose up into real being (τὸ ὄν ὄντος).’ (*Phaedrus* 249c)<sup>90</sup> To live a life simply after the physical is to have amnesia of the divine vision the soul once beheld. The picture Plato portrays throughout the *Phaedrus* is one of transformation, a transformation known when the soul in its love recollects the divine that was beheld before it descended into the physical world. Through remembering, the memory (μνήμη), the soul recaptures the true love that it once had. As Socrates says, through its memory the philosopher’s soul recovers her ‘wings’ by communing with those things which even makes ‘God’ divine. (*Phaedrus* 249c)<sup>91</sup> Because of such a love, this one ‘separates himself from human interests and turns his attention toward the divine’ and in so doing is ‘rebuked by the vulgar, who consider him mad and do not know that he is inspired.’ (*Phaedrus* 249d)<sup>92</sup> In this true love, the philosopher is inspired (ἐνθουσιάζων), desiring as a bird to fly upward caring nothing for the world beneath (*Phaedrus* 249d),<sup>93</sup> a desire

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<sup>89</sup> John M. Cooper writes in his opening notes to the dialogue *Alcibiades* that an exemplary Platonic love is given in the relationship between Socrates and Alcibiades, seen in the *Symposium* and in the dialogue that bears Alcibiades’ name. Cooper writes, Platonic love is an intensely affectionate, but not a sexual, relationship...’ Cooper, *Plato: Complete Works*, 557.

<sup>90</sup> H. Fowler translation in Loeb.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>93</sup> H. D. F. Kitto explains the nature of eros that is applicable to Plato’s entire scene by drawing a distinction between eros and the related thought of Cupid. Cupid, Kitto argues, means desire, (as the adjective *cupidus*) denoting greed and not love in the sense that eros does. In fact, Eros has different associations: all entailing the idea of passionate joy. An example of such love and joy is given in Sophocles’ play portraying Ajax who, though contemplating suicide, is persuaded by his wife, Tecmessa, and his own men (the Chorus) to endure life, disgrace, and go on with life. Upon this decision the chorus sings, and dances, and gives an ode: ‘I shiver with eros: my abounding joy gives me wings.’ This, in similar fashion seems to be Plato’s meaning here. It is a philosophically pregnant idea that the vision of beauty would strike a type of love that also includes a profound notion of passionate joy – Kitto, *The Greeks* (Penguin Books, 1951), 251.

which those who simply exist in the common and physical love do not comprehend because they have forgotten.

What can be gleaned from Plato's concept of Eros is that it involves a religious idea of transformation as a cosmic spiritual reality<sup>94</sup> and a medium through which the soul encounters the divine, as well as a concept which involves the aspect of embodiment representing the joining of the intellectual and the passionate. In Iris Murdoch's words, Eros is 'sexual energy as spiritual energy.'<sup>95</sup> Eros is a principle, 'which connects the commonest human desire to the highest morality and to the pattern of divine creativity in the universe.'<sup>96</sup> The transformation that takes place in the soul through Eros is one that, in Murdoch's conception, is a transformation of energy. The sexual energy that is common to all is transformed to reach new heights, to lead to an encounter with the divine. Murdoch writes that for Plato,

We must transform base egoistic energy and vision (low Eros) into high spiritual energy and vision (high Eros)... The moral life in the Platonic understand of it is a slow shift of attachments wherein *looking* (concentrating, attending, attentive discipline) is a source of divine (purified) energy. This is a progressive redemption of desire.... The movement is not, by an occasional leap.... There are innumerable points at which we have to detach ourselves, to change our orientation, to redirect our desire and refresh and purify our energy.<sup>97</sup>

We do not do away with Eros, but we channel the sexual energy, transforming it to take us to the divine wherein we find the source and true love of our souls. Eros is a turning toward ultimate reality, and the 'life-problem' that exists within humanity, writes Murdoch, is the 'transformation of energy'.<sup>98</sup> To Plato, the issue of transformation and even salvation of the soul is what is at stake, as Murdoch writes, 'Never has a philosopher more clearly indicated that salvation concerns the whole soul: the soul must be saved entire by the redirection of its energy away from selfish fantasy toward reality.'<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> The cosmic dimension of Eros is recognised by Empedocles who speaks of the two principles of the universe to be Love and Strife. See 'Empedocles', fragment 17 in Kathleen Freeman's, *Ancilla to The Pre-Socratic Philosophers: A complete translation of the Fragments in Diels, Fragmente der Vorsokratiker* (Basil Blackwell: Oxford, 1948) as well as Werner Jaeger's, *The Theology of the Early Greek Philosophers* (Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1947).

<sup>95</sup> Murdoch, *Metaphysics*, 24.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 415.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 24-25.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 24

<sup>99</sup> Murdoch, *Existentialists*, 419.

The choices of life and the way of transformation offered by a religious view of Plato's Eros is a perspective which contributes greatly to modern considerations, as Freud himself writes, 'Anyone who looks down with contempt upon psycho-analysis from a superior vantage-point should remember how closely the enlarged sexuality of psycho-analysis coincides with the Eros of the divine Plato.'<sup>100</sup> However, even with this, contemporary thought still overlooks Eros's religious nature, drawing a distinction between what Murdoch calls the Platonic 'religious concept' and its 'quasi-scientific modern version.'<sup>101</sup> Eros is an issue of the *psyche*, the soul, and it conveys in Plato a choice that must be made between a love that is base and a love that is for the eternal. As Karl Jaspers comments on the *Phaedrus*, sexuality is depicted as, 'origin, symbol, and as enemy' in the dialogue.<sup>102</sup> The vision of Beauty causes recollection in the soul,<sup>103</sup> and the desire for union with that which is beautiful compels the lover, however, when sexuality becomes 'self-sufficient',<sup>104</sup> when it becomes the good in itself, then it becomes base, vulgar, and self-satisfying. Such a problem is indicative of the choice that has to be made in that Eros, as an ambiguous spirit, says Murdoch, aspires to good, but is potentially destructive.<sup>105</sup>

In its transformational role, Eros is a concentration upon that which lies 'beyond' the physical in the divine, a searching for that which lies beyond the physical beauty to that which is eternal. To be transformed by Eros is not to reject the body, but a seeking to go beyond it. James Feibleman writes it well when he says that Plato,

Never argued that the good things of this world were to be altogether denied; he said only that we had to get beyond and above them – yes, but only by going through them, not by denying them. This is the theme of the ladder of love in the *Symposium*. Hence for Plato matter is not evil, it is simply by itself not enough.<sup>106</sup>

For Plato, Eros represents a religious quest that humanity must go beyond the physical by going 'through' it in order to reach the divine wherein the soul finds its

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<sup>100</sup> Murdoch, *Metaphysics*, 21; from Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, vol. VII, preface to the fourth edition.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>102</sup> Jaspers, *Great Philosophers*, 155.

<sup>103</sup> *Phaedrus* 249d.

<sup>104</sup> Jaspers, *Great Philosophers*, 155.

<sup>105</sup> Murdoch, *Metaphysics*, 24



true satisfaction. As Eros runs through the universe in the *Symposium*, it is an experience of a cosmic reality, of that which is at the centre of all existence. The transformation offered through Eros is a transformation by that which is ultimately real, and that in which all things participate.

To Plato, the redirection of Eros away from self-gratification to a desire for wisdom is the path that humanity must take in order to be fully human. Through the transformation of Eros, humanity is brought from the old life of self-gratification to the life of philosophy. Anders Nygren, in his work, *Agape and Eros*, famous for its discrediting of Eros in favour of *agape*, does, interestingly, raise the important issue that what is involved in Plato's doctrine of Eros 'is primarily a doctrine of salvation.'<sup>107</sup> According to Nygren, Plato's Eros as a doctrine of salvation is also tied to his doctrine of the Forms in which Eros is not only the beginning, but is also the culmination of the conception of the Forms: 'On the one hand, the idea of Eros is the basis of Plato's religious doctrine of salvation; but on the other, the structure of the doctrine of the Forms is such that it leads up to Eros as its natural conclusion.'<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> James K. Feibleman, *Religious Platonism* (George Allen and Unwin Ltd: London, 1959), 32.

<sup>107</sup> Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, Part I, transl. by A. G. Herbert (London: Society For Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1941), 121. To understand Eros, continues Nygren, is to understand it in the manner of the Orphic Mysteries which played a great part in Plato's own thought processes in the forming of Plato's philosophy. What is found in Orphism is the basis upon which Plato transposes his use of eros to explain the understanding of philosophy. As the Orphic myth of Zagreus / Dionysos shows: Zeus had intended to give all power to Dionysus his son, but the Titans seizing him, killed and devoured him. 'Zeus then smote the Titans with his thunderbolt and destroyed them; and out of the Titans' ashes he formed the race of humanity.' (121) The myth explains the central rite of Dionysiac orgies, the dismembering and eating of the god incarnated in the form of an animal; but in Orphism this is inseparably connected with the myth of the creation of mankind out of the ashes.' (121, quoting Nilsson) Man has a double nature – kinship with the divine and enmity against it as well. Formed from the ashes, man is evil and at enmity with God, but since in the Titans' ashes there were the remains of the god they had consumed, man also has a divine element ('a spark of the Divine'). It is this divine element that must break its bonds to the earthly, to the bodily through purification from earthly defilement, and pass into the nature of the Divine to which it is by nature akin. To this end Orphism provides a way of salvation (122) by purification and ecstasy, as the soul is able to be united again with the Divine and taken up into it. The double nature of humanity, the notion of ascent and the liberation of the soul, is the basis for the idea of Eros. (122) Around this basic idea is a number of other conceptions all belonging to Eros-religion: the primaeval fall of souls into matter, the body as the prison house of the soul, the transmigration of souls, the soul's natural immortality and divine nature (see *Alcibiades*), and also asceticism, mystical rites and ecstasy (divine madness?) as a way of salvation. (122) However, for the Mystery religions as with other religions, the blessed life, the 'soul's salvation', is one found in initiations and ritual observances, but for Plato the blessed life is one of practising and pursuing philosophy. Philosophy becomes the salvation. Nygren writes in comparing the mysteries to Plato: 'even the philosopher can speak of a 'conversion' and a 'purification', and he cannot arrive at the desired end by way of dialectics, but only in a state of 'Divine madness' (μαῦνια). The Platonic myths gives us valuable hints of the religious side of his world-outlook.' (124)

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.



Thus, writes Nygren, 'Plato's doctrine of the Forms leads directly up to the idea of Eros, and his philosophy is at the same time a doctrine of salvation.'<sup>109</sup>

The point by Nygren that Plato's doctrine of Eros is one which involves a salvation for the human soul is a valid one. However, it is an idea of salvation that is based upon Eros as a mediator in that the soul ascends *via* Eros in its experience of the divine. As Diotima says, Eros is a 'great spirit' in between 'god and mortal' and as such, is a messenger who shuttles back and forth between the divine and humanity, binding them both together (*Symposium* 202e). The encounter with the divine is the culmination, and the source of salvation, offered in Plato's philosophy, not, as Nygren says, the experience of Eros. In this, Nygren mistakes Eros as the beginning and the end of humanity's salvation and not as a mediator. In contrast to Nygren's perspective of Plato, Eros leads the soul to the divine, but is never the end itself. This, of course, breaks a strength of Nygren's point to find justification in pitting Eros against *agape* as directly linked to being a point of salvation and not salvation's mediator. John Rist illumines the point,

Plato usually tends to describe it as a passion directed *towards* the supreme Realities and as an upward movement, but that nevertheless we are justified in seeing him as the source of a second conception, that of an overflowing of love from higher to lower realities.<sup>110</sup>

We must, however, even be cautious with Rist's point as well in that Eros is a medium of exchange between the soul and the divine, and between lovers, but is not that which flows from the divine to humanity. The Forms do not lovingly desire the world, but the world lovingly desires them. As Iris Murdoch comments, the Forms are 'essentially objects of love',<sup>111</sup> but they stand 'separate and unresponsive.'<sup>112</sup> However, as we shall see in the fourth chapter, this separate and unresponsive nature is negotiated in a quasi-personal view of the Forms. For the point here, Eros is a medium of the soul in its salvation in the encounter with the divine.

Even though recognising Eros' role in the salvation of the soul, and that it is humanity's means to the encounter with the divine<sup>113</sup> Nygren attempts to diminish

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<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

<sup>110</sup> John M. Rist, *Eros and Psyche*, 39. In the *Phaedrus*, Plato describes that love begins to overflow in the lover and runs outside of him to the beloved. There, love begins to grow in the beloved so that the soul of the loved one is filled 'with love in return.' (255d)

<sup>111</sup> Murdoch, *Metaphysics*, 144.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>113</sup> Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, 135.

and discredit the nature of Eros to the point of seeing Eros as the love of desire<sup>114</sup> not as desiring love, and that it is an egocentric love and not as a love which leads to the divine.<sup>115</sup> Nygren through this misses completely the nature and definition of Eros as given within Plato who sees Eros not as a selfish attachment but a selfless desire for the beloved and a desirous love for the divine. As Plato's myth of the charioteer makes clear, the dark horse is reined because of his all consuming desire not allowed to run free to pursue it. The lust is controlled through a purification of Love that is transformed as a love for the divine and not the physical manifestation. Nygren admits, however, that 'the Platonic Eros is a wholly different thing from sensual love',<sup>116</sup> and that it is necessary to distinguish two types of Eros as apart as, 'This distinction between the 'vulgar' and the 'heavenly' Eros is, indeed... elementary.'<sup>117</sup> (*Symposium* 180d) It may even be said that Plato does not distinguish between two different 'types' of Eros, as much as that there are two directions to which the one Eros can turn. As Iris Murdoch argues, it is the redirection 'away from selfish fantasy' and not toward it, that is the mark of Plato's Eros.<sup>118</sup> To Plato, only an Eros turned toward the divine establishes truth and justice which is a far and away different idea than seeing Eros, as Nygren does, as a love of desire.

The second idea Nygren argues: that Eros is egocentric love, is simply a misguided point that shows Nygren's pious bias for *agape* and what he perceives as remaining true to Christian thought rather than a true seeking of what Eros actually entails. Eros is far from an egocentrism in Plato's understanding, but is, as in the *Phaedrus* (250), an envisioning of beauty that is actually the prime occasion for 'unselfing.'<sup>119</sup> Nygren's thesis desires to establish that Eros does not represent true love at all, and that in such a choice the Greeks as a whole, but especially Plato, advocated a love based upon the centrality of the self over the 'other'. On this, Gregory Vlastos argues that Nygren

fails to reckon with elementary fact that *philia* is a near-synonym of *agape*, and that, regardless what their philosophers said, Greeks, being human, were as capable of genuine non-egoistic, affection as are we. Ignoring *philia* (save

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<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

<sup>118</sup> Murdoch, *Existentialists*, 419.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 369.

for a passing notice of the *Lysis*... where Nygren translates the word by 'friendship' and uses the dialogue as further evidence 'of the egocentric nature of Eros' in Plato... fails to take the slightest cognizance of Aristotle's conception of it.<sup>120</sup>

As shown above, Eros is not the preservation of the self, but the desire to lose the self and the soul's own selfish desires in the love for the divine.

Even with such a low view, in the end, of the concept of Eros, Nygren still retains a view which is illuminating to a true understanding of Plato which sees Eros as giving the soul transformation and salvation. To Nygren, Eros is humanity's ascent rather than the divine's descent as it 'is the way of man to the Divine, and can never be a way by which the Divine may descend to man.'<sup>121</sup> Admittedly, this is what Plato indicates. However, Nygren rejects an essential understanding of Eros in that it is a means through which, as in the *Phaedrus* and the *Symposium*, beautiful things act as reminders of Beauty so that, 'the sharp dualism' is overcome, and a more harmonious world-view is attained.<sup>122</sup> Nygren writes that Plato's insistence on escape emphasises the reality of ultimate dualistic opposition so that Eros is 'a way of flight' and not an affirmation of the world of sense.'<sup>123</sup> Yet, Nygren fails to see that Eros is for Plato a means to the divine, an ascent wherein the idea of Eros for the divine transforms life itself, and does not simply represent a flight away. The spiritual nature of Eros is that it is a common experience which, as the soul desires the divine and not simply the physical, becomes the medium through which the divine is encountered bringing transformation, and even salvation, to the soul.

As it is a means to the divine, Plato's Eros is a recognition of the manifestation of the divine in the world, and is embodied in the philosopher in that the way of the philosophical life is the way of love. The central role of Eros in the philosophical life is that it recognises the divine, known in the form of Beauty, as present in the world. Eros is a power that enlivens the soul to seek the eternal Beauty, which is recognised universally. Regarding the *Phaedrus*, Iris Murdoch comments that, for Plato, we,

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<sup>120</sup> Gregory Vlastos, *Platonic Studies* (Princeton University Press, 1973), 6.

<sup>121</sup> Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, 135.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*

‘see’ non-visual forms of beauty. Plato, in his myth does not discuss exactly what seeing beauty is like. He assumes his hearer will understand.<sup>124</sup>

Simone Weil comments that beauty is not simply for cultivated people, but is ‘the only value that is universally recognised’ as the word beauty ‘speaks to all hearts.’<sup>125</sup>

Weil continues that love is so much a part of the universe, as seen in the *Timaeus*, that ‘the substance of the universe wherein we live, is love.’<sup>126</sup> The universe,

has been created by love and its beauty is the reflection and the irrefutable sign of this divine love, as the beauty of a perfect statue, of a perfect song, is the reflection of supernatural love which fills the soul of a truly inspired artist.<sup>127</sup>

This immanence of the divine is part of the underlying understanding of the doctrine of Eros in that the soul desires the Beauty that is manifest in the world. Because of its recognition of the beautiful object Eros is a channel through which the eternal Beauty is known, and through which this divine Beauty is encountered. In Eros, sensual beauty is not diminished but is built up and exalted as that which participates in the eternal. Plato’s Eros does not bring a cold, hard separation between the sensual and the divine, but sees the sensual as participating in the divine. Eros is a mediator between the mundane and eternal, and, as such, is a realisation of their mutual interaction.

The interaction between the mundane and eternal is seen in one aspect through the philosophical life as Eros becomes embodied in the philosopher. The philosopher, as a lover, is one in whom the divine Love shows itself. Although Eros is, of course, intangible, there is still a movement toward embodiment as seen exemplified in the philosophical life. Of course, for Plato, the chief example of this embodiment is in the person of Socrates, an idea which figures prominently in Plato’s philosophical theology as a whole. On this, Edith Hamilton reminds that, ‘the stress in the *Phaedrus* is on visible beauty, but the reader of Plato must always remember that Socrates, the most beloved and the most lovely of all...’ was completely absent of any physical beauty, but had, as Hamilton describes it, a beauty ‘within.’<sup>128</sup> Karl Jaspers similarly writes that, Eros is a ‘movement of love’ (a

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<sup>124</sup> Murdoch, *Metaphysics*, 15.

<sup>125</sup> Weil, *Intimations*, 102.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>128</sup> Hamilton, *Plato*, 475.

*philein* of *sophia*), and it is Socrates who is the source for Plato's own love and literally the source for his philosophy,<sup>129</sup> one who, throughout the *Dialogues*, embodies the love of wisdom. Jaspers comments that in Socrates Eros, in Plato's thought, becomes tangible as,

No other love has ever left such a monument. Plato's Eros was real; illumined by the reality, it became a love of everything noble that crossed his path.<sup>130</sup>

As Eros involves an aspect of embodiment in its transformational and even salvific role, it also represents the interrelationship of the intellectual with the passionate that characterises Plato's philosophical theology as a whole. Through the concept of Eros, Plato interrelates these two ideas to the point that the philosophical way is not the removal of the emotional or the spiritual, but is the embracing of the passionate as an essential attribute of philosophy. As his philosophy involves this emotional and the passionate aspect, it involves the personal being of the philosopher.

However, Plato at some points seems to advocate the divorce of passion altogether from the life of reason and philosophy. In the *Phaedo* (84b), the philosopher's soul,

would not reason as others do, and would not think it right that philosophy should set it free, and that then set free it should give itself again into bondage to pleasure and pain and engage in futile toil... No his soul believes that it must gain peace (*γαλήνην*) from these emotions, must follow reason and abide always in it, beholding that which is true and divine and not a matter of opinion...<sup>131</sup>

In Socrates' words, the soul seeks a *galene*, a calm repose<sup>132</sup> from the emotions of pleasure and pain, found in reason and the contemplation of the divine. Yet, can we deduce, then, that Plato's philosophy condones the absence of passion in order that one must gain peace from such 'emotions'? The answer is that we cannot, for what Socrates is advocating is not an absence of emotion, but a description of the freedom of the soul that is found as the soul breaks free from the passions that rule the body.

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<sup>129</sup> Jaspers, *Great Philosophers*, 155.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>131</sup> Harold Fowler translation in Loeb edition of *Plato*, 1982. This translation is a better rendering of Plato's connotation, however for an alternative reading see Tredennick's translation in Hamilton and Cairns, *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, page 67, who translates the phrase that the 'soul secures immunity from its desires by following reason.'

This does not constitute a breaking away from passion altogether, but a certain type of passion (i.e. the bodily), for the soul has its own desire and passion for the divine which is clearly seen in the *Phaedrus* and the *Symposium*. Only when it is free from the rules of the passion of the body does the soul find its own passionate awakening in desire for the eternal. Plato indicates throughout that it is not the absence of emotion, but the transforming of emotion to be a desirous love for the divine that is the mark of the divine way of life in philosophy, a passion that is seen clearly in the concept of Eros. As Iris Murdoch writes, 'in spite of Plato's repeated declaration that philosophers should stay chaste and his requirement that the soul must try to escape from the body, it is the whole Eros that concerns him, and not just some passionless distillation.'<sup>133</sup> In Eros the picture is given that passion is an essential characteristic of the philosophical life.

A further illustration of how the passionate and emotional is involved within the philosophical life is seen in Plato's use of imagery: in the myths to convey philosophical ideas, and in the envisioning of the Forms, which, even further, betrays the religious aspect of this question altogether. What is suggested, for example, by the elaborate myth of the *Phaedrus*, and other myths, according to Murdoch, is that Plato suggests to us 'the naturalness of using visual images to express spiritual truths.'<sup>134</sup> It is the vision of Beauty which enlivens the soul of the philosopher, awaking the passionate intensity of the divine Eros. Murdoch writes that though Plato has been 'criticised for his use of visual imagery', 'many of these images... suggest the absolute closeness, at some points at any rate, of the spiritual world, how close and how numerous are its cues.'<sup>135</sup> Recalling the image of Beauty, even the contemplation of the Forms is an experience which involves the emotions. Myles Burnyeat, in his commentary on the *Theaetetus*, writes regarding Plato's Forms that, 'a great philosophy demands a response which is more than merely intellectual.'<sup>136</sup>

Such images naturally draw upon the emotional by their very nature – we are moved imaginatively, we experience the emotion that is involved in the myth, and in

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<sup>132</sup> γαλήνη has the connotation of a 'stillness of wind and wave' (Liddell and Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon*, abridged (Oxford: 1926), 137.)

<sup>133</sup> Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 415.

<sup>134</sup> Murdoch, *Metaphysics*, 15.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>136</sup> Myles Burnyeat, *The Theaetetus of Plato* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1990), 39.



beholding the Form, we are philosophically engaged. As Nicolas Berdyaev writes, knowledge is actually attained ‘by means of images to a greater extent than knowledge reached through concepts.’<sup>137</sup> As Murdoch argues, Plato is not simply an ‘intellectualist’, one simply given to the rational without any reference to the passion, emotion, or even soul, but represents a union of the passion with the intellect:

Certainly he [Plato], who returns so often and so ardently to the importance and the ambiguity of love, cannot be called a cold or abstract or purely intellectual moralist. It is rather the other way round. He does not ‘intellectualise’ love, but sees intellect as passion.<sup>138</sup>

Further, such passion indicates not only an emotional aspect to Plato’s philosophy, but the religious nature of the philosophical experience as well. Murdoch writes in another comment, ‘Throughout his work Plato understands intellectual activity as something spiritual, the *love* of learning spoken of in the *Symposium* and the *Philebus*.’<sup>139</sup>

The presence of the passionate in Plato’s philosophical theology argues against the contrasting view that does not see passion or spirituality as part of intellectual endeavour. In Plato, the metaphysical is an emotional endeavour in which the reason and the soul are in conjunction to that point where the person becomes involved with, and influenced by, that which is contemplated. An example from the *Laws* proves this out when concerning the contemplation of the gods, the Athenian says, ‘You should wait for the future, then, before you undertake to judge of the supreme issues, and the greatest of these, though you now count it so trivial, is that of thinking rightly about the gods and so living well, or the reverse.’ (888b) For Plato, the correct thinking about the divine is directly tied to a way of living in that what is contemplated forms the way one lives. In fact, the knowledge of the divine that is striven for through philosophy in Plato involves a richer idea than simply an agreement on its reality. H. D. F. Kitto writes, that knowledge that is spoken about in the context of the Greeks, and specifically Plato,

is one of Being, of The Good, virtually of God. It is something much richer and wider than our current, purely intellectual ‘knowledge’, for a moral as

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<sup>137</sup> Nicolas Berdyaev, *The Beginning and the End* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1952), 39.

<sup>138</sup> Murdoch, *Metaphysics*, 17.

<sup>139</sup> Murdoch, *Existentialists*, 437.

well as an intellectual passion is its driving-force, and its object is the Truth that embraces everything....<sup>140</sup>

By understanding that philosophical knowledge is that which involves the passion and emotion, we see how that both the inner and outer experience of philosophy conjoins one with another.<sup>141</sup> Such a perspective according to Iris Murdoch recognises that the conjoining of the intellect and passion gives rise to a ‘new (modern) definition’ of metaphysics or metaphysical craving, which would be acceptable to Plato, one that contemporary thought is in need of.<sup>142</sup> Such words express what Murdoch terms as, ‘our finite nature together with our passionate desire to understand “the world” which we attempt to intuit ‘as a whole.’<sup>143</sup> Therefore, she adds, it can be said that, ‘Metaphysics may thus be connected with a mystical state.’<sup>144</sup> Nicolas Berdyaev echoes a similar sentiment when he writes that, ‘as a system of concepts metaphysics is an impossibility, it is possible only as the symbolism of spiritual experience.’<sup>145</sup> It is the ‘whole man’, and not simply the reason, which ‘constructs metaphysics,’<sup>146</sup> for a perspective which sees metaphysics as a strict and objective science devoid of passion is a ‘will o’ the wisp,’<sup>147</sup> for it is the ‘apprehension of spirit, in spirit, and through spirit’<sup>148</sup> Metaphysics becomes part of the subject, influencing within, creating spiritual values and making the act of transcendence, not a means into an object, but an influence back into the subject.<sup>149</sup> John Macquarrie adds the significant comment when he writes,

The desire to know, the drive of the intellect, is subtly intertwined in its roots with the desire to be, the drive of the whole person. There is a personal factor

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<sup>140</sup> Kitto, *The Greeks*, 194.

<sup>141</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer writes in *The World as Will and Idea*, supplement to Book One, ‘Criticism of the Kantian Philosophy’ that, ‘We have no grounds for shutting ourselves off, in the case of the most important and most difficult of all questions, from the richest of all sources of knowledge, inner and outer experience, in order to work only with empty forms. I therefore say that the solution of the riddle of the world must proceed from the understanding of the world itself; that thus the task of metaphysics is not to pass beyond the experience in which the world exists, but to understand it thoroughly because inner and outer experience is at any rate the principal source of all knowledge; that therefore the solution of the riddle of the world is only possible through the proper connection of outer with inner experience effected at the right point, and the combination thereby produced of these two very different sources of knowledge.’ (Murdoch, *Metaphysics*, 79)

<sup>142</sup> Murdoch, *Metaphysics*, 79.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>145</sup> Nicolas Berdyaev, *The Beginning and the End*, 42.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*

in all knowing, even the kind which seems most matter-of-fact. That personal factor becomes increasingly important as we move toward the kind of knowing that is called 'metaphysical.' For this has to do with the ultimate convictions that also shape our lives. In other words, metaphysics has a religious dimension – using the word *religious* in the widest sense so that it would not be restricted to those who finally come to a theistic metaphysic.<sup>150</sup>

As philosophy in Plato is defined to include the passionate, it involves the individual philosopher within it, the entirety of the philosopher's being and the philosopher's search for meaning. Berdyaev writes strongly that, 'Dispassionate knowledge there cannot be and never has been among real philosophers; it can only exist in dissertations which are devoid of any creative gift.'<sup>151</sup> Berdyaev comments, 'Plato, the greatest of all philosophers, was an erotic philosopher.'<sup>152</sup> The true philosopher,

has fallen in love with wisdom. In real true-born philosophy there is the Eros of truth; there is the erotic attraction of the infinite and the absolute. Philosophical creativity is intoxicated with thought.<sup>153</sup>

For Plato philosophy represents that which is known in the depth and involvement of life so that intellect, passion, and religious thought become intertwined. When this is understood, it is the entirety of the person that is involved, which Plato advocates throughout the *Dialogues*. As Gerard Watson writes, such personal involvement is an,

aspect much emphasized by Plato which we cannot afford to neglect. This is that any real knowledge involves the emotions and that knowledge is in fact impossible without such an involvement.<sup>154</sup>

Echoing this point, Nicolas Berdyaev writes, 'Philosophical knowledge is personal in character and the more personal it is the more important it is.'<sup>155</sup> To know, to have cognition, as the philosopher desires to do, is for Berdyaev indicative of even a search for meaning, as he writes,

It [cognition] is a spiritual struggle for meaning, and it is such not merely in this or that line of thought or school, but in every true philosopher even

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<sup>150</sup> John Macquarrie, *Existentialism*, 198-9.

<sup>151</sup> Nicolas Berdyaev, *The Beginning and the End*, 41.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>154</sup> Watson, *Plato's Unwritten Philosophy*, 78.

<sup>155</sup> Nicolas Berdyaev, *The Beginning and the End*, 39.

although he may not recognize the fact himself. Cognition is not a dispassionate understudy of reality.<sup>156</sup>

For Berdyaev it is the depth of passion that determines the intensity of the philosophical endeavour. Berdyaev comments that,

The significance of any philosophy is decided by the passionate intensity of the philosopher as a man, as one who is present behind all his efforts to know. It is decided by the intensity of the will to truth and meaning; it is the whole man who takes knowledge of a thing.<sup>157</sup>

For Plato, the determining factor of philosophy in one's life is where the passion is directed whether to the sensual or to the divine. For him the passionate and the intellectual are interrelated, even to the place that the degree of intensity of passion for the divine is the determining factor of how deeply one may know wisdom and encounter the divine. It is Eros that represents the major point at which the intellectual and passionate, as well as the philosophical, and the religious meet.

### Conclusion

Philosophy for Plato is a way of transformation and even salvation for humanity. As it involves this way of transformation, it is a profoundly religious idea. Through examining the question of philosophy in terms of its transformational role for humanity, we discover the underlying purpose of the *Dialogues* and the objective of Plato's philosophy as a whole. The key transformational aspect of Plato's philosophy is found in that it is a means of humanity to ascend to encounter the divine but such an ascent is not an escape from the world, but a transformation of it in that human existence finds its true existence and meaning in such an encounter. Plato's philosophy does not represent a simple mental game, but a way of life which is a religious quest, a seeking for the divine – which is not an option for humanity, but one in which humanity must engage if it is to find any meaning.

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<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*

## CHAPTER TWO: THE PHILOSOPHICAL LIFE

An essential aspect of Plato's philosophy as a religious experience is expressed in the idea that it is a religious way of life and existence. As it is a way which transforms humanity, philosophy for Plato is a way of being, a perspective that practices the presence of the divine through a way of life. Because of this, the notions which surround this way of life of philosophy that Plato teaches are deeply theological. In this chapter we will examine five themes which are involved in the religious aspect of the philosophical life in Plato: the *symbol* of the philosophical life in philosophy as a way of dying, the *dictum* of the philosophical life in knowing thyself, the *practice* of the philosophical life in the dialogue, the *personification* of the philosophical in the principle of embodiment, and the *goal* of the philosophical life in the notion of *homoiosis theo*. Relating these themes to the religious dimension of Plato's philosophy, we see through these themes the experience of transformation within Plato's philosophy, and the theological ideas implicit in the philosophical life.

### The *Symbol*: Philosophy as a Way of Death

The *symbol* of the philosophical life is that philosophy for Plato is a way of dying. To die to the passions of the body and flesh in order to be made alive in wisdom and the soul is the symbol that the philosophical life in Plato inhabits. In the *Phaedo* the image of dying is given as the way of the life of philosophy. Similarly, the same idea colours the *Apology* as well, even the rest of the *Dialogues*, particularly through the figure of Socrates. Indeed, the constant memory of Socrates' own death overshadows Plato and Platonism as a whole, as it is, in the words of Pierre Hadot, the 'radical event which founded Platonism.'<sup>1</sup> The historical event of Socrates' death is augmented by Plato into a vivid symbol of the philosophical life.

In the *Phaedo* philosophy is symbolised by death, represented as a catharsis of the soul in which it is liberated from the pull of the body and the flesh. This idea, religious in its nature alone, is one which also, in Plato, provides meaning to human

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<sup>1</sup> Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 94.

existence. The dialogue is set within Socrates' prison cell on the day of his death and is pervaded by a union of the idea of dying with the idea of the liberation that is given to the soul within the philosophical life. Socrates, using the theme of his own death in the early part of the dialogue, considers sending a message about his death to Evenus the poet to 'bid him farewell' and to 'tell him if he is wise, to follow me as quickly as he can.' (61b) The link of the symbol of death with the philosophical life is so strong that being told by Simmias that Evenus would not take his advice, Socrates questions if Evenus is even a philosopher. (61c) The expectation, implicit in these early words of the dialogue, is that the way of dying is an image of the true philosopher's way of life. As Socrates says,

Ordinary people seem not to realize that those who really apply themselves in the right way to philosophy are directly and of their own accord preparing themselves for dying and death. (64a)

For Plato the philosopher constantly prepares for and lives this way of death in his or her existence. The catharsis of the soul from body, therefore, is not a means of simple asceticism, but a means of acquiring wisdom and the development of the soul, or in short, a way of existence. For Plato, only in seeking that which is of the soul does humanity ever find peace, for the philosophical life is one that does not attach importance to seeking those things of 'the body' but of the soul:

Do you think that a philosopher attaches any importance to them (attentions paid to the body)? I mean things like providing himself with smart clothes and shoes and other bodily ornaments; do you think that he values them or despises them – in so far as there is no real necessity for him to go in for that sort of thing... but keeps his attention directed as much as he can away from it (the body) and toward the soul? (64e)

Plato's is not a calling the giving up of all pleasure, but a philosophical ethic in which ultimate importance is not attached to such things as what one holds in one's hand or wears. The unrest that humanity faces is caused, for Plato, by attempting to fulfil the desire to acquire such things as wealth at the expense of a knowledge of the divine and wisdom:

War and revolutions and battles are due simply and solely to the body and its desires. All wars are undertaken for the acquisition of wealth, and the reason why we have to acquire wealth is the body, because we are slaves in its service. That is why, on all these accounts, we have so little time for philosophy. (*Phaedo* 66d)





The soul seeks a freedom from the passions which, for Plato, entrap it. Thus, the seeking of wisdom, is a way of freedom.

For Plato, the philosophical life in seeking the divine seeks that which is ultimately real and liberates the soul, instead of that which is sensual and ultimately binding to the soul. The soul, liberated through death, strives for the realisation of this divine 'reality', and is able to think best when it does not rely upon, nor is troubled by, 'hearing nor sight, nor pain nor any pleasure' but, 'so far as possible...takes leave of the body...avoiding, so far as it can, all association or contact with the body reaches out toward the reality (τοῦ ὄντος).' (65c)<sup>2</sup> The act of looking away from a raw desire of the material body frees the soul so that it is able to comprehend that which is absolute: the Just, the Good, the Beautiful, (*Phaedo* 65d) and the 'realm of the pure and everlasting and immortal and changeless.' (79d)

And it is then that the philosopher most disdains the body, flees from it and seeks to be by itself?...Do we say that there is such a thing as the Just itself, or not?...And the Beautiful, and the Good?...have you seen any of these things with your eyes?...Then he will do this most perfectly who approaches the object with thought alone, without associating any sight with his thought, or dragging in any sense perception with his reasoning, but who, using pure thought alone, tries to track down each reality pure and by itself, freeing himself as far as possible from eyes and ears, and in a word, from the whole body, because the body confuses the soul and does not allow it to acquire truth and wisdom whenever it is associated with it. Will not that man reach reality, Simmias, if anyone does? (*Phaedo* 65d-66a)

As the absolute and eternal stands 'alone', so does the soul seek to be 'alone' without the influence of any other hindrance in its contemplation of reality. Socrates says, 'We are in fact convinced that if we are ever to have pure knowledge of anything, we must get rid of the body and contemplate things by themselves with the soul by itself.' (66e) The seeker of wisdom in contemplating this reality is then 'freed' from the prison of simply seeking the pleasure of the body:

Every seeker of wisdom knows that up to the time when philosophy takes it over his soul is a helpless prisoner, chained hand and foot in the body, compelled to view reality not directly but only through prison bars, and wallowing in utter ignorance. And philosophy can see that the imprisonment is ingeniously effected by the prisoner's own active desire, which makes him

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<sup>2</sup> Fowler translation in Loeb.

first accessory to his own confinement... philosophy takes over the soul in this condition and by gentle persuasion tries to set it free. (82e-83a)<sup>3</sup>

So strong is the symbol of death to Plato's philosophy that to follow the way of dying in one's own existence is the objective of the philosophical life. The embracing or rejection of this way of death is correlative to loving the way of wisdom *or* loving the way of the body and that which is opposed to it,

if you see anyone distressed at the prospect of dying, said Socrates, it will be proof enough that he is a lover not of wisdom but of the body. As a matter of fact, I suppose he is also a lover of wealth and reputation – one or the other, or both. (68c)

To Plato the soul is independent of the body as their nature is of two different realms. Whereas the body changes, dies, and decays, the soul, being like the divine, is immortal and ever the same. (*Phaedo* 80c*ff.*) This separation, however, is a problematic one for thinkers such as John Macquarrie who argues that the correct understanding of the soul is one which is united with the body. He writes,

it can hardly be denied that there are many difficulties attendant on it [the idea of the soul as separate from the body]. The activities of the soul, our mental and spiritual life, are all closely correlated with physical occurrences in the brain and in the bodily organism generally, and it is hard to see how the soul could exist apart from the body...the human being is a psychosomatic unity... if one could imagine a soul existing apart from the body, it is hard to see how it could relate to a world or to other people or have any content to its experience. It is through the body that we relate to that which is other than ourselves, and there could be no worthwhile human existence without relatedness. So even if there were an independently existing soul, which seems improbable, it would still be doubtful if it could sustain in any significant way the hope of a life beyond death.<sup>4</sup>

To Plato, it is the very idea of the soul as separate from the body that is a crucial understanding of his philosophical theology and, more, a key to wisdom. For Plato, the soul possesses its existence because of its relation, not to the body, but to the divine which is independent and non-contingent on anything. As Plato says, the soul seeks to be by itself (*auto kath' auto*; *Phaedo* 64c) in order that it may know the divine (the Forms) which exists by themselves as well and in this know wisdom. (*Phaedo* 65e) For Plato, the only way that we are able to relate to the world is

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<sup>3</sup> The images here are reminiscent of the myth of the Cave (*Republic* VII). The images and themes of shackles and liberation are common in both instances. The Cave may thus be not only a picture of the world, but also a picture of that state when the person concentrates only upon the body and its desires.

<sup>4</sup> Macquarrie, *In Search of Humanity: A Theological and Philosophical Approach* (SCM Press Ltd, 1982), 250.

through the soul, as it is the soul alone which realises true reality over and against a changing world known only by the senses. Plato would see Macquarrie's doctrine as too linked with the material to know wisdom. The reliance upon the body that Macquarrie advocates: that it is only through the body that we are able to relate to anything or anyone else, is argued against by Plato's notion that it is only through the soul that we are able to know anything, and that there is nothing known or realised without the soul – only the soul knows itself, others, and the true nature of the body. Further against Macquarrie, for Plato, the reason that the soul is able to live on after death is because of its dissociation with the body and its association with the divine. The soul's own immortality is based upon its very nature being like the divine. To tie the soul with the body is for Plato to be associated with change and death, not immortality and life at all.

The well-being of the soul at death, literally its immortality, is guaranteed for Plato in following the philosophical life, a life symbolised in death itself, in knowing the soul to be separate from the body. Death is not feared by the philosopher, for the philosopher expects to reach a place after physical death where the good and wise have gone. The philosopher is protected by God, as Phaedo indicates when he says that he felt an 'incomprehensible emotion' at the death of Socrates, one of pain and pleasure combined (*Phaedo* 59a).<sup>5</sup> Phaedo confesses that he never really felt sorry for Socrates as one would of a dear friend who is going to die, for there was an assurance that Socrates would be taken care of by the providence of God, and that all would be well with him – as well as anyone could be. (*Phaedo* 58e) Socrates himself confesses an assurance of eternal life because of his philosophy in that:

If I did not expect to enter the company, first, of other wise and good gods, and secondly of men now dead who are better than those who are in this world now, it is true that I should be wrong in not grieving death. As it is... I shall find there divine masters who are supremely good. (63c)

As lovers of wives, husbands, children, companions, etc. long to be with those that have died to the point that they wish to follow them in death, Socrates asks if the philosopher as the,

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<sup>5</sup> ἀλλ' ἀτεχνῶς ἀτοπόν τί μοι πάθος παρῆν καί τις ἀήθης κρᾶσις ἀπό τε τῆς ἡδονῆς συγκεκραμένη ὁμοῦ καὶ ἀπὸ τῆς λύπης.

true lover of wisdom who has firmly grasped this same conviction – that he will never attain to wisdom worthy of the name elsewhere than in the next world – will he be grieved at dying? Will he not be glad to make the journey? We must suppose so... that is, if he is a real philosopher, because then he will be of the firm belief that he will never find wisdom in all its purity in any other place. If this is so, would it not be quite unreasonable... for such a man to be afraid of death? (68b)

What is counted by many to be the termination of existence is for Plato the point of life. Where many seek to satisfy physical passions solely as the way of the wise, Plato finds the way of death to these passions the true way of wisdom, and where death is seen as an ending of existence altogether, Plato finds in it the way of existence.

Through the image of death Plato points back to a way of human life, even an image of philosophical existence. The symbol of death, known acutely in Socrates, manifests such a great tie of philosophy with death in Plato, that Pierre Hadot sees the training for death as what philosophy is in itself.<sup>6</sup> Hadot writes that the understanding that philosophy is a training for death is ‘profoundly true’ for anyone ‘who takes philosophy seriously.’<sup>7</sup> Such thinking has had an enormous influence on Western philosophy, as Hadot writes, even on such ‘adversaries of Platonism’ as Epicurus and Martin Heidegger.<sup>8</sup> Hadot comments that in Heidegger, ‘we have... a system which makes of the anticipation or forestalling of death a precondition of authentic existence.’<sup>9</sup> In Plato, however, this forestalling of, and turning away from death is contrasted with death as the symbol of the true philosophical way of life. Hadot urges that, ‘We must not forget that in Platonic philosophy, the point is not simply to think about death, but to carry out a training for dying which is, in reality, a training for life.’<sup>10</sup>

The philosophical death for Plato is a remedy for humanity’s situation. By facing death, Plato confronts the depressing and constant change of the world by securing his thought and life in a reality which is only found through dying. As Eric Voegelin writes, in the *Phaedo*, ‘Thanatos (death) becomes the cathartic power that

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<sup>6</sup> Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 28.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 121, n. 123.

cures the soul of the sickness of the earth.’<sup>11</sup> But such a death, for Plato, is a ‘training for life’, a way of life to be lived in the world, not simply a resignation from the world. As Guthrie comments, the *Phaedo* presents ‘not the life which the philosopher refuses, but that which he embraces.’<sup>12</sup> In such perspectives, the philosophical death, contrary to those such as Grace Jantzen, is an ethical position rather than one intended to discredit our physical existence.<sup>13</sup> For Jantzen the philosophical death of Plato means that we throw away the body, discrediting all that the body means, or should mean, to our existence. But Jantzen, however, greatly misreads Plato’s teaching of the philosophical death in that what Plato calls for is not a throwing away of the body, but an ethical and positive position of seeing the soul as ultimately important and that the material, that which is of the body, changes, decays, and dies, incapable of providing any source of hope or virtue.<sup>14</sup> To see the philosophical death as the casting aside of the body altogether is to see the dualism that Plato (admittedly) indicates as a violent one, rather than seeing its true intention of establishing that that which is eternal and of the soul is far more important and virtuous than a life spent seeking after fame, fortune, and physical pleasures of the body without any reference to one, or another’s well-being. The correct reading of the *Phaedo* is to see that Plato’s position is an ethical position of warning against allowing the passions of the body to rule a person’s existence. For Plato, to see beyond the physical to the individual soul is the embellishment of the worth of the person and not his or her diminishing. By emphasising that the seeker of wisdom is not lured by the physical at all, Plato establishes an ethic of human existence in that

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<sup>11</sup> Eric Voegelin, *Order and History*, vol. III (Louisiana State University Press, 1957), 12.

<sup>12</sup> W. K. C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy* (Cambridge: 1965), vol. IV, 338.

<sup>13</sup> See Grace Jantzen, *Power, Gender, and Christian Mysticism*, (Cambridge University Press, 1995), 30-31ff.

<sup>14</sup> Guthrie’s pondering is worth noting here:

‘Some of the finest parts of the dialogues give the impression not that he (Plato) despised the body, but that, although the soul was the higher principle and must maintain the lead, soul and body could work in harmony together. Yet this unnatural dualism of the Orphics, which divides the two so sharply and makes the body nothing but an encumbrance, the source of evil, from which the soul must long to be purified, permeates the *Phaedo*... I would go so far as to name the Orphics as at least one of the influences which went to form the most characteristic part of Platonism, the sharp separation of the lower world of *sensa* from the heavenly world of the Ideas. It is often puzzling to see how this doctrine, which in itself leads naturally to a lack of interest in the sensible world and a concentration on the higher, seems to be at war with Plato’s inborn longing to interfere effectively in practical matters. I believe in fact that it was the teaching of the *hieroi logoi* that set the feet of the philosopher on the upward path from the Cave into the Sunlight, whereas it was the voice of Plato’s own heart that



the worth of an individual lies within the soul, and not the physical appearance – an appearance which may be deemed as attractive or unattractive and the worth of the individual based upon that. What can certainly be said is that Plato's way of philosophical death is not escapism, nor a rejection of or withdrawal from the world, but a way of the philosophical life that involves the love of wisdom in all aspects of existence.

Existentially, the way of death is, for Plato, to see philosophy as the struggle with the self and to find, for Plato, one's true existence. To be philosophical in Plato's estimation is to be one who rejects one's own selfish ambition or the exalting of one's pleasure or popularity over wisdom. In the *Apology*, Socrates justifies himself being a true philosopher in that he has put away own selfish ambition due to philosophy within his soul. Because of his trying to help 'the cause of God' through the investigation of his and others' souls, Socrates' ambition for political power or wealth are cast aside because of his divine calling in being a philosopher: 'I do not have the leisure to engage in public affairs to any extent, nor indeed to look after my own, but I live in great poverty because of my service to the god.' (*Apology* 23)<sup>15</sup>

Hadot comments that Socrates,

preferred to die rather than renounce the demands of his conscience, thus preferring the Good above being, and thought and conscience above the life of his body. This is nothing other than the fundamental philosophical choice. If it is true that philosophy subjugates the body's will to live to the higher demands of thought, it can rightly be said that philosophy is the training and apprenticeship for death.<sup>16</sup>

The image of dying and the loss of the self is one taken up by Simone Weil when she writes,

Plato does not say, but he implies, that to become wise...one must become, already in this life, naked and dead. The examination of conscience exacts this breaking of all the attachments which make up our reasons for living.<sup>17</sup>

Iris Murdoch, following on from Weil's thought, says that, 'Simone Weil tells us that the exposure of the soul to God condemns the selfish part of it not to suffering but to

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sternly bade him return and help his fellow-prisoners still fettered in the darkness of the cave. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, vol. IV, 339-40.

<sup>15</sup> G. M. A. Grube's translation in Cooper, *Plato: Complete Works*. The sarcasm by the use of the word 'leisure' (σχολῆ) is key, for the service to the god in philosophy is its own great pleasure, but it is the way of salvation for the soul.

<sup>16</sup> Hadot, *Philosophy*, 94.

<sup>17</sup> Weil, *Intimations*, 82.



death.’<sup>18</sup> In such thinking, only in dying to the flesh are we able to behold the Divine reality, the absolute, and in so doing, the selfish part, which seeks its own satisfaction in its own body, and not the idea of universal truth, wisdom, and philosophy, is put to death. In the ‘Fire and the Sun’, Murdoch explains that,

Philosophy is a training for death, when the soul will exist without the body. It attempts by argument and the meticulous pursuit of truth to detach the soul from material and egoistic goals and enliven its spiritual faculty....<sup>19</sup>

Through the philosophical death, the ‘spiritual faculty’ of humanity, to use Murdoch’s words, is the basis of a ‘spiritual exercise’ which has in mind the notion of liberation, a freedom from ‘...a partial, passionate point of view –linked to the senses and the body – so as to rise to the universal, normative viewpoint of thought, submitting ourselves to the demands of the Logos and the norm of the Good.’<sup>20</sup> Such a life consists,

in changing one’s point of view. We are to change from a vision of things dominated by individual passions to a representation of the world governed by the universality and objectivity of thought. This constitutes a conversion (*metastrophe*) brought about with the totality of the soul.<sup>21</sup>

The universality of thought which is achieved by the liberated soul becomes a self-less pursuit which ends in wisdom. The training for death that Socrates speaks of is the dying to oneself in order to see the truth, as Hadot describes it, ‘training to die to one’s individuality and passions, in order to look at things from the perspective of universality and objectivity.’<sup>22</sup> This is the point of dying to self and the ambitions of the self which is characteristic of the body. It is to put away all earthly passions and ambitions and to know the absolute reality. P. Schroeder says it well when he writes,

We may see in the Socratic practice of death (*melete tou thanatou*) not merely a rehearsal for physical death but the transformation of self, a dying to the identity that experience, circumstance, and inclination may have presented to us. Thus, the *Phaedo* is very much about life, a life in which archaic passivity before fate is replaced with contemplative will and control.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Iris Murdoch, ‘The Sovereignty of the Good Over Other Concepts’, *Existentialists*, 385.

<sup>19</sup> Murdoch, *Existentialists*, 404.

<sup>20</sup> Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 94-95.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>23</sup> Schroeder, *Classical Mediterranean Spirituality* (Routledge and Kegan Paul: London, 1986), 348.

Therefore in the *Phaedo*, the symbol of philosophy in the way of death is one which is a loss of selfish motives in order to find true existence.

In the idea of the philosophical death, there is a blend of death with life for Plato in that philosophers, like Socrates, actually die; but there is a life to follow and to call others to, which forms the way of the philosophic life, a life which leads on to philosophical holiness. At the basis of such a life is the recognition that for Plato philosophy means a way of life, a way of salvation for humanity. It is a perspective that does not see an utter and final end to the search for wisdom nor the ongoing pursuit for it, but a continuous 'dialogue' between life and death as one fosters the other.

### The *Dictum*: Know Thyself

Established in the *Apology* and in *Alcibiades I*, to 'know yourself' (γνωθι σεαυτον) is the *dictum* of the philosophical life.<sup>24</sup> As philosophy as a way of death is the *symbol* of the philosophical life, to know oneself describes the essence and practice of philosophy *within* one's life. But, as the philosophical death may be seen, at least in one aspect, as the loss of the self, to know oneself is the balancing and equalising of that concept so that the self is regained. In this, to know oneself involves two aspects which are part of the religious dimension of Plato's philosophy: one is that it represents a spiritual exercise of the soul that leads to the soul's transformation in knowing one's motives and desire for wisdom, and secondly, it conveys a theological understanding of the soul as reflecting the divine. To know oneself is to know one's own motives and desires and concomitantly to know oneself in relationship to the divine.

Philosophy, for Plato, begins with the recognition within one's soul of the need for wisdom. In the *Apology*, Socrates' own questioning of himself leads him to establish that wisdom is solely the property of God, and that true wisdom only begins when the individual understands his or her need.

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<sup>24</sup> As the inscription on the walls of the temple of Apollo at Delphi, 'Chilon's γνωθι σεαυτον, 'know thyself' ... lent the initial impulse to the great philosophical movement in Greece... The wisdom he (Socrates) sought was essentially ethical: it turned on the principle of virtuous conduct.' (*Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, James Hastings, ed, Vol. 12 (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1921), 745.)

But the truth of the matter... is pretty certainly this, that real wisdom is the property of God (τῷ ὄντι ὁ θεὸς σοφὸς εἶναι) and this oracle is his way of telling us that human wisdom has little or no value. It seems to me that he is not referring literally to Socrates, but has merely taken my name as an example, as if he would say to us, The wisest of you... is he who has realized, like Socrates, that in respect of wisdom he is really worthless. That is why I still go about seeking and searching in obedience to the divine command, if I think that anyone is wise... when I think the person is not wise, I try to help the cause of God by proving that he is not. (*Apology* 23b)

To Socrates, it is this very lack of self-knowledge that is the Athenians' trouble, as he challenges:

let no day pass without discussing goodness and all the other subjects about which you hear me talking and examining both myself and others is really the very best thing that a man can do, and that life without this sort of examination is not worth living.... (*Apology* 38a)

In Socrates' words, it is the element of self-reflection that is missing in most lives, but it is this which is the beginning point of wisdom. The problem is that many do not look inward to confront and know their own desires, their own motives, and their own lack of wisdom, but attempt to convince themselves they are fully whole and wise as they are. In his defence, Socrates asks, 'Are you not ashamed that you give your attention to acquiring as much money as possible, and similarly with reputation and honor, and give no attention or thought to truth (*aletheia*) and understanding (*phronesis*) and the perfection of your soul (*psyche*)?' (*Apology* 29e)<sup>25</sup> Pierre Hadot's translation of Socrates' words is well formulated when Socrates says:

I set myself to do you – each one of you, individually and private – what I hold to be the greatest possible service. I tried to persuade each one of you to *concern himself less with what he has than with what he is*, so as to render himself as excellent and as rational as possible. (*Apology* 36b-c)<sup>26</sup>

What is shown here is the concern for the relationship of the individual to truth in which lies the well-being of the soul – not in what one possesses in power or wealth. The famous phrase of Socrates centres this entire theme that, 'life without this sort of examination is not worth living.' (38a)

What we are given in the idea of knowing oneself is what may be termed in Hadot's useful comment, a 'relationship of the self to the self', which forms the basis

<sup>25</sup> See Pierre Hadot's translation in *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 89.

<sup>26</sup> Pierre Hadot's, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 90.

of a spiritual exercise.<sup>27</sup> Socrates is one who knows himself and his own lack of wisdom which he, in turn, calls on others to recognise as well. As Socrates claims, he does not possess wisdom at all but that he is only a *philo-sophos*, a lover of wisdom. An underlying message of Plato seen in the *Apology*, and in the *Dialogues* as a whole, is that the beginning of wisdom lies in the difference between thinking one possesses wisdom already, and the humility of loving and desiring wisdom – knowing that one does not possess it, and knowing that its source is in the divine. To know oneself means, as Hadot puts it, among other things: ‘To know oneself *qua* non-sage: that is, not as a *sophos*, but as a *philo-sophos*, someone *on the way toward* wisdom.’<sup>28</sup> Yet such a knowledge is also, as Hadot goes on to say,

to know oneself in one’s essential being; this entails separating that which we *are not* from that which *we are*. Finally, it can mean to know oneself in one’s true moral state: that is, to examine one’s conscience.<sup>29</sup>

However, all three of these concepts are united in Plato and not separate: to know ourselves is to know our own soul as on the way to wisdom, but it is to begin with knowing that we are not wise, and to examine our lives as seekers of wisdom in order that we may live a virtuous life through the life of philosophy.

The knowledge of oneself is also characterised by literally an inner speech within oneself, and thus becomes intertwined with the formational idea of the dialogue. In the *Apology*, Socrates calls upon those at his trial to examine their souls in this way, to give consideration to themselves, to dialogue with themselves, not in terms of priding themselves in terms of their possessions, or what they think they have in terms of wisdom, but what they truly are within their souls. Hadot comments that if we can trust the portrait painted by Plato, and even Aristophanes, we see that, ‘Socrates, master of dialogue with others, was also master of dialogue with himself.’<sup>30</sup> Such a concept is deeply meaningful in Plato, for the notion of being a lover of wisdom means directly being honest with oneself in one’s own motives and need. The whole mission of Socrates is this calling to reflect upon one’s soul in this manner – an introspection which, in Plato’s thought, prepares one to undertake the life of philosophy.

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

Yet, as much as to know oneself is to reflect upon oneself in relationship to one's own soul, to know oneself is to be led back to the divine, and to know oneself in relationship to that divine. This second aspect of 'know thyself' found in *Alcibiades I* conveys the profound relationship between the soul and the divine in which the soul is seen in Plato's philosophical theology to be a reflection of the divine. Socrates alludes in the dialogue that the knowing of oneself comes by knowing the soul in 'itself':

Tell me, how can we come to know the self itself (αὐτὸ ταῦτό)? Maybe this is the way to find out what we ourselves are – maybe it's the only possible way. (*Alcibiades I* 129b)

Yet, such a knowledge comes through an even more evocative understanding in that the soul resembles God as in a mirror. (*Alcibiades I* 132ff) As Socrates asks,

And can we find any part of the soul that we can call more divine than this, which is the seat of knowledge and thought?... Then this part of her resembles God (Τῷ θεῷ ἄρα τοῦτ' ἔοικεν αὐτῆς), and whoever looks at this, and comes to know all that is divine, will gain thereby the best knowledge of himself. (133c)<sup>31</sup>

In Plato is a relationship between the soul and the divine in that the soul reflects the divine. We may even read 'know thyself' as 'see thyself' and understand the same meaning. (*Alcibiades I* 132d) That the soul in its 'thinking part' resembles God is a concept established in the *Phaedo* as well (80a), illuminating the close relationship of the soul to the divine in which the relationship of the soul and the divine is reciprocal. As in Plato's symbol of the 'mirror' (*Alcibiades I* 132e), to see the soul is to see the divine, and vice versa. The soul in knowing itself becomes intertwined with the knowledge of God. Thus, to 'know thyself' takes on a reciprocal dimension in that to know oneself is to know God as well; a looking inward upon the soul and seeing God reflected there.

Gerard Watson writes the synopsis of Plato's doctrine that, 'God is the mirror of what is best in us, and by knowing Him we will know ourselves....'<sup>32</sup> In this line of thought, to examine one's soul is to know the divine, but the opposite is also true in that to not undertake an understanding of the soul is to miss the understanding of

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<sup>31</sup> W.R.M. Lamb transl., *Plato*, vol. VIII, Loeb Classical Library (William Heinemann, Ltd: Cambridge, Mass., 1927).

<sup>32</sup> Watson, *Greek Philosophy*, 16. A word about the authenticity of *Alcibiades I* and this particular passage is offered by Gerard Watson in a note that both have been questioned, but without good grounds.



God, wherein alone is found wisdom. Theologically, in a circulating and reciprocating fashion, to know oneself is the knowledge of the divine in that the inward self-inspection brings the philosopher to reflect upon both their self and the divine simultaneously. Søren Kierkegaard puts it, 'In the Socratic (or Platonic) view each individual is his own centre, and the entire world centers in him, because his self-knowledge is a knowledge of God.'<sup>33</sup> But it is the mystical perspective that is even more helpful to understand this concept as when Meister Eckhart comments: 'To get into the core of God at his greatest one must first get into the core of himself at his least for no one can know God who has not first known himself,'<sup>34</sup> or as Iris Murdoch quotes Eckhart: 'Do not seek God outside your own soul.'<sup>35</sup> What is seen in Plato's philosophical theology is that a knowledge of oneself and one in relationship to the divine cannot be seen as two different ideas, but ideas which are complementary, indeed reciprocal, flowing into one another. As the dictum of the philosophical life, to know thyself is that which the philosophical life aspires, to know oneself and a knowledge of the divine is a reciprocal and mutual reflection.

Knowing oneself is of great importance in Plato for it involves a concept of existence and a concept of transformation through the philosophical life. In Plato, the meaning of knowing oneself is to reach into the depths of one's own soul, but also to bring oneself into relationship with the divine and wisdom. Karl Jaspers writes that the meaning of the philosophical life begins with one's self-inspection as it,

Springs from the darkness in which the individual finds himself, from his sense of forlornness when he stares without love into the void, from his self-forgetfulness when he feels that he is being consumed by the busy-ness of the world, when he suddenly wakes up in terror and asks himself: What am I, what am I failing to do, what should I do?<sup>36</sup>

It is this type of self-inspection of the soul which Plato indicates in the *Apology* that the Athenians lacked. Indeed, if we further take the Athenians as representative of a general theme of humanity then, for Plato, we suffer from self-forgetfulness, the loss of self-inspection, leaving us at a loss in the truly meaningful questions of life. As

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<sup>33</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, N.J.: 1974), 14.

<sup>34</sup> Meister Eckhart in George Seldes' *Great Thoughts* (Ballantine Books: New York, 1985), 117.

<sup>35</sup> Murdoch, *Metaphysics*, 70.

<sup>36</sup> Jaspers, *Way to Wisdom*, 121.



Jaspers continues, philosophy is at its root, ‘the decision to awaken our primal source, to find our way back to ourselves, and to help ourselves by inner action.’<sup>37</sup> Taking Plato’s conception, philosophy is, at its essence, a way of self-inspection that leads the soul back to itself, literally back upon itself, and therein does the soul find truth. By knowing oneself, one becomes identified with the truth, for the wisdom that one is searching for is found ultimately within the divine, but, as seen above, a divine that is reflected within the soul. In Socrates’ own case, his own self-inspection and identification with the divine through the knowing of his own soul caused his martyrdom. Reflecting upon this, Jaspers writes that, the martyr actually suffers not out of ‘emotional enthusiasm’, or ‘defiance of the moment’, but ‘after a long and arduous conquest of himself.’<sup>38</sup> For Plato, Socrates became a martyr for knowing the sort of wisdom which begins in knowing oneself, a way which, for some, is too unsettling to undertake.

#### The *Practice*: The Dialogue

It is the dialogue – the philosophical conversation and even communion – that is the *practice* of the philosophical life. The dialogue takes its place as one of the foundational ideas in considering Plato’s philosophy as a religious experience, and particularly in the philosophical life, because it is through the dialogue that the soul is transformed by engaging with others in the philosophical conversation and communion. The dialogue represents the philosophical soul in communion and community, outside the nature of self-knowledge that the ideas of philosophy as a way of death and ‘know thyself’ brings. Indeed, Plato’s whole intention of writing the *Dialogues* is to bring the reader to a knowledge of their own soul but to do so through the act of dialogue, to join the philosophical conversation, and through this to be transformed. What is found in the idea of the philosophical dialogue in Plato is an aspect of the religious nature of the philosophical life, but also an idea which is a foundational aspect of Plato’s philosophical theology as a whole.

Throughout the *Dialogues*, Plato conveys various aspects of the dialogue itself in its transformational role. The dialogue for Plato is described as an act of

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<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> Jaspers, *The Perennial Philosophy*, 10.

transformation in that it is an engagement in ‘living speech’, and as an act of communion and communication. In the *Phaedrus* (276a) the dialogue is said by Socrates to be that which is ‘living and breathing’ (ζῶντα καὶ ἔμψυχον), beyond the written word, of which the written word is only an image (εἶδωλον). As writing lies dead on the page, immobile and undynamic, the dialogue is in the soul, moving and alive. The dialogue is that which is ever current and fresh whereas the written word is only a tool for memory (*Phaedrus* 275a). Thus, the dialogue is that which makes philosophy alive as that which is organic and dynamic – without the dialogue, philosophy becomes simply idle words.

This life of the dialogue as a transformation of the soul is seen as well in the *Seventh Letter*<sup>39</sup> (341d) as Plato gives encouragement, but also caution, that philosophy is known through ‘communion’ (συνουσία), literally through the act of joining to it, and with those who love philosophy. As Plato writes cautioning those who take philosophy too lightly, ‘acquaintance with it must come after a long period of attendance on instruction in the subject itself and of close companionship...’, wherein philosophy is born in the soul as a spark gives rise to a blazing fire (341d). The ‘communion’ in this context is a communion with philosophy itself, but also implied is the idea of being in community with those who love philosophy as well. Through the philosophical community, the would-be philosopher is led by a teacher to philosophy through the dialogue, giving them an ‘acquaintance’ with the subject. It is the dialogue that is the uniting endeavour of everyone engaged in the philosophical life.

The religious aspect of the dialogue is seen in that it is centred in the act of the philosophical conversation which transforms the soul. Iris Murdoch comments, making the point,

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<sup>39</sup> The authenticity or inauthenticity of the *Seventh Letter* has been a topic of debate over the course of years. Today, the position is one of controversy to some extent, but as John M. Cooper comments the *Seventh Letter* is, ‘the least unlikely [of all the Epistles] to have come from Plato’s pen.’ (Cooper, *Plato: Complete Works*, 1635) The work of Gerard Watson in his *Plato’s Unwritten Teaching* (Appendix, ‘The Authenticity of the Seventh Letter’, 134-135) is significant in that it provides thoughts of the argument in a concise form. Aside from stylistic questions, which are easily put to simple changes or evolution in a writer themselves, the *Seventh Letter* in my own view is not in any way contrary to what Plato says in other undisputed dialogues, but is an accentuation of these doctrines, making the case ever more clearly for the nature of philosophy to be that which is to be taken seriously as a life-transforming experience especially from 340ff onwards. However, for an alternative reading see Edelstein, *Plato’s Seventh Letter* (Leiden, 1966).

Now what exactly is philosophy? Some might say that philosophy is certain arguments in certain books, but for Plato (as indeed for many present-day philosophers) philosophy is essentially talk. *Viva voce* philosophical discussion (the  $\psi\iota\lambda\omicron\iota\ \lambda\omicron\gamma\omicron\iota$  of *Theaetetus*, 165a) is the purest human activity and the best vehicle of truth. Plato *wrote* with misgivings, because he knew that truth must live in present consciousness and cannot live anywhere else. He expressed these misgivings in the *Phaedrus* and (if he wrote it) in the *Seventh Letter*.<sup>40</sup>

The theological meaning of the dialogue is found in that it is an active participation of the soul in philosophical exchange with others, in speaking but also in listening, beyond the written words of a page. However, the dialogue represents in Plato more than a conversation, but is also a way of transformation through the purging of the soul. The religious dimension of this notion is evident in Iris Murdoch's words as she continues that Plato,

was concerned throughout with how people can change their lives so as to become good. the best, though not the only, method for this change is *dialectic*, that is, philosophy regarded as a spiritual discipline. The aim of Socrates was to prove to people that they were ignorant, thus administering an intellectual and moral shock. In the *Sophist* (230c), dialectic is described as a purgation of the soul by  $\epsilon\lambda\epsilon\gamma\chi\omicron\varsigma$ , argument, refutation, cross-questioning; and in the *Phaedo* (67e) true philosophers are said to 'practise dying'. Philosophy is a training for death, when the soul will exist without the body. It attempts by argument and the meticulous pursuit of truth to detach the soul from material and egoistic goals and enliven its spiritual faculty, which is intelligent and akin to the good....<sup>41</sup>

In a lucid comment, Murdoch writes that, 'It is always a significant question to ask of any philosopher, 'what is he afraid of?''<sup>42</sup> In the type of transformation offered through the dialogue, nothing remains hidden, for all thoughts surface in the act of the dialogue and questioning. The persistent questioning of Socrates, the constant dialogical nature of philosophical exchange, 'outs' the hidden agenda or the false thought. As the Stranger says in the *Sophist*, the dialectic seeks to 'eradicate the spirit of conceit' (230b-d). Through the dialectical process, inconsistencies are revealed that exist in one's opinion, and the one who sees this becomes 'angry with himself' in turn becoming more gentle toward others (230c). The individual is changed in his outlook, delivered from falsely held notions, dogmas, and prejudices, knowing only what he knows, and no more. In effect this one has been transformed

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<sup>40</sup> Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 404.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

into a seeker and lover of wisdom, into the ‘the best and wisest state of mind’, rather than one who has convinced himself that he knows already (230d). The vibrancy of this idea is seen in the words of Karl Jaspers who comments that the contradiction, an essential part of the dialogical question and answer and to the dialectic itself, is an ‘art of purification’ as,

the way to knowledge by showing men what they do not know. People who think they know refuse to learn... Openness to correction is acquired by education and is a sign of distinction, whereas the man who is inaccessible to correction, be he the king of kings, must be regarded as an uncultivated man, whose mind has suffered hideous neglect.<sup>43</sup>

To think that one knows already is to miss this essential notion, to know that one does not already know wisdom is salvation. As Gadamer correctly writes, ‘Dialectic is not so much a *techne* – that is, an ability and knowledge – as a way of being.’<sup>44</sup>

What is seen therefore is that the dialogue is part of a religious way of life. It is Pierre Hadot who emphasises this point that the dialogue, to be understood properly, must be seen in its religious dimension as part of a philosophical spirituality. Plato’s dialogue, writes Hadot,

turns out to be a kind of communal spiritual exercise. In it, the interlocutors are invited to participate in such inner spiritual exercises as examination of conscience and attention to oneself....<sup>45</sup>

Hadot writes that such a perspective is founded upon two ideas. Firstly, the dialogue is the means of the movement of the participants toward a transformation, even a conversion of the soul in philosophy:

the dialogue guides the interlocutor – and the reader – towards conversion. Dialogue is only possible if the interlocutor has a real *desire* to dialogue: that is, if he truly wants to discover the truth, desires the Good from the depths of his soul, and agrees to submit to the rational demands of the Logos. His act of faith must correspond to that of Socrates: ‘It is because I am convinced of its truth that I am ready, with your help, to inquire into the nature of virtue. (*Meno 81e*)’<sup>46</sup>

Secondly, the dialogue is part of nature of the soul:

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<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 359.

<sup>43</sup> Jaspers, *The Great Philosophers*, Volume I, 136.

<sup>44</sup> Gadamer, *The Idea of the Good*, 37-38.

<sup>45</sup> Hadot, *Philosophy*, 90.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 93; *Meno* (81e).

every dialectical exercise, precisely because it is an exercise of pure thought, ... turns the soul away from the sensible world, and allows it to convert itself towards the Good. It is the spirit's itinerary towards the divine.<sup>47</sup>

Even when read, Plato's *Dialogues* reveal an objective in Plato himself that always seeks to engage and transform the reader so that after reading a particular dialogue, the reader will begin to live the philosophical life.<sup>48</sup> Jill Gordon, commenting on Wolfgang Iser's reader-response theory writes that,

Plato's dialogues thus induce us to engage in dialectic while we are reading them. In addition, they convey to us the tools necessary for living the life of dialectic beyond the act of reading. If we take seriously the moral component of Socratic dialectic as a way of life, then Plato's dialogues act in a parallel fashion to exhort the reader to live the Socratic or philosophic way of life. The act of reading one of Plato's dialogues, therefore, can serve as the beginning of a transformation.<sup>49</sup>

Gordon's consideration is echoed by Hadot who, in Arnold Davidson's words, once called the thinking of Plato's *Phaedrus*: the 'ontological value of the spoken word.'<sup>50</sup> The concept is of a 'living and animated discourse', not intended for information, but as Hadot says, 'to produce a certain psychic effect in the reader and the listener.'<sup>51</sup>

As the Platonic dialogue strives for transformation, one is able to see the place of the transformational role of the myth and the symbolic images Plato employs within its context as involving the reader in the midst of the dialogue. The myths, as Murdoch writes, are sources for Plato 'to explain his conception of human life.'<sup>52</sup> The subject of how the mythical relates to the dialogue is legitimised in that it is the mythical that Plato employs to illuminate the subjects given in *Dialogues*, and in many cases, encapsulate and house the central themes that the particular dialogue discusses: Plato's myth of the Cave in the *Republic*, the soul as a charioteer and horses as in the *Phaedrus*, and Plato's extent references to the religious myths well-known in his own day portray in picturesque terms the points of the discussion. The myth draws the participant into the midst of the philosophical discussion through

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<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> 'Although every written work is a monologue, the philosophical work is always implicitly a dialogue.' (Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 105) In consideration of Hadot's work as a whole, the missing element in current philosophical and theological endeavour is the art of ancient philosophy in its search for wisdom and which warrants a certain way of living.

<sup>49</sup> Jill Gordon, 'Dialectic, Dialogue, and Transformation'. *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 29, pt. 3 (1996), 272-273.

<sup>50</sup> Hadot, *Philosophy*, 19.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> Murdoch, *Metaphysics*, 10.



the faculty of vision and imagination, attaching themselves to the soul leading to its transformation. Through the power of myth the participants in the dialogue, even ourselves, are enabled to envision truths which are difficult to convey, ‘thoughts that do not lend themselves to direct statement.’<sup>53</sup> Because it is visionary, we become emotionally involved in the dialogue through the story, aided by the imagination, and are cast, with both reason and emotion, into the middle of the issues at stake, and because it is dramatic, the dialogue affects us personally by drawing us into the discussion. Thus, the dialogue is the union of *mythos* and *logos* – an argument that is not ‘flat’ but multi-dimensional, giving meaning to, and comprised of, different levels of perception and philosophical awareness.

The idea that the dialogue represents a living discourse in which the reader is brought into the midst of the dialogue and the soul transformed through this interaction, has led some to ponder the objective of the *Dialogues* as a whole. Such a question is emphasised by those such as Francisco J. Gonzalez<sup>54</sup> who sees philosophy in Plato as being defined by its transformational role in the person. Gonzalez writes that aside from the more historical interpretations that Plato is establishing some form of doctrine, or refuting the doctrine of another, there is a ‘third way’ of interpreting Plato that goes beyond that even offered by ancient writers such as Diogenes Laërtius in his *Lives* when he writes that,

an interpretation of a Platonic dialogue must decide, among other things, whether the statements in it are meant to establish Plato’s own doctrines (εἰς δογματῶν κατασκευήν) or to refute the interlocutor (III.65).<sup>55</sup>

For Gonzalez and others, the ‘third’ way seeks to read the *Dialogues* as being a means of transformation to the soul rather than a way of doctrine. Gonzales writes that instead of simply seeing the dialogues as either the establishment of Platonic doctrines, or the refutation of other antithetical ideas, the *Dialogues* are to be seen as,

inspiring us, as expanding our imaginations, as ‘orienting’ us in our own inquiry, as communicating a form of reflexive, practical, and nonpropositional knowledge, or as inviting us to a conversation in which we must actively participate in order to arrive at the truth.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Jaspers, *Great Philosophers*, 143.

<sup>54</sup> Gonzalez, Francisco J., ed., *The Third Way: New Directions in Platonic Studies* (Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc.: Lanham, Maryland, 1995).

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 1

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.



Within the same perspective as Gonzalez, Gerald Press writes in his reflection of reading Plato's *Dialogues* that,

rather than speak of doctrines, I believe it is more accurate to call this all a 'vision.' There are several reasons for doing so. For one thing, it is consistent with the language of psychic seeing that Plato sometimes makes Socrates use. (*Phaedo* 99b) For another, the terms *theoria* and *theasthai* as indicating what philosophy is and what philosophers do are used in significant contexts in several dialogues. Moreover, it captures the peculiarly Greek sense of *theoria* as a cognate of *theatron*. The dialogues are certainly, from one point of view, full of theories, but theories more as visions than as doctrines.<sup>57</sup>

Pierre Hadot echoing this similar point writes that the dialogue must be represented in terms of its ethical transformation, a transformation that is experiential and not doctrinal:

The dimension of the interlocutor is, as we can see, of capital importance. It is what prevents the dialogue from becoming a theoretical, dogmatic exposé and forces it to be a concrete, practical exercise. For the point is not to set forth a doctrine, but rather to guide the interlocutor towards a determinate mental attitude.... The point is worth stressing, for the same thing happens in every spiritual exercise: we must *let* ourselves be changed, in our point of view, attitudes, and convictions.<sup>58</sup>

One must agree that the dialogue concerns the soul's transformation, but contrary to Gonzalez, Press, and Hadot, Plato does not abandon doctrine in order to have a concept of transformation, or conceive transformation as contrary to doctrine, but sees doctrine and the transformed life in philosophy as conjoined. In fact, the dialogue itself is the medium through which the Platonic philosophical and theological perspectives become known – perspectives which lend themselves to the soul's transformation. As is stated in the *Laws*, the belief of what the divine is or what it is like leads directly to the living of the ethical, and hence, philosophical life, as the Athenian draws the correlation: 'You should wait for the future, then, before you undertake to judge of the supreme issues, and the greatest of these, though you now count it so trivial, is that of thinking rightly about the gods and so living well, or the reverse.' (888b) Further, as is written in the *Republic* and the *Laws*, certain ideas concerning the divine are non-negotiable, as that God is 'good' in the *Republic* (379b), or that God is the 'measure of all things' (*Laws* 716c). The importance of

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<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 146-147.

<sup>58</sup> Hadot, *Philosophy*, 91.

these ideas for Plato is that a correct and philosophical perspective of the divine affects the type of life that is led. As in the *Republic* (380bff), the stability of the society is linked to a correct understanding of God as one who does good and not evil. And similarly, in the *Laws* (907c), the ‘wicked’ fancy themselves free to act as they will because they entertain strange and unphilosophical ideas about the divine. For Plato, the philosophical way known through the dialogue changes the perspective of how all things are viewed and how life is lived. Doctrine and transformation are not separated but correlate together. Gonzalez’, Press’, and Hadot’s point if left to its own relegates Platonic thought to be simply a practical way of life absent of any transcendent vision. Yet, what is experienced in Plato is the simultaneous encounter with the divine which leads to transformation which Gonzalez, Press, Hadot nor even Laertius’ positions portray on their own without a balancing view. Even with this, it is a striking fact that whatever doctrine Plato has, is indeed borne out of the philosophical experience, even the soul’s transformation through the divine. Plato’s is an intertwining of doctrine and transformation (experience) in which one is involved in the other.

The point at which the transformational role of the dialogue, and the union of doctrine and transformation can be clearly seen, is within the figure of Socrates, and the ideas that are given by him when considering the role of the dialogue and its impact upon the soul. In Plato’s philosophical theology of the philosophical life it is Socrates who, as the grand interlocutor questioning and probing the individual toward transformation, is also the figure through which the dialogue is modelled, and through whom the philosophical theology of the dialogue is expounded. Through Socrates the dialogue becomes the source of attending to one’s soul, as the confession of Alcibiades in the *Symposium* makes clear: ‘he [Socrates] makes me admit that while I’m spending my time on politics, I am neglecting all the things that are crying for attention in myself.’ (215e-216a) In the *Apology*, the entirety of Socrates’ speech is given in the attitude that the listener (or the reader) will begin to follow the philosophical way of life and engage with him in the philosophical dialogue. Yet, Socrates is one who, as Jill Gordon points out, is a model of such a transformation as one that not only transforms those around him but is transformed himself. Gordon writes:

Dialectic is not merely a tool of logical analysis, nor simply a method of breaking down an interlocutor in argument. Dialectic, as practiced by Socrates, is the fundamental moral enterprise that comprises the Socratic way of life (*Apology* 20e-23b). In practicing it, Socrates benefits his soul and, ideally, the souls of his interlocutors are opened up to the same possibility. Dialectic is, I would therefore argue, a fundamentally moral enterprise. Its aim is the improvement of those who engage in it, and it has the capacity to transform those who put it to use.<sup>59</sup>

The dialogue is a two-way transformation, as Hans-Georg Gadamer writes reflecting on the *Meno*, that reveals,

what Plato has in mind is the failure of Socrates' sophist interlocutors when they want to do the questioning themselves. The questioner seems to them to play a superior role, to which, accordingly, one should aspire. But questioning is not a technique of role playing. The questioner is always one who simultaneously questions himself.<sup>60</sup>

What the role of Socrates reveals is that, as in the *Theaetetus* and the *Meno*, the dialogue's transforming nature is possible because of the knowledge that is already present in the soul. The transformation that is known through the dialogue is a reawakening in the soul of that which it already knows. The image of Socrates as a midwife, as in the *Theaetetus*, and the understanding that nothing is ever learned but only recollected as Plato shows in the doctrine of *anamnesis* in the *Meno*, means that the dialogue is the way of bringing out that which is latent in the soul's memory. For Plato, the dialogue does not import knowledge to the soul but rekindles it.

Kierkegaard describes it in his *Philosophical Fragments*, as that Truth, 'is not introduced into the individual from without, but was within him'<sup>61</sup> already. Such thinking, Kierkegaard continues, is developed through Socrates, and 'ultimately becomes the point of concentration for the pathos of the Greek consciousness...'<sup>62</sup>

In the *Theaetetus*, Socrates describes his role as a midwife, and through this image, the dialogue is seen to be maieutic in its nature.

My art of midwifery... is not with the body but with the soul that is in travail of birth. And the highest point of my art is the power to prove by every test whether the offspring of a young man's thought is a false phantom or instinct with life and truth. I am so far like the midwife that I cannot myself give

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<sup>59</sup> Jill Gordon, 'Dialectic, Dialogue, and Transformation'. *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 29, pt. 3 (1996), 266.

<sup>60</sup> Hans Georg-Gadamer, *The Idea of the Good in Platonic-Aristotelian Philosophy*, P. Christopher Smith, translator (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 59.

<sup>61</sup> Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, 11.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

birth to wisdom... because there is no wisdom in me... Those who frequent my company at first appear, some of them, quite unintelligent, but, as we go further with our discussions, all who are favored by heaven make progress... although it is clear that they have never learned anything from me. The many admirable truths they bring to birth have been discovered by themselves from within. But the delivery is heaven's work and mine. (*Theaetetus* 150c-d)

As truth already exists within the soul, the dialogue, in the hands of Socrates, is a means for the seeker of wisdom to give birth to wisdom. Of his own, Socrates remains 'barren', admitting that he has no wisdom of his own. This same position he maintains in the *Apology*: one of ignorance who only knows that he is not wise. Yet, he is the midwife, administering the dialogue, in which those who are 'favored by heaven make progress' though, as Socrates says, they learn nothing from him.

Kierkegaard's commentary on this wise is worth repeating:

In the light of this idea (the soul's remembrance, its immortality, its preexistence) it becomes apparent with what wonderful consistency Socrates remained true to himself, through his manner of life giving artistic expression to what he had understood. He entered into the role of midwife and sustained it throughout; not because his thought 'had no positive content,' but because he perceived that this relation is the highest that one human being can sustain to another... Socrates was a midwife subjected to examination by the God; his work was in fulfilment of a divine mission (Plato's *Apology*), though he seemed to men in general a most singular creature (ἀτοπώτατος, *Theaetetus*, 149); it was in accordance with a divine principle, as Socrates also understood it, that he was by the God forbidden to beget (μαιύεσθαί με ὁ Θεὸς ἀναγκάζει, γεννᾶν δὲ ἀπεκώλυσεν, *Theaetetus*, 150); for between man and man the maieutic relationship is the highest, and begetting belongs to God alone.<sup>63</sup>

The dialogue is the point where one realises the knowledge latent within, that which God alone provides and brings forth.

Yet, regarding the dialogue and its ability to help the soul remember, there is the issue of 'Meno's paradox' (*Meno* 80d-e) where Meno asks: How do you seek for what you already know, or if you do not know, how do you even know what to look for, or how will you ever know if you have even found it? Meno's question challenges the whole premise of what the dialogue is attempting to do for, as Meno asks, how do you search for that which is already in the soul (in the memory of the soul) or if you do not understand anything, how will you know when the dialogue has resulted in your finding truth? For Plato, the answer to the paradox lies in that

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<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 12-13.

though the soul remembers and hence knows, it does not remember in full. The soul by the very act of trying to recollect, which is brought on by the dialogue, is attempting to know something more to fulfil the remnants of knowledge already present. For Socrates, the act of acquiring knowledge is the act of the soul's remembering. Knowledge is not imported, but brought out from the depths of the soul, as Jill Gordon calls it, 'an act of re-covery rather than dis-covery.'<sup>64</sup> As Socrates explains,

The soul has learned everything, so that when a man has recalled a single piece of knowledge – *learned* it, in ordinary language – there is no reason why he should not find out all the rest, if he deeps a stout heart and does not grow weary of the search, for seeking and learning are in fact nothing but recollection. (*Meno* 81d)

The dialogue then in Plato's thought does not import anything into the soul, but is an exercise from the inside, from the experience of recalling the knowledge which is latent in the soul. In short, for Plato, learning is a process of re-gathering, recovery, recollecting that knowledge already within the soul and it is the dialogue that is the means to this remembrance.

As it is a literal reaching back into the soul within itself as well as an ongoing conversation with others, the dialogue in Plato can be seen as a journey of the soul both individually and communally, in its striving for wisdom. As Socrates asks in the *Republic* (532b), 'And what about this journey? Don't you call it dialectic?'<sup>65</sup> (οὐ διαλεκτικὴν ταύτην τὴν πορείαν καλεῖς;) As it is a journey, it is a movement of asking and answering of questions (*Cratylus* 390e) which does not end, for as the *Phaedo* (66e) states, nothing can be finalised for the philosopher until the philosopher reaches the world of the divine at death. Generally speaking, the *Dialogues* as a whole cannot really be said ever to draw to a final conclusion as each dialogue leaves the reader with questions unanswered which, as I understand it, is Plato's purpose to draw the reader toward philosophy. Further, because the philosophical conversation for Plato is centred in the eternal and inexpressible, it

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<sup>64</sup> Jill Gordon, 'Dialectic, Dialogue, and Transformation'. *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 29, pt. 3 (1996), 265. According to Gordon the idea of recollection makes known several aspects of the dialogue: First, that the dialogue 'takes place through question and answer, inquiry and response.' Secondly that, 'there is no teacher who tells the learner what there is to learn' but rather, 'the student has access to learning through an examination of himself and his beliefs through dialectic.' And thirdly, learning can take place only when the walls of self-righteousness and arrogance 'are torn down and one admits ignorance.'



never is able to draw to a close due to what it is searching for. As Murdoch's insight puts it, 'Plato pictures human life as a pilgrimage from appearance to reality,'<sup>66</sup> and it is this idea of 'pilgrimage' which is one of the main aspects of the dialogue as it a means of moving the soul toward the encounter with divine reality.

The dialogue as this journey can be seen to be characterised by movement, and is dynamic. In one aspect the dialogue is a movement inward within oneself but also outward toward divine reality and truth. To Plato, truth is found both in knowing oneself, in the subjective and self-inspecting journey of one's own dialogue within, but also in the encounter with the divine through the philosophical conversation with others who are outside of the self. The dialogue within is a psychological journey realising one's own ignorance or beliefs in a purification of the soul. Yet, the dialogue is also a journey to seek that reality which lies outside the self beyond time and the sensual world. To dialogue is to undertake the facing of contradictions, exemplified by Socrates who explores contradicting viewpoints in order to clarify and define the terms which are used in the conversation. As thought is challenged, it is moved and never allowed to stagnate. Karl Jaspers gives a perspective of this aspect of the dialogue when he writes that the demonstration of contradictions

brings thinking into its natural *movement*. Its consequence in the dialogue form is that the thought content is suspended in the movement of thinking. While in an exposition thoughts are set forth as definitive, in dialogue the truth develops spontaneously, in the course of the exchange, as an objective reality that is not contained in any one position. It is not as though a truth that might be expressed directly and more adequately in an exposition were superfluously cloaked in dialogue form. For in the dialogue my opponent also makes an indispensable contribution to the truth in its entirety.<sup>67</sup>

By it being a journey that is both inward and outward and that faces contradiction, the dialogue, though establishing a certain doctrine of the divine, does not provide for the formulation of that doctrine to be hardened and stagnate. The nature of the dialogue is one of a philosophical endeavour that is fluid and dynamic ever expressing the divine in new ways. This of course does not mean that there is no foundation for the dialogue to build upon, as in the absence of an eternal reality or

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<sup>65</sup> G. M. A. Grube's translation, revised by C. D. C. Reeve in Cooper, *Plato: Complete Works*.

<sup>66</sup> Murdoch, *Existentialists*, 387.

<sup>67</sup> *Great Philosophers*, I, 136.



position to which it ascribes, but that by its very nature represents that which cannot be proverbially placed in a box or ended. The dialogue in Plato represents a constant moving reflection upon an eternal and stayed divine which seeks for new and deeper perspectives and expressions of that divine reality to which it is striving. On this Gabriel Marcel reckons that it would be better for the philosopher to regard his or her doctrine as, 'a limited participation in the meaning of being,' rather than a self-centred 'definitive theoretical encapsulating of the universe.'<sup>68</sup> Comparatively, to Plato's use of the dialogue, Marcel's own use of the 'journal-form of communication'<sup>69</sup> prohibits any surmisation that reality is exhausted, or that there is not a continuous search, even journey, toward the goal of wisdom. In Plato, one understands that there is a divine reality which is non-negotiable, but how that reality is expressed fuels the dialogue. Truth is comprised of many individual experiences but not one incarnating full truth. Plato's Good, Beauty, the One, the changeless, the invisible, etc., are expression of one reality experienced in a multiplicity of ways, and not separate realities all vying for the same position. The doctrinal position that is reached through the dialogue is that there is a true reality beyond the physical and changing, described in similar ways through the dialogue in the various Forms, all part of the dialogical experience.

In short, the dialogue is in Plato a means to the transformation of the soul representing the soul's encounter with the divine as found through the philosophical conversation within oneself and with others. As it is an encounter with the divine, it moves toward an end in the knowledge of the divine, but never reaches a finality or conclusion. For Plato it is *the* major vehicle through which the soul is transformed and led to an encounter with the divine.

### *Embodiment*

As the dialogue involves the philosopher within it, the philosophical life involves itself in the philosopher as the philosopher is called to be the *embodiment* of the philosophical ideal by living out the philosophical life. Such an idea is central to understanding the nature of the true philosopher in Plato, and especially seen in the

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<sup>68</sup> James Collins, *The Existentialists: A Critical Study* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company: 1952), 216.

figure of Socrates who embodies and personifies the divine gift of philosophy.<sup>70</sup> C. Taylor has written that one of the central theme of the *Dialogues* is one in which Plato ‘writes as a philosophical apologist, who seeks to present Socrates as the ideal embodiment of philosophy...’<sup>71</sup> The centrality of Socrates in Plato’s mind is such that Karl Jaspers is moved to write that Plato’s philosophy builds itself upon a person:

Plato’s philosophy is grounded in a lifelong personal attachment. The fixed point in this philosophy is not nature, not the world, not man, not a problem, not a theorem, but all of these because the center upon which the whole rests is one man. To discern the nature of this attachment is one of the conditions for an understanding of Plato... We may say that what Plato first expresses is not the philosophy but the philosopher as he saw him in reality. He discloses philosophy in his presentation of the philosopher. Plato’s poetic invention found the philosopher in the real man whom he knew and loved.<sup>72</sup>

What is shown through the figure of Socrates is that philosophy in Plato is linked to that which is ultimately personal and incarnational: philosophy as embodied in the individual and in a person. As Hadas and Smith write in their work *Heroes and Gods*, the image of Socrates is Plato’s ‘greatest creation and his most effective vehicle for teaching’<sup>73</sup> Socrates is one in whom philosophy is embodied and personified, but also is one whom the would-be philosopher takes as his or her model of life. As Gerard Watson writes, Socrates ‘was the most important theological influence on Plato, emotionally and intellectually...’<sup>74</sup> and it is this figure that Plato presents in his dialogues as a model of what the philosopher is to be.

In the *Dialogues*, Socrates is the central dramatic figure with whom the reader comes into contact and in whom philosophy is, for Plato, embodied. Challenging the crowds of Athens in the *Apology*, Socrates himself points to himself as a model to be followed:

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<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> The works of Paul Gooch, *Reflections on Jesus and Socrates* who considers the similarities and differences between the portrayal of Socrates’ and Jesus’ deaths, and Mark McPherran’s, *The Religion of Socrates* (Penn State University Press, 1996), discuss the religious beliefs and aspects of Socrates philosophical mission, finding their source and centre in the personage of Socrates himself.

<sup>71</sup> C. C. W. Taylor, ‘Socrates’, in the *Oxford Companion to Philosophy* (Oxford University Press, 1995), 836.

<sup>72</sup> Karl Jaspers, *The Great Philosophers*, Volume 1 (Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc.: New York, 1962), 119.

<sup>73</sup> Moses Hadas and Morton Smith, *Heroes and Gods: Spiritual Biographies in Antiquity* (Routledge and Kegan Paul: London, 1965), 56.

<sup>74</sup> Watson, *Greek Philosophy*, 16.

But the truth of the matter, gentlemen, is pretty certainly this, that real wisdom is the property of God, and this oracle is his way of telling us that human wisdom has little or no value. It seems to me that he is not referring literally to Socrates, but has merely taken my name as an example (ἐμὲ παράδειγμα ποιούμενος), as if he would say to us, The wisest of you men is he who has realized, like Socrates, that in respect of wisdom he is really worthless. (*Apology* 23b)

As Plato indicates, Socrates is the *paradeigma*, the pattern and model of one who has realised that the source of wisdom is in God and is a paradigm in realising this truth. Socrates claims his role as a blessing of God, saying, ‘This, I do assure you is what my God commands, and it is my belief that no greater good has ever befallen you in this city than my service to my God.’ (*Apology* 30b) It is Socrates who even hears a divine voice, the *daimonion*, (*Apology* 31d; 40b)<sup>75</sup> which prevents him from doing what he should not. The nuance of the *Apology* is the idea that the blessing of philosophy rests upon Socrates, that in him we encounter divine wisdom, and that the acceptance or rejection of Socrates is the acceptance or rejection of this philosophical way of life, and for Plato, the way of truth.

The aspect of embodiment is raised in several further examples in the *Dialogues*. Eric Voegelin comments that the *Republic* is characterised by the motion of descent and that it is Socrates who counters the descent by his ascent to the light as ‘the savior’ as it is Socrates ‘who has travelled the way up from the night of Hades to the light of Truth.’<sup>76</sup> Thus, Socrates by the very nature of his person is the embodiment of philosophy that saves the soul. Pierre Hadot also makes the case that in the *Symposium* we are given the sight of Eros which is directly tied to the person of Socrates.<sup>77</sup> Hadot comments that,

To be in love with Socrates... was to be in love with love... The whole dialogue is constructed so as to make the reader guess the identity between the figures of Socrates and Eros.<sup>78</sup>

Plato’s Eros thus becomes tangible in the figure of Socrates, embodied in the sensible world. Karl Jaspers writes that,

Plato’s thinking has its source in his love of Socrates. No other love has ever left such a monument. Plato’s Eros was real; illumined by the reality, it became a love of everything noble that crossed his path.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> See also *Phaedrus* 242b, *Republic* 496c.

<sup>76</sup> Eric Voegelin, *Plato and Aristotle*, 59.

<sup>77</sup> Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 158-165.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

Even with these, it is in the *Phaedo* that the aspect of Socrates as embodying the philosophical ideal is perhaps more poignantly seen than in any other place in the *Dialogues*. In the *Phaedo* the matter of *who* is doing the talking (i.e. Socrates) is just as important as what is being said. The portrayal in the dialogue of the soul that follows philosophy, and the particular elements of philosophy as a way of death (61cff), the argument for the immortality of the soul (70ff), and the actual account of Socrates drinking the hemlock (116ff) centre upon, and are given life through the image of Socrates. The centrality of the person of Socrates is so strong that Gerard Watson has even commented that in the *Phaedo*,

The fate of Socrates gave a weight to Plato's arguments for the immortality of the soul which they do not merit in themselves, and it also gave a popularity to the dialogue itself which ensured that the views of the relations between gods and men contained in it were well-known in the ancient and early Christian world.<sup>80</sup>

Critically, we may say that Watson's view is correct, but it raises a general religious issue in Plato that philosophy though based upon a person is still linked with an idea of the divine which is beyond that person altogether. We may certainly say, in fact, that the personal aspect of Plato's philosophy is that it is to be lived out in existence, embodied in life, an aspect which is proven by Socrates being the one central character within Plato's philosophy. Yet, it is a perspective of life that envisions the divine beyond the physical world to which that life points. Using the example of the *Phaedo*, Hadas and Smith take the understanding of embodiment too far when they write that, 'it is his image of Socrates rather than any specific doctrine that Plato wished to crystallize and perpetuate.'<sup>81</sup> They continue that, 'in such an issue it is the personality of the teacher rather than the cogency of his arguments that is most persuasive.'<sup>82</sup> For Hadas and Smith, one comes from the dialogue regarding the immortality of the soul as one that is a

belief in Socrates, not in immortality. Only an occasional reader of the *Phaedo* could rehearse its arguments for immortality years or months after he had laid the book down; the saintliness of Socrates he can never forget.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Karl Jaspers, *The Great Philosophers*, vol. 1, 155.

<sup>80</sup> Watson, *Greek Philosophy*, 21-2. Cicero wrote in the *Tusculan Disputations* (1.74): 'While I am reading the book (the *Phaedo*), I agree, but somehow, when I lay the book down and myself reflect on the immortality of the soul, that agreement disperses.' (Hadas and Smith, *Heroes and Gods*, 55).

<sup>81</sup> Hadas and Smith, *Heroes and Gods*, 55.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

Against Hadas and Smith, it is actually the ‘doctrine’ of the philosophical life that is shown *through* Socrates that is the important issue for Plato rather than simply seeing Socrates. For Plato, we are to see both: the philosophical life as truly and uniquely expressed through Socrates’ life. We may certainly remember Socrates as a person, but to indicate Plato is separating his ‘doctrine’ from the person of Socrates is to miss a keynote in Plato’s philosophical theology which is seen in this idea of embodiment. It is no accident that Socrates is remembered, for Plato does not build his doctrine in opposition to, but in conjunction with, the person. We may say that Socrates’ life gives his arguments solidity, but we can never say that Plato’s intention is for us to see Socrates rather than the arguments, because for Plato they are intertwined. The principle of embodiment, then, as seen in Plato, is one of giving life to inanimate doctrine, making that doctrine come alive, breathe, and become dynamic by uniting that which is believed to that which is encountered in the person.

Reflecting upon the philosophical theology implicit in Plato’s portrayal of Socrates and in the paradigm he presents, the aspect of embodiment is crucial in that philosophy in Plato must be lived out in life or it becomes a system of idle thoughts, detached without substance. Metaphysically speaking, it is certainly not the case as John Macquarrie writes in his classic work, *Existentialism*, that the ‘whole tradition that stemmed from Plato has exalted essence at the expense of existence.’<sup>84</sup> The word ‘exalting’ may be applicable, but it is certainly not the case that Plato’s thought is one which is ‘at the expense’ of existence, but is one which strives to perceive and to understand the ideal *within* existence. At the basis of Plato’s philosophical theology is the essential need to have that particular understanding embodied in those who live that perspective out, or carry out the philosophical life.

It is Edward Caird who, reflecting on the general idea of incarnation, writes of a perspective that is seen to be present in Plato in that,

It is a law of human history that principles and tendencies which are really universal, should at first make their appearance in an individual form, as if bound up with the passing existence of a particular nation or even of a single man. The general idea needs, so to speak, to be embodied or incarnated, to be ‘made flesh and to dwell among men’ in all the fullness and realization in a finite individuality, before it can be known and appreciated in its universal meaning. And it is only after such individual presentation has produced its

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<sup>84</sup> Macquarrie, *Existentialism*, 41.



effect that reflection is able to detach the idea from accidents of time and place and circumstance, and present it as a general principle.<sup>85</sup>

What is expressed by Caird is not only the desire, but as he writes, ‘the need’ for an incarnational aspect to be included in philosophical and theological thought. What is needed is not simply a hero, but that which is much deeper, that which represents a universal idea in bodily form. It is a search for a ‘synthesis’, Caird writes, ‘of the universal and the individual.’<sup>86</sup> In particular regard to Plato, the individuals, who embody the philosophical ideal, the universal, become, in turn ‘universal’ representations – the ideal is given the factor of tangible reality as one that can be touched, handled, seen. In this, the embodiment gives validity and immanence to an otherwise ethereal and distanced idea as the intangible and tangible are brought into union. Caird writes that philosophy,

as it belongs to the reflective stage of consciousness, might seem independent of the personality of its teachers – the same laws [of incarnation] still partially hold good; for the greatest of all philosophical movements is associated with the life and death of Socrates, the first representative of the subjective principle of thought.<sup>87</sup>

Though ‘incarnation’ is a very laden term, it is for Caird a meaning that is included in the aspirations of Plato’s philosophy. Socrates is certainly not the only philosopher,<sup>88</sup> but he presents a unique culmination of one in whom philosophy dwells, an individual representing philosophy which any seeker of wisdom is to naturally emulate.

Interestingly enough, the way of life is accentuated in a way of death in that not only is the one who embodies the ideal known in life, their status is accentuated in their death. Thus, in the example of the *Phaedo*, Socrates in his practice of philosophy as a way of dying is seen in his life, but through the episode of his own dying, Socrates’ status as a model of the philosophical life is substantiated. Caird comments that death is important for the incarnated universal to be realised, for, ‘men never have full spiritual or ideal possession except of that which has ceased to

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<sup>85</sup> From Edward Caird’s, *The Evolution of Religion* (James Maclehose & Sons, 1893), Vol. II, 217–34, in John Macquarrie’s *Contemporary Religious Thinkers: From Idealist Metaphysicians to Existential Theologians* (Harper and Row, 1968), 11.

<sup>86</sup> Caird in Macquarrie, *Contemporary Religious Thinkers*, 11ff.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>88</sup> Pythagoras would also be one who is the embodiment of philosophy, along with those such as Heracitus, Parmenides, and in the Platonic tradition, Plotinus.



be empirically present to their senses... They need the real to be removed to some distance, ere they can fully apprehend the ideal that is behind it.’<sup>89</sup> As such, the incarnational aspect learned by the life lived, is known not only in the living but also in death. Further, it is the dying of the individual who represents the universal, the ideal, that gives new and greater life, not only for the individual but for those who would reflect upon and emulate that life lived out. Socrates’ death elevates him as much as the life he actually lived. Caird offers this comment:

For its (Christianity’s) fundamental lesson that man must ‘die to live’ involves as a consequence that it is just through the last sacrifice of life itself that the divine principle of life in humanity reveals itself most clearly. In such complete devotion of himself, man becomes, what it is his innate vocation to be, the organ and manifestation of God. From this principle it necessarily follows that the idealizing process which death sets on foot, and by which the individual is lifted out of the limitations or mortality, is no mere visionary or poetic exaggeration, but only a recognition of the inmost truth of things. If life and death are the process whereby the image of God is realized in man, then there is no illusion in the correlative process by which, in the thought of those that come after, the history of a man is regarded as a stage in the manifestation of God.<sup>90</sup>

From all of this, there are two interrelated issues which are raised in this philosophical context of embodiment in the religious nature of the philosophical life. Firstly is that as philosophy is embodied, the transcendent is known in bodily form in which the division between the divine and mundane, the ideal and the individual, is relaxed. Employing Caird’s terms above, the embodiment of the ideal is the joining of the ‘universal’ and ‘individual’ as the divine is manifest in a life. Philosophy becomes immanent and intimate within the reality of a person as a manifestation of the divine in which all of humanity can participate. Thus, a literal example of the divine is produced, not in a miraculous sense, but in the ordinary realm of existence in which all humanity may participate. As it is then, the perceived strict wall of separation, or dualism between the divine and mundane is not completely maintained for the sensual is transformed and is able to know the divine.

Secondly, because of this embodiment, life is transformed in light of the individual who incarnates the ideal as he or she becomes the paradigm of life creating a new level of humanity in light of the ideal itself. The one who embodies

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<sup>89</sup> Caird in Macquarrie, *Contemporary Religious Thinkers*, 13.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

the ideal points beyond himself or herself realising that he or she is not the ideal of which he or she speaks. Instead, this one, as the embodiment of the ideal, calls others to that ideal through the life lived, and although considered an embodiment of the ideal, never considers himself or herself equal to the ideal. If such were the case, the individual would become the ideal itself, creating opposing ideals in opposing personalities and individuals, producing fragmentation. For Plato, Socrates calls others by his life to the ideal of philosophy, not to be simply the followers of Socrates, but followers of Socrates in that they are philosophers themselves. Thus, Socrates words to ‘know thyself’, or to examine one’s life, are those which not only those who would follow Socrates would practice, but those of which Socrates himself would be the chief follower.

However, to respond to the ideal of philosophy is to respond to Socrates as the one in whom the ideal is embodied. For Plato, the philosophical ideal is known through Socrates who is one with the ideal and the divine, and one whom student or reader is called upon to imitate in life. Socrates is a point of reference, a place where the philosophical ideal is centred, and one to which those who follow wisdom must refer.

#### *The Goal: Homoiosis Theo*

Lastly, the objective and *goal* of the philosophical life in Plato, may be expressed in the idea that the philosopher is to become like God, to be *homoiosis theo*. It is this idea that encapsulates all that the philosophical life in Plato aspires to. In the *Theaetetus* Socrates conveys this objective of the life of philosophy when he says to Theodorus,

it is not possible, Theodorus, that evil should be destroyed. But it must inevitably haunt human life, and prowl about this earth. That is why a man should make all haste to escape from earth to heaven; and escape means becoming as like God (ὁμοίσις θεῶ) as possible; and a man becomes like God when he becomes just and pure, with understanding. (176b)<sup>91</sup>

Theologically speaking, the idea of *Homoiosis theo* presents a union between human existence and a religious ideal. The way of wisdom for Plato in becoming like God in conduct is a *participation* in the divine through an ethical ideal,

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<sup>91</sup> M. J. Levett’s translation, rev. by Myles Burnyeat in Cooper, *Plato: Complete Works*.

establishing God as the ‘measure’ of the philosophical life. To become like God, for Plato, is neither an option nor a lofty aspiration, but is a matter of human existence representing the true way of life for humanity. As it is the divine that is ultimately real, humanity’s true existence begins when it imitates that divine reality. The way of *homoiosis theo* is a drawing together of the human with the divine, a practice of pursuing righteousness which is an aspect of what God is.

The divine, for Plato, is that reality which affects all of life. Because of the reality of the Divine the life of philosophy is not concerned with the pursuit of wealth or fame, nor is it concerned about cultic religious practices and rites, but is concerned with holiness and justice as realities and sees life as practising this divine ethic. Socrates says in *Alcibiades II* that it would be,

a strange and sorry thing if the gods took more account of our gifts and sacrifices than of our souls and whether there is holiness and justice to be found in them. Yes, that is what they care about, I believe, far more than about these extravagant processions and sacrifices offered year by year by states and individuals who may, for all we know, have sinned greatly against gods and men. (150a-b)

For Plato, that which is believed about the Divine directly affects the life that is led, for it is a belief and concern for that which is ultimately real. By understanding the true nature of the divine, even God, one gains an understanding of the true attributes of the philosophical life. As utter righteousness is an aspect of what the divine is (*Theaetetus* 176c),<sup>92</sup> then as the individual strives to become like God he or she participates in an aspect of the divine existence. It is a likeness to the divine that conveys more than simply reflecting the divine, or copying it, but one in which the soul participates in the reality of the divine righteousness. In the *Laws* it is God who is the measure of life, as the Athenian says, ‘Now it is God who is, for you and me, of a truth the “measure of all things” (ὁ δὴ θεὸς ἡμῖν πάντων χρημάτων μέτρον), more truly than, as they say, man.’ (716c) For Plato, the true life of humanity is measured through the ultimate and eternal standard of God, and cannot be led by a changing and passing standard of humanity and its varied opinions, which Protagoras espoused.<sup>93</sup> Socrates, repeating Protagoras’ concept, says that we cannot

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<sup>92</sup> Cf. *Republic* 379b where the notion of God and goodness are directly linked as God is described as ‘good in reality’ (ἀγαθὸς ὃ γε θεὸς τῷ ὄντι).

<sup>93</sup> Protagoras’ words: ‘Man is the measure of all things’, ‘...of the things that are, that they are, and of the things that are not, that they are not.’ (Freeman, ‘Protagoras’, Fr. 1) ‘About the gods, I am not

live by the attitude, ‘that things are to me as they appear to me, and they are to you as they appear to you.’ (Cratylus 386a) For Plato, it is ultimately important that humanity’s model be God (δικαίον καὶ ὄσιον μετὰ φρονήσεως γενέσθαι).<sup>94</sup>

For Socrates, this way of existence in becoming like God is not a simple mimicking of God, a *seeming* to be innocent and good, which is not better than ‘an old wives’ tale’(176b), but a becoming like the divine in conduct for ‘God is in no wise and in no manner unrighteous, but utterly and perfectly righteous (ὡς δίων τε δικαιοτάτος)<sup>95</sup>, and there is nothing so like him as that one of us who in turn becomes most nearly perfect in righteousness.’(176c)<sup>96</sup> As Socrates says it in the *Republic*, ‘For by the gods assuredly that man will never be neglected who is willing and eager to be righteous, and by the practice of virtue to be likened unto God so far as that is possible for man.’ (*Republic* 613b, cf. *Philebus* 39e) The way of philosophy for Plato centres upon the idea of is to become like God in one’s life, which entails a taking on of the divine attributes into one’s existence.

For Plato, humanity must live by that which is eternal and divine in order to find wisdom. Werner Jaeger comments that the idea of setting God as the standard for the philosophical life represents a long-standing notion that philosophy is the ‘supreme ‘art of measurement’.<sup>97</sup> ‘Such an art,’ Jaeger continues,

could not as the sophists and the mass of ordinary men believed in *Protagoras*, use the subjective scale of pleasure and pain. It must employ an entirely objective standard.<sup>98</sup>

In the numerous passages of the *Dialogues* where *theos* is used, it applies to the ideal of philosophy and the philosophical life. Gerard Watson writes that God, ‘as a model to be approximated or as a criterion of behaviour recurs again and again in

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able to know whether they exist or do not exist, nor what they are like in form; for the factors preventing knowledge are many: the obscurity of the subject, and the shortness of human life.’(Freeman, ‘Protagoras’, Fr.4)

<sup>94</sup> *Meta* is with the genitive *phroneseôs* which conveys the meaning of justice and righteousness as arising out of the company with wisdom. One may translate the words as becoming righteous and pure by becoming wise. The point is that these are not extractable from each other but linked.

<sup>95</sup> It is significant here that for Plato the concepts of righteousness and justice are synonymous.

<sup>96</sup> *Theaetetus* 176c. H. N. Fowler’s translation, in the Loeb edition (William Heinemann: London, 1921). Fowler puts this sentence more strongly than does Cornford, which fits much better with the context, and the actual words of Plato.

<sup>97</sup> Jaeger, *Paideia*, vol. 2, 286.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*

Plato.’<sup>99</sup> As Watson continues,

Is the notion of morality necessarily connected with the notion of God? It is for Plato, in at least one meaning of God.<sup>100</sup>

According to James Duerlinger, because of this, the philosophical life that Plato espouses is one that is the practice of that which may be called the ‘divine life.’<sup>101</sup>

Duerlinger writes of this important point that as the goal of philosophy is the attainment of likeness to the Divine, the ‘theory and practice of the Platonic philosophy also constitutes a religion, and its ethics, a religious ethics.’<sup>102</sup> This aspect, as Duerlinger points out, ‘is not often discussed, much less accorded its traditional central place, in contemporary treatments of his philosophy...’<sup>103</sup> In such a case, Plato’s ideal of *homoiosis theo* is a philosophically religious ideal, a practising of the ‘divine life’, which is ‘the final end towards which the practice of the Platonic philosophy aims.’<sup>104</sup>

As a religious ideal, *homoiosis theo* implies by its nature an existential notion of the soul’s union through the practice of its becoming like the Divine in its conduct. Gerard Watson writes that becoming like the Divine through philosophy is in Plato ‘the aim of existence’ for it is the ‘immortal union of the soul with God that Plato is primarily concerned with,’ as it is ‘fundamental to his philosophy.’<sup>105</sup> Simone Weil, writes that with this underlying desire for unity with the Divine Plato is the ‘authentic mystic.’<sup>106</sup> It is in the recognition of *homoiosis theo* as a striving for unity with God that the notion takes its most profound form. Reflecting upon the *Theaetetus* Weil describes this underlying thought of becoming like the Divine as an *assimilation*<sup>107</sup> to the Divine, entailing the idea of likening oneself unto, or even being *absorbed* into the Divine. But such an assimilation does not involve an escape

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<sup>99</sup> Gerard Watson, *Plato’s Unwritten Teaching* (Talbot Press: Dublin, 1973), 78. *Gorgias* 507d-e; *Symp.* 188d; *Phaedo* 63,80; *Rep.* 500c, 613b; *Theaetetus* 176b; *Statesman* 309c; *Timaeus* 90a; *Laws* 716b, 907b-c.

<sup>100</sup> Gerard Watson, *Plato’s Unwritten Teaching* (Talbot Press: Dublin, 1973), 78.

<sup>101</sup> James Duerlinger, ‘Ethics and the Divine Life in Plato’s Philosophy’, *Journal of Religious Ethics* (13), Fall 1985, 312-331. Duerlinger, however, does not go into any detail of how Plato’s idea of God affects the type of life lived.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 315.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 312-13.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 313.

<sup>105</sup> Watson, *Greek Philosophy*, 28

<sup>106</sup> Weil, *Intimations*, 79.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.



from the moral retreating to some divine union, but it is a living of that union out in the life of justice within existence.<sup>108</sup>

For Plato, the union with the Divine is not an escape from the life or a mystical encounter divorced from everyday life, but is one which is a way of full existence. Evelyn Underhill provides a helpful model of such a perspective as one who in her own life sought to bring the mystical union with the Divine to bear upon the way that life was lived. James Horne explains that in her preface to *Practical Mysticism* Underhill

writes that if mystical experiences have the transcendent value that the mystics claim, and, if they reveal to us a world of higher truth, then that value and that truth will be even more precious if discerned within ‘the overwhelming disharmonies and sufferings of the present time.’<sup>109</sup>

The mystical union that is known through Plato’s concept of becoming like the Divine is one of a participation within the Divine, a union with God through the ethical life lived in imitation of the ways of God, joining a religious and philosophical ideal within a way of existence.

Yet, for others, *homoiosis theos* though a way of life conveys another side in a desire for escape, a means to flee from the world and its system. Reflecting on Socrates’ words to Theodorus that we should ‘escape from earth to heaven’, that we must make flight (φεύγειν) away, André-Jean Festugière comments that there is an existentialist motif in Socrates’ words which depicts a characteristic of humanity. For Festugière, Plato’s idea of union with God through *homoiosis theos* recognises an uneasiness with the world which displays,

a profound disgust with life. Those who experience it have suffered. For them the earth is truly a vale of tears. As is set forth in the *Theaetetus*, they are aware of the evil of this world. The remedy they seek in flight, in a flight that will make them like unto God....<sup>110</sup>

Yet, the way of becoming like the Divine, presents not only an ethic, but also a remedy for the ills of this world, and its system.<sup>111</sup> *Homoiosis Theos* finds its

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<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>109</sup> James Horne, *The Moral Mystic* (Canadian Corporation for Studies in Religion: Waterloo, Ontario, 1983), 81.

<sup>110</sup> André-Jean Festugière, *Personal Religion among the Greeks* (University of California Press: 1954), 20.

<sup>111</sup> Such a disgust with life, if agreed to be present in Plato, may have been brought on through the death of Socrates, which interestingly enough is alluded to in the last sentences of the *Theaetetus*. Yet, to say that there is no joy with living may be to put too much weight upon what Socrates is



expression, writes Festugière, out of a 'homesickness for heaven, an aspiration to lose oneself, to pass from this world, into the unsounded depths of divine peace.'<sup>112</sup> Expressed in Hellenistic mysticism, this desire, writes Festugière, finds 'its most finished expression' in Plato.<sup>113</sup> However, as Festugière continues, Plato uses the soul's desire for escape as a notion of the ethical life.

In Plato, of course, the formula for becoming like the divine takes on a moral ring; one becomes like God by leading a pure and holy life with an enlightened mind. But this is, as so often with Plato, a transposition; Plato shifts to the plane of philosophy a preëxistent tendency which was not essentially an ethical principle. It was much more a fundamental aspiration of the human spirit. Above all our unhappiness, above this earth where men, like beasts, rend one another, where injustice reigns supreme and we live in an age of iron, the gods are perfectly happy.<sup>114</sup>

By attaching a dramatic and ancient notion of worldly unrest to his philosophy, joining a psychological anxiety with a spiritual lesson, Plato attracts the ones who understand the disappointment of this world and leads them to an answer in the philosophical ethic in which to become like the Divine.

There is certainly an unrest with the world within Plato's philosophy in that it responds to what it perceives as wrong in human existence, but it is not simply a way of union with the Divine or a flight away from the world, but is one seeks to bring these desires into a way of existence. Plato's is a two-faceted understanding of a spiritual unrest united with an ethical life. For Plato, it is not simply the desire to escape to the divine world, nor to live the ethical life without reference to a union with the Divine, a way of life that is lived in and through the idea of becoming like God. To have one or the other notion exclusively is to have an imbalance, a way of life without an aspiration, or an aspiration without a practical and meaningful

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saying. It may even be said that living is not a weight at all, not 'a vale of tears', but a 'game' to be played (Laws) which John Passmore mentions in his work on *The Perfectability of Man*. There is a certain lightness in Socrates, a philosophical playfulness that never lets the reader and the philosopher to take things, including oneself, too seriously. On the other hand, the gravity of the *Theaetetus*' two ways of life, the philosophical and the not-philosophical, seems very serious indeed.

His point is perhaps valid, what one may truly say is that Socrates' death moved his band of students toward a philosophical discontent with life. For Plato this discontent is found in the philosophical, ethical life found ultimately in the Divine. Even though there is perhaps this philosophical unrest, this tendency to flee, Plato finds solace in the life of philosophy.

<sup>112</sup> Festugière, *Personal Religion*, 21.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

application to existence. *Homoiosis theo* represents a philosophically religious ideal of the soul's union with God, but a union which is a way of life and existence.

### Conclusion

Through the philosophical life, philosophy is legitimised in existence. Philosophy, for Plato, is one of existence, of living out the divine way which philosophy contemplates. In this way, philosophy is more than a way of thought, but is a religious way of existence in which human life interacts with the divine through the medium of philosophy as the love of wisdom and the knowledge of the soul, forming an entry into communion with the divine itself. By being a way of existence, Plato's philosophy exhibits itself as a religious undertaking as it involves the formation of the soul and the embodiment of the divine way of life where the ideas of the divine are brought to bear upon an ethic. Plato's philosophy as this way of life is not an escape, but an incarnation of the philosophical ideal in existence in a form that gives tangibility and an ethical substance to the intangible and the metaphysical. In Plato, such a life is a means of knowing the divine, which is the greatest aspiration of humanity.

### CHAPTER THREE: THE HUMAN ENCOUNTER WITH THE DIVINE

The religious dimension of Plato's philosophy is seen in that it is the human experience of the encounter with the divine. In Plato, this experience of encountering the divine involves a religious understanding of the Forms. The Forms, in their most important aspect represent an experience of divine reality, and the related ideas of participation (*methexis*), the immanence and transcendence of the divine, the philosophical striving of unity with the divine, and the doctrine of *anamnesis*, are to be seen as philosophical theological ideas involving a religious dimension. The doctrine and experience of the Forms in Plato involve a personal encounter with the divine which transforms the soul, deeply interrelating philosophical and theological thought. Only when the Forms are considered in this religious context and dimension can a full account of Plato's philosophy be given.

#### The Religious Experience of Divine Reality

In Plato the human encounter with the Forms is a religious experience of transformation through a vision of divine reality. For Plato, the Good and the Beautiful exist in a reality which eternally *is*. In the *Republic* the Good is that which gives to all things knowledge and truth, a reality described as one of light and sharpness of reason, in direct contrast to the world of change, a world that is dark causing the soul to be blunted and to grope for wisdom. As Socrates says,

When it [the soul] is firmly fixed on the domain where truth and reality shine resplendent it apprehends and knows them and appears to possess reason, but when it inclines to that region which is mingled with darkness, the world of becoming and passing away, it opines only and its edge is blunted, and it shifts its opinions hither and thither... This reality, then, that gives their truth to the objects of knowledge and the power of knowing to the knower, you must say is the idea of good.... (*Republic* 509d)

As the cause of knowledge and truth, and as the object of knowledge itself (*Republic* 508e), the Good exists as that which is 'beyond being' (ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας), a reality by itself, beyond even that which it gives, and above that which it causes:

In like manner, then, you are to say that the objects of knowledge not only receive from the presence of the good their being known, but their very existence and essence is derived to them from it, though the good itself is not essence but still transcends essence in dignity and surpassing power.  
(*Republic* 509b)

The Good as being ‘beyond’ all things betrays a transcendence and an eternal nature within and of itself. Christopher Stead comments that in this entire section of the *Republic* (Books VI and VII) οὐσίᾳ is no longer phrased with a dependent genitive as in the definition of something or as an attribute, but is employed by Plato as ‘a collective singular denoting reality, or the sum total of real being; and in this absolute use denotes ‘eternal reality.’<sup>1</sup> Stead writes that as Plato describes the Good as ‘beyond being’, he ‘does not mean that it is too excellent to be real; in his view it is more real than any of its instances.’<sup>2</sup>

Similarly in the vision of the Beautiful in the *Symposium*, Diotima’s words convey that which is ultimate reality:

It is an everlasting loveliness which neither comes nor goes, which neither flowers nor fades, for such beauty is the same on every hand, the same then as now, here as there, this way as that way, the same to every worshiper as it is to every other. Nor will his (the initiate into Love) vision of the beautiful take the form of a face, or of hands, or of anything that is of the flesh. It will be neither words, nor knowledge, nor a something that exists in something else, such as a living creature, or the earth, or the heavens, or anything that is – but subsisting of itself and by itself in an eternal oneness [αὐτὸ καθ’ αὐτὸ μεθ’ αὐτοῦ μονοειδὲς], while every lovely thing partakes of it in such sort that, however much parts may wax and wane, it will neither more nor less, but still the same inviolable whole. (*Symposium* 211a-bff)

The vision of the Beautiful is one of an eternal reality which, as Iris Murdoch writes, for Plato, comes by grace as, ‘when one directs his thoughts toward beauty of the mind and spirit he will suddenly receive the vision, which comes by grace, θεῖα μοῖρα, of the Form of Beauty itself, absolute and untainted and pure....’<sup>3</sup> The philosophical soul sees Beauty as above the fray and change of the world as that which eternally *is*, that which is never known fully through particular manifestations, always remaining as that which is complete reality. In the words of Werner Beierwaltes, the beautiful is, ‘nothing *on* or *in* an other – thus no attribute of an

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<sup>1</sup> Stead, *Divine Substance* (Oxford at the Clarendon Press: 1977), 37.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>3</sup> Murdoch, *Existentialists*, 416.

other, but rather pure being-in-itself.’<sup>4</sup> The form of Beauty never alters, never grows dim, but remains the same forever in every circumstance and from every view. It is not part of the changing material world which constantly alters and fades, but is by itself in a divine and eternal unity, an inviolable whole. The Forms themselves are in their reality even beyond aesthetic description altogether, for such a reality is,

without color and without shape and without solidity, a being that really is what it is, the subject of all true knowledge, visible only to intelligence, the soul’s steersman. (*Phaedrus* 247d)

Yet, what is seen in Plato’s philosophical theology of the Forms is that they are not simply a vision of the soul, but are that to which the soul is akin. The soul’s knowledge of the Forms as that which truly exists does not come through the senses but through the soul, a knowledge based upon a relationship of the soul with the divine. As Socrates rhetorically enquires in the *Phaedo*,

Do we say that there is such a thing as the Just itself... the Beautiful, and the Good?... have you ever seen any of these things with your eyes?... have you ever grasped them with any of your bodily senses? I am speaking of...the reality (τῆς οὐσίᾳς) of all other things, that which each of them essentially is. (*Phaedo* 65d-e)<sup>5</sup>

It is this reality that captivates the soul of the philosopher, for Plato, an existence that is ‘itself by itself’ (αὐτὸ καθ’ αὐτό, *Phaedo* 78d, 100b). Such a reality exists in its own glory, by itself, and the philosophical soul seeks this reality ‘by itself’ as well, away from the pull of the senses and the body, and in so doing, reaches the divine. (*Phaedo* 66a)<sup>6</sup> The philosopher, says Socrates,

approaches the object with thought alone...using pure thought alone, tries to track down each reality pure and by itself, freeing himself as far as possible from eyes and ears, and in a word, from the whole body. (*Phaedo* 66a)

The philosophical soul, away from the influence of the body and its senses, recognises its kinship with this divine and longs to remain in this reality:

... [the soul] passes into the realm of what is pure, ever existing, immortal and unchanging (τὸ καθαρὸν τε καὶ ἀεὶ ὄν καὶ ἀθάνατον καὶ

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<sup>4</sup> Werner Beierwaltes, ‘The Love of Beauty and the Love of God’, *Classical Mediterranean Spirituality*, ed. by A. H. Armstrong (Routledge and Kegan Paul: London, 1986), 297.

<sup>5</sup> Grube’s translation in Cooper, *Plato: Complete Works*. One may say that change is acutely witnessed as it surrounds the death of Socrates. In this scene of the *Phaedo*, the eternal reality which the philosopher sees is not only one on which philosophical reason bases itself, but is a reality that has a passionate meaning as well. It is to this reality that the philosopher, even Socrates, longs to go.

<sup>6</sup> As the soul is related to the divine, to seek wisdom is to seek the divine through the soul, and to seek it within the soul (i.e. to know thyself).



ὡσαύτως), 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? (*Phaedo* 79d)<sup>7</sup>

However, for Plato, we do not simply move *away* from the senses to glimpse the eternal but, as shown in the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus*, move *through* the senses to envision the eternal. In the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus*, the philosopher moves from one vision of beauty to the next until he draws near the vision of the eternal Beauty which is the encounter with the divine. In the *Symposium*, the philosopher moves progressively from a vision of the various things of beauty to the one eternal vision of the Beautiful (211a<sup>ff</sup>). In the myth of the *Phaedrus* as well, the philosopher seeing the beauty of the beloved recovers the wings of his soul as his memory is stirred of the Beauty his soul beheld before coming to earth. (249d<sup>ff</sup>) In these cases, balanced with the *Phaedo*, Plato indicates that the philosopher does not shut away the senses but goes beyond them, superseding them in order to encounter the divine reality.

This ultimate reality for which the philosophical soul strives and encounters beyond the senses is a reality that always *is*, changeless and unalterable. In the *Phaedo*, the unchanging nature of the Forms is a significant point as Socrates questions,

are they (that which is of the divine reality) ever the same and in the same state, or do they vary from one time to another; can the Equal itself, the Beautiful itself, each thing in itself, the real, ever be affected by any change whatever? Or does each of them that really is, being uniform by itself, remain the same and never in any way tolerate any change whatever?  
(*Phaedo* 78d)

Relatedly, in Plato, even God is one who is in reality good and changeless in nature. As Socrates says in the *Republic* (379b), ‘whether in epic, melody, or tragic verse’, in whatever way we depict God, we must convey God’s ‘true quality’ of ultimate goodness, as Socrates asks, ‘And is not God of course good in reality and always to be spoken of as such (Οὐκοῦν ἀγαθὸς ὁ γε θεὸς τῷ ὄντι;)?’ By being good in his essence, God can never be, for Plato, the cause of evil but only of the good, never capable of deception, and in this state is changeless. (380c) For Plato, to be deceptive is to change, to be unpredictable, and as goodness is the measure of the

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

divine itself, such a concept links directly with God's changeless nature. 'But God,' says Socrates, 'and everything that belongs to God, is in every way in the best possible state.' (*Republic* 381b) God is a simple unity, possessing a wholeness of being and ultimate reality, one that is,

simple and true in word and deed. He doesn't change himself or deceive others by images, words, or signs, whether in visions or in dreams. (382e)

Yet, for Plato, such changelessness in this divine reality does not warrant a static nature devoid of life. Along with this unchanging nature, Plato offers a more complex idea in the thought of the *Sophist*. For Plato, a reality that is static, as seemingly indicated in the *Phaedo*, does not remain, or never was appealing over time, for such a reality, to Plato, is one devoid of life. In the *Sophist* Plato confronts a concept of utter changelessness as the Stranger, addressing the 'friends of the forms', proclaims,

But for heaven's sake, are we going to be convinced that it's true that change, life, soul, and intelligence are not present in *that which wholly is*, and that it neither lives nor thinks, but stays changeless, solemn, and holy, without any understanding? (*Sophist* 248e)<sup>8</sup>

The Stranger introduces the element of life and intelligence into a divine which is changeless, one that is solemnly holy and without relationship to the world. As the Stranger suggests, if it is to be known, then this divine must be considered as being changed by 'having something done to it.' (248d)<sup>9</sup> According to the Stranger, we cannot say that such a reality, *that which wholly is*, can neither live nor think as one aloof in its holiness and solemnity without understanding. As he asks further, 'are we saying that it has intelligence, life, and soul, but that it's at rest and completely changeless even though it's alive?' (249a) Thus, both the elements of change and changelessness, 'holy solemnity' and involvement with life. must be given to a conception of reality. The philosopher must, as the Stranger says, be as a child begging for both ideas, as the Stranger says,

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<sup>8</sup> Nicholas P. White's translation in Cooper, *Plato: Complete Works*.

<sup>9</sup> The argument in the *Sophist* is one that posits that if something is known then it has something done to it (248e). The same idea is given in the *Euthyphro* (10c) that change comes by something having some other thing act upon it. The modern understanding finds this argument as being strange, and at worst wrong as nothing is changed simply because it is known. Whether or not this is Plato's own thought is speculative, for like the rest of the Platonic corpus, one is unclear as to whose position Plato is positing as his own, if any at all. However, the traditional position, and one which I adopt as well, would see the major protagonist of each dialogue to be reflective of Plato's own position be it Socrates in the Socratic dialogues, or in this case the Stranger or Visitor.

then, it seems that only one course is open to the philosopher who values knowledge and rest above all else. He must refuse to accept from the champions either of the one or of the many forms the doctrine that all reality is changeless, and he must turn a deaf ear to the other party who represent reality as everywhere changing. Like a child begging for 'both,' he must declare that the reality of the sum of things is both at one – all that is unchangeable and all that is in change. (*Sophist* 249d)

The *Sophist* presents, Gerard Watson comments, 'a very important modification of his (Plato's) thinking about the unchanging nature of the perfect,' one that is a different stance than that which was taken by one such as Parmenides.<sup>10</sup> To Plato, without this one sense of 'change', the divine is void of the element of life and meaning to existence. Iris Murdoch writes that,

The early picture of the Forms is unsatisfactory not only because of the unclarified relation of these separate changeless perfect entities to a changing imperfect world, but also because the Forms are supposed to be the only realities... The attribution of life and movement to ultimate being in the *Sophist* brings this 'mediation' into the area of philosophical argument... he creates a fundamental division in the structure of the ultimately real since κίνησις and ζώη and ψύχη and φρονήσις (movement, life, soul, intelligence) are now allowed somehow into the company of the still changeless Forms.<sup>11</sup>

What may be said is that here, as elsewhere, Plato admits to a dynamic element in his theological conception which incorporates differing conceptions as complementary. Life enters the static and the changeless so that the entirety of reality embraces both: a changeless nature on which wisdom builds itself, and a dynamic element of life and 'change' applicable to existence.

What can be seen through all of these aspects of the divine reality in Plato's philosophical theology is the religious nature of the philosophical vision that Plato describes. As André-Jean Festugière has written, it is this 'impulse toward the Eternal' that is the 'profound current which moves the Platonic doctrine.'<sup>12</sup> Plato's perspective is that,

only the Eternal exists, because it alone is unchanging. All else, all that the senses perceive, is fleeting and corruptible. They pass, the Eternal remains.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Gerard Watson, *Greek Philosophy and the Christian Notion of God*, 26 ff.

<sup>11</sup> Murdoch, *Metaphysics*, 428.

<sup>12</sup> Festugière, *Personal Religion*, 42.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

The 'Eternal' which is sought in Plato is that which always *is*, embodied in the Forms as the 'supreme categories of Being.'<sup>14</sup> The Forms, as ultimate and divine reality, are that which are religiously encountered. W. C. K. Guthrie comments that even in the 'developed Platonism' of the middle dialogues, the Forms are spoken of in an 'exalted and religious language as divine (e.g. *Symp.* 211e), eternal and changeless, having their being in a world 'beyond the heavens', removed from space and time.'<sup>15</sup> This same persuasion is seen in the *Republic*, and as Guthrie further comments,

As the earlier books have shown, the Forms are still in part a religious conception. They are divine, and apprehended, after suitable preparation, by faith or intuition (*νόησις*). They are still, as in the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*, the *epopteia*, the revelation vouchsafed to initiates in the intellectual mysteries of Platonism.<sup>16</sup>

Such a vision of divine reality moves some to consider Plato's philosophy mystical in its nature. F. M. Cornford argues that if Platonism is considered to have one of its essential points in the theory of the Forms, then we must see that Platonism belongs to the mystic tradition.<sup>17</sup> The first appearance of the Forms in the *Phaedo*, Cornford writes, associates them as proofs of the soul's immortality and because of this understanding and association, 'there is therefore a strong *prima facie* case for holding that the Theory of Ideas should be interpreted from the mystic standpoint....'<sup>18</sup> Even in the specific example from the *Symposium* above, A. E. Taylor describes Socrates' words as conveying a 'spiritual voyage', even describing it as a mystical vision.<sup>19</sup> What is at stake in such an understanding is a beginning point of interpreting Plato's vision as one that is religious in its nature. The descriptions of Cornford and Taylor betray this religious nuance through their understanding of the mystical nature of Plato's philosophy. However, some are careful not to link Plato's words at all with a philosophical mysticism. In contrast to

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> W. C. K. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, Vol. IV, 116.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 552. The analogy to initiation is also in the *Phaedo* 69c-d where the ones who have truly practised philosophy are those who are 'purified and initiated' and will dwell with the gods.'

<sup>17</sup> F. M. Cornford, *From Religion to Philosophy* (London: Edward Arnold, 1912), 242.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> A. E. Taylor, *Plato: The Man and His Work* (Methuen and Co. Ltd.: London, 1926), 225. Taylor likens this experience to that of St. John of the Cross described in the opening lines of the *Dark Night* in the song, *En una noche oscura* or even to the visions of Bonaventura.

Taylor, Constantin Ritter is careful not to link Socrates' vision in the *Symposium*, nor any other philosophical vision, with mysticism, as he says that such,

are wholly based on forged passages of the *Epistles*, which I can only consider as inferior achievements of a spiritual poverty which seeks to take refuge in occultism. I am astonished that anyone can hail them as enlightened wisdom, as the final result of Platonic philosophising.<sup>20</sup>

For Ritter, and even others, Plato speaks mystically and poetically when, as Frederick Copleston writes, he is feeling his way, but when, as in later dialogues, his doctrines are more certain, he speaks more scientifically, dropping the poetic and mystical genre altogether.<sup>21</sup> Interestingly enough, the arguments put forward by Ritter and others do not attempt to establish the religious nature of Plato's philosophy at all, even in regard to comparing it to that which is mystical, but make the deciding factor of the argument the idea that there is a certain development in Plato's work which moves from one position to the other negating that which was held before. Though we may say that Plato, as any thinker, develops in thought, there is a unity to Plato's thought throughout the *Dialogues* that makes Ritter's dismissing statement of desiring a 'final result of Platonic philosophising' a moot point on its own.<sup>22</sup> The visions of the Good and the Beautiful are those which intertwine with other aspects of the *Dialogues* portraying a common theme of the philosopher as one who seeks the eternal and encounters the divine. The religious status of the Forms never alters, as it is a basic understanding of Plato's doctrine. Even Guthrie's comment above that the Forms are 'still' part of a religious conception is a bit misleading, for the Forms are never separated from their ultimate religious connotation in Plato at any time. As is shown by the *Timaeus* (considered a 'late' dialogue)<sup>23</sup> the religious conception of the Forms as a divine reality which the Demiurge contemplates and copies in the formation of the created order, makes clear that Plato retains the religious and theological nature of the Forms. As Huntington Cairns writes,

the evolutionary view of the dialogues is difficult to maintain... [as in them] the same thoughts appear again and again, expressed in different words, in different contexts, with varying emphasis... there is not shift in his

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<sup>20</sup> Ritter, *Essence*, 11.

<sup>21</sup> Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, volume 1, 198.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Paul Shorey, *The Unity of Plato's Thought* (The Chicago University Press: Chicago, 1960).

<sup>23</sup> Guthrie, *History*, IV, 50.



convictions... The world view they [the *Dialogues*] display is clear.. when seen as a whole.<sup>24</sup>

Beyond the textual arguments against it, there is an understanding that rationality and mystical intuition are not separate in Plato's mind but part of the one philosophical experience.

The philosophical vision that Plato conveys is not one which separates mystical or religious vision from rational thought, but joins the two together so that the philosophical vision is both rational and mystical or religious at the same time: a philosophically religious vision of that which is 'real'. In regard to this understanding, Gregory Vlastos writes that there are two meanings of this word 'real' in Plato when describing the Forms. One implies a 'cognitive meaning' as that the Forms are 'more' real than anything else, so that, as Vlastos terms it, there are degrees of reality in Plato. But there is also another meaning, Vlastos writes, which is more to the point here that the word 'real' can convey the Forms as 'objects of mystical experience.'<sup>25</sup> In such a meaning, the word 'real' functions as a 'value-predicate' – one that even 'transcends the usual specifications of value, moral, aesthetic, and religious' by connoting, as Vlastos puts it, 'more than goodness, beauty, or holiness, or even than all three of them in conjunction.'<sup>26</sup> In an even further comment, Vlastos comments that the vision of the divine described in the *Phaedrus* of the 'unblemished, whole, tremorless, blessed apparitions' (250c) convey a status of divinity even 'more so than traditional gods.'<sup>27</sup> What is gathered from this, is that Plato speaks of a reality which is ultimately divine, which is philosophically envisioned, and which literally transforms the soul intertwining the philosophical with the religious.

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<sup>24</sup> Hamilton and Cairns, *Plato*, 'Introduction', xvii.

<sup>25</sup> Gregory Vlastos, 'Degrees of Reality in Plato', *Platonic Studies* (Princeton University Press, 1973), 64.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* In a note explaining his use of the term, 'value-predicate', Vlastos writes that, 'so far as things fail to be real they are regarded by Plato as 'trash' (φλυαρία, Republic 515d), unworthy of any 'serious concern.' (n. 26) The same connotation is found with the word οὐδενία ('nothingness') meaning 'worthlessness' (*Phaedrus* 235a and *Theaetetus* 176c) which Vlastos writes may be compared with the words of Meister Eckhart when he writes, 'a stone, to the extent that it has being, would be better than even God and the Godhead without being.' (n. 26) The reality of the Forms is such that all things which are not ultimately real have nothing to offer. Using Vlastos' comparison with Eckhart's words, the 'being' of the divine is its essence to Plato and without it, it can no longer be worthy of the devotion or provide the source of wisdom for which humanity longs.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.



*Divine Reality and the Meaning to Human Existence*

What is to be clearly stated in Plato is that the religious nature of Plato's philosophical vision is not one which implies a lofty escape, but one which involves the soul's transformation and corresponds to and affects human existence. For Plato, the reality of the Forms elicits a religious way of life and existence that seeks and responds to this divine reality. Iris Murdoch comments that,

The connection of the Forms with morality and the spiritual life emerges at the same time naturally, together with their 'ontological' or existential function, out of reflection upon what serious truthful thinking is like.<sup>28</sup>

In Plato, for Murdoch, is a coalescing of morality, spirituality, and existential meaning which provides a backdrop for the Forms' religious meaning to be seen. As Murdoch indicates, the various meanings emerge simultaneously, in one accord, reflecting one another. As Gerard Watson writes of the Good, the Good provides the soul with a point of 'fixity' that it needs and desires.<sup>29</sup> For Plato, it is certainly the divine reality that humanity needs and must contemplate if any meaning is to be had within life, and it is in this that at least one view of the Forms' religious meaning can be seen. It is only this encounter with divine reality that, for Plato, leads to the soul's transformation.

For Plato, the answer to the human dilemma lies in the vision of the Forms, a vision which forms the basis of a philosophical spirituality. Iris Murdoch writes that, 'Plato's Forms, as objects of moral desire, and principles of understanding, are to be thought of as active creative sources of energy in the world...'<sup>30</sup> Although the Forms are posited as moral definitions, there is an attempt, Murdoch writes, to reify the Forms as objects of a spiritual and philosophical vision as well, even in the earliest dialogues:

from the *Phaedo* onward Plato develops, especially in moral and religious contexts, a picture of the Forms as changeless and eternal and *separate* objects of spiritual vision known by direct acquaintance rather than through the use of language (propositions)... The discovery of truth and reality, the conversion to virtue, is through the unimpeded vision of the transcendent Forms.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Murdoch, *Metaphysics*, 398

<sup>29</sup> Watson, *Greek Philosophy*, 27.

<sup>30</sup> Murdoch, *Metaphysics*, 223.

<sup>31</sup> Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 408.

Seen in this meaning of the Forms, it is only the divine, manifested particularly in the Form's transcendence above the world, that provides, for Plato, the meaning and salvation for which humanity seeks.<sup>32</sup>

Within this basis of a philosophically religious way of life, the Forms as divine reality provide humanity with existential meaning. Iris Murdoch comments that,

The original role of the Forms was not to lead us to some attenuated elsewhere but to show us the real world. It is the dreamer in the cave who is astray and elsewhere.<sup>33</sup>

The Forms present that which is divine, an ontological unity transcendent above the fragmentation of the world. As exemplified in the case of Beauty, the Form exists 'itself by itself' in an 'eternal oneness' (μονοειδὲς ἀεὶ ὄν), and though all things participate in it, it remains in this same unified whole. (*Symposium* 211b) Plato, through the Forms, addresses a perceived need of humanity for that which remains against a world in chaos. As Murdoch comments, such a search for unity drives our own existence:

the idea of a self-contained unity of limited whole is a fundamental instinctive concept. The urge to prove that where we intuit unity there really is unity is a deep emotional motive to philosophy, to art, to thinking itself. Intellect is naturally one-making.<sup>34</sup>

We naturally cannot tolerate chaos, or the chaotic derivatives of violence, the tearing apart of all knowledge, as Murdoch writes, for we fear the chaos, the fear of 'plurality, diffusion, senseless accident....'<sup>35</sup> For Plato, the divine Form is the way out of and beyond the meaninglessness of this Heraclitean flux. Philosophy builds upon a vision of the transcendent divine which provides an existential meaning for life. To Plato, the philosopher cannot look to the world for his or her knowledge, nor most of all salvation, for the remedy of the soul and the society is that which is eternal and ultimately real. Gerard Watson writes,

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<sup>32</sup> The vision of the Forms is one which leads literally to the soul's transformation. George Thomas notes Gregory Vlastos' suggestion that, 'Plato regarded the philosophers's vision of the Ideas as analogous to the vision or *epopteia* which was the culmination of the rites of the Eleusinian mysteries' – a vision which was a 'personal' rather than communal experience that resulted in a transformation of one's personality and character. George Thomas, *Religious Philosophies of the West* (Charles Scribner's Sons: New York), 21.

<sup>33</sup> Murdoch, *Existentialists*, 426-7.

<sup>34</sup> Murdoch, *Metaphysics*, 1.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

it is understandable that there should be such an emphasis on the unchanging nature of forms in a philosophy (Plato's) which was evolved in an attempt to provide the moral convictions derived from Socrates in particular with an unshakable metaphysical basis.<sup>36</sup>

However, as Eric Voegelin comments, we cannot simply see Plato's desire for transcendence as being a lofty desire out of touch with reality but must see it as part of the experience of philosophy in life, as Voegelin writes,

The Platonic realm of changeless eternal being was not a wanton assumption; it was experienced as a reality in the erotic fascination of the soul by the Agathon as well as in its cathartic effects. The realm of ideas was one of the symbols which expressed the philosopher's experience of transcendence.<sup>37</sup>

Within the religious experience of the divine reality of the Forms is one which, for Plato, is needful, essential to, and involved within human existence. As Gerard Watson comments on Plato's thought, the transcendent reality forms an essential need of humanity, for without the it, 'man's life can seem pointless and futile.'<sup>38</sup> Plato's is not simply a matter of 'propositional' knowledge, of simply knowing the Forms, but is a knowledge that is one of 'acquaintance',<sup>39</sup> in which he, as Watson writes,

wishes to retain the abstract, intellectual formulation because of his need for a knowledge that is 'pure', unchanging, mathematical in its certainty and consistency. But he is also aware that man does not live by intellect alone, that such perfection is too often arid, and that not only the unexamined but also the uninvolved life is not worth human living.<sup>40</sup>

The transcendent divine reality of which Plato speaks involves humanity within it, or better, through its contemplation humanity reaches a state of transcendence, becoming involved with the divine through a correspondence within the soul. As John Macquarrie writes, the human act of transcendence is a quality of life, a way of being.<sup>41</sup> It is a way of 'becoming more': a qualitative 'deepening, enhancing and enriching of life, or, if one prefers, a fuller, truer humanizing of life.'<sup>42</sup> Macquarrie writes that when we speak of human existence, we are faced with a fundamental choice between a life of transcendence or the life of immanence, in which, contrasted

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<sup>36</sup> Watson, *Greek Philosophy*, 26.

<sup>37</sup> Eric Voegelin, *Plato and Aristotle*, 275.

<sup>38</sup> Watson, *Unwritten Teaching*, 61.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> Macquarrie, *In Search of Humanity* (SCM Press Ltd: London, 1982), 26.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

to transcendence, is a way, 'of drift and conformity in which one decides nothing for oneself but lets one's life be formed by passing appetites, social pressures, the latest fashions and so on.'<sup>43</sup> However, for Plato, the way of transcendence is not simply a 'fuller' way of life, as Macquarrie says, but is a way of necessity for humanity to be fully human. For Plato, the way of envisioning the transcendent divine reality forms a deep contrast with the life that does not; as in the myth of the Cave, the soul's ascent is the 'turning of the soul from a day that is a kind of night to the true day – the ascent to what is, which we say is true philosophy.' (*Republic* 521c) It is in the application of the vision of divine reality to a way of life that the Forms' meaning to human existence can be fully seen.

As the reality of the Forms relates back to human existence and a way of life, what is seen is that the human question is always central to Plato, as in the opening lines of the *Republic*, a concern with 'the way people live.' (*Republic* 329d) Humanity's contemplation of the divine is ultimately important for Plato for it governs the way life is lived. As Gadamer writes, 'in the end, any talk about the universal idea of the good always takes as its point of departure this *human question*: What is the good for us?'<sup>44</sup> The Ideas can never be separated from their religious or existential meaning as the envisioning of the Beautiful or the Good has as much to say, and do with the way an individual lives or the way that society conducts itself as it does the philosophical vision or experience of ascent. Herein we find the indelible union in Plato between the divine and the human experience as the transcendent vision of the divine has direct implications to the human situation and experience. In Plato the divine and human are joined in an interrelationship that is based upon humanity's experience of the divine, and its ascent to be united with and encounter the divine in everyday existence.

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<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 25. Macquarrie is responding to the contrast Alister Kee develops in his *Way of Transcendence* between the way of 'transcendence' and the way of 'immanence'. On another comparative thought, Augustine's *City of God* portrays the earthly city as one that secures its order through 'violence,' (Hauerwas in *Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine*, 25), as Augustine's cities are metaphors for the two types of human life, the one who is given to the way of immanence, the way of the earth, lives only for material gain as Alister Kee's words also conveys.

## *Divine Reality and the Contrast of Lives*

The point where the speculations about the vision of divine reality become ultimately important, for Plato, is when they are seen to affect human life directly. In his conception of humanity and society, Plato conceives of a deep contrast between those who are philosophers and those who are not: a contrast of lives that involves an equally contrastual difference in visions of reality where the philosophical life, based upon the divine reality, is contrasted with a way of that turns away from this reality following mere appearances. These contrasting visions involve a theological and ethical implication, for one can never separate, for Plato, what is contemplated, or not contemplated, from the way one's life is lived, as the two are inextricably linked.

In the *Sophist*, *Republic*, and *Theaetetus*, respectively, Plato presents three aspects within this image of the contrast of lives: the contrast between the philosopher as a lover of wisdom and the sophist as the lover of arguments, the contrast between the philosopher and the lover of opinion (*philodoxos*), and a contrast between the philosopher and the lover of popularity. In the *Sophist*, the philosopher is portrayed as one who seeks divine reality while the sophist satisfies himself with the world and that which *is not*, a world of change, instability and opinion. The sophist loves and desires words, the turn of obscurities that wins arguments but does not seek wisdom. Through the contrasting symbols of light and darkness, Socrates describes the sophist as one who 'runs off into the darkness of *that which is not*', becoming difficult to see. (*Sophist* 254a). The philosopher, on the other hand, leads a life which stays 'near the form' of '*being*,' (*Sophist* 254a)<sup>45</sup> and in contrast to the sophist lives in the company of divine reality, certainty, and light. The philosopher is one 'whose thoughts constantly dwell upon the nature of reality' and in contrast to the sophistic darkness, 'is difficult to see because the region [in which the philosopher exists] is so bright, for the eye of the vulgar soul cannot endure to keep its gaze fixed on the divine.' (254a)<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Gadamer, *The Idea of the Good*, 30.

<sup>45</sup> Nicholas White's translation, *Plato: Complete Works*.

<sup>46</sup> The Good is always associated with light as it is depicted in the *Republic*. Such a thought can be remembered and applied throughout this thesis in the contrast of light and darkness which is very symbolic of the religious nature of philosophy.



A further contrast is drawn in the *Republic* between the philosopher and the lover of opinion, the φιλόδοξος.<sup>47</sup> For Plato, the lover of opinion does not see the reality of the divine but only loves the numerous beautiful things, the spectacles, never contemplating the Form of the eternal Beauty itself. As Socrates says:

Let him answer me, that good fellow who does not think there is a beautiful in itself or any idea of beauty in itself always remaining the same and unchanged, but who does believe in many beautiful things – the lover of spectacles... who cannot endure to hear anybody say that the beautiful is one and the just one, and so of other things.... (*Republic* 479a)<sup>48</sup>

The lover of opinion can only endure and see that which is becoming, they cannot 'bear the idea' that 'the beautiful itself is one or that the just is one or any of the rest...'<sup>49</sup> In Plato's thought, no true life can be based upon seeking only beautiful objects aside from the one eternal Beauty for everything that is beautiful is in some way ugly, that which is just is in some respects unjust, and that pious in some ways impious. The way of the *philodoxos* is actually a midway point between the Beautiful itself and all beautiful objects, it is a way of 'becoming', a point between existence and non-existence (*Republic* 479c); a way that neither commits to certainty nor uncertainty, but one that is simply that of opinion. (476d ff.) Reminiscent of Heraclitus' words,<sup>50</sup> to live in such a middle state, says Socrates, is to live as in a dream:

What about someone who believes in beautiful things but doesn't believe in the beautiful itself... Don't you think he is living in a dream rather than a wakened state?... But someone who, to take the opposite case, believes in the beautiful itself, can see both it and the things that participate in it and doesn't believe that the participants are it or that it itself is the participants – is he living in a dream or is he awake? (*Republic* 476c)<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> One important point of the word φιλόδοξος connotes that such is not only a lover of opinion, but, as is pointed out (Liddell and Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon*, abridged (Oxford: 1926), 759), a lover of glory and honour.

<sup>48</sup> Eric Voegelin comments that Plato uses for that which is 'in itself' the term 'idea,' and as he does, the 'Parmenidean Being is made to embrace the realm of ideas, while his world of illusion (*doxa*) becomes the realm of the many things in which the ideas are incarnate.' Voegelin, *Plato and Aristotle*, 67

<sup>49</sup> Voegelin, *Plato and Aristotle*, 67.

<sup>50</sup> As Heraclitus writes: 'The Law (of the universe) is here explained; but men are always incapable of understanding it... As for the rest of mankind, they are unaware of what they are doing after they wake, just as they forget what they did while asleep.' (Fragment 1) Kathleen Freeman, Freeman, Kathleen. *Ancilla to The Pre-Socratic Philosophers* (Basil Blackwell: Oxford, 1996), 24.

<sup>51</sup> Grube's translation, *Plato: Complete Works*.

In contrast to the *philodoxos* the philosopher embraces (ασπάζομενους) true being (τὸ ὄν). (*Republic* 480a) The philosophers are those, ‘who in each and every kind welcome the true being...’, those who embrace the whole of all things rather than the parts (474c). The philosopher contemplates and embraces the reality of beauty and justice, grasping that which never changes and which is ‘always the same.’ (484b) They are lovers of truth (*aletheia*) and not falsehood (485c).

In the *Theaetetus* (170ff) Plato makes a further contrast between the lover of wisdom and the lover of popular opinion. In the dialogue Socrates digresses to give honour to the philosophical life by showing what a true philosopher is, and contrasts the lover of wisdom to the man who is a slave to the system of the world, one bound by the desire for social and political popularity. Such an individual, says Socrates, is found constantly in the law courts seeking approval from those like himself, chasing after reputation, offering flattering words to please the crowd, always in a hurry and watching the clock. (172eff) Such a soul is small and warped (173a-b), says Socrates, one who glories in the self and one’s own accomplishment counting himself wise, practical, and worldly. Such a one is fooled in considering himself a free individual as he esteems himself to have a reputation and popular but is actually held by these in a prison (174e), and bound by these, his soul sinks into its own worthlessness. Such a life is one that chases after what can be held in the hand. These are the lives, says Socrates, of the ‘uninitiate’ (τῶν ἀμύητων, the *profane*)<sup>52</sup> who believe that ‘nothing is real save what they can grasp with their hands and do not admit that actions or processes or anything invisible can count as real.’ (*Theaetetus* 155e) Such an individual is the worldly man of affairs who believes he is wise as he thinks himself able to work the system to his own best advantage, but who is, in reality a slave of the system, unaware that his unscrupulous conduct condemns his life to be its own curse and punishment (176d-177a).<sup>53</sup>

The philosopher in contrast to such a one, is, on the other hand unbound by popular opinion and free to converse leisurely with fellow seekers of wisdom. Taking no interest in that which would make him popular, the philosopher’s interest is in that which is eternal. He takes no interest,

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<sup>52</sup> *A Lexicon* abridged from *Liddell and Scott’s Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1926), 42

in the rivalries of political cliques, in meetings, dinners, and merrymakings with flute girls... Whether any fellow citizen is well- or ill-born or has inherited some defect from his ancestors on either side, the philosopher knows no more than how many pints of water there are in the sea. He is not even aware that he knows nothing of all this, for if he holds aloof, it is not for reputation's sake, but because it is really only his body that sojourns in his city, while his thought, disdainful of all such things as worthless, takes wings, as Pindar says, 'beyond the sky, beneath the earth,; searching the heavens and measuring the plains, everywhere seeking the true nature of everything as a whole, never sinking to what lies close at hand. (173d–174a)

As an example of such a life, Socrates recounts the tale of Thales who was lampooned by the Thracian servant girl for falling into the well for looking up to the sky and missing that which was at his feet. (174a)<sup>54</sup> As the story shows, the philosopher pursues an entirely different path of life. The life of the philosopher is marked, in the end, by his or her aspiration to a life of wisdom that seeks to become like God (176a) and not like the crowds and so-called leaders of society.

What is given in these three examples are pictures of lives violently contrasted in their outlook and their views of existence. Eric Voegelin points out in specific reference to the *Republic*, yet generally applicable to this whole idea, is that such a state is a 'state of the soul', a 'wandering or erring between being and not being.'<sup>55</sup> Voegelin notes that it is on this basis that the Heraclitean picture of the sleepwalker offered by Socrates is to be seen as one who lives his life by putting 'images in place of reality.'<sup>56</sup> (*Republic* 476c) Gregory Vlastos describes it as the mistake of taking 'half existents for full existents... deceitful resemblances of *F* for the real *F*.'<sup>57</sup> This contrast of lives is not one simply of ideas, but a contrast of existence. Eric Voegelin continues that,

Today Plato has become a philosopher among others; and our modern term even includes the philodoxers to whom he was opposed. For Plato the philosopher is literally the man who loves wisdom, because wisdom puts substance in the freedom of his *Arete* and enables the soul to travel the road

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<sup>53</sup> Myles Burnyeat, *The Theaetetus of Plato*, 34.

<sup>54</sup> Smith recounts that in his lectures at Boston College, Gadamer pointed out that in fact Thales would not have fallen into the well, as the maidservant presumed (174b), but would have climbed down in order to view the stars without the interference of peripheral light. A contemporary reader of Plato would have understood just whom Plato is portraying as ignorant here – not Thales, but self-proclaimed 'practical' people. (Hans Georg Gadamer, *Idea of the Good*, 39.)

<sup>55</sup> Voegelin, *Plato and Aristotle*, 66.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>57</sup> Vlastos, *Platonic Studies*, 66.

toward salvation. In the philosopher who resists the sophist lives a soul which resists the destruction of Arete.<sup>58</sup>

For Plato what is contemplated is a deciding factor in how an individual life is led, an understanding greatly overlooked. As Gilbert Ryle put it, defining philosophy as a whole, philosophy is ‘talk about talk’, a view widely held that philosophy is about the use, misuse, abuse, etc. of language.<sup>59</sup> However, such a definition is in utter contrast to Plato who sees the philosophical way of life as an existence arising from a contemplation of the divine, not simply about the use of words, or as in the case of the sophist, turns of phrases simply for the sake of winning arguments. Myles Burnyeat writes in his commentary on the *Theaetetus* that we are invited by Plato to contemplate the lives in which the rival theories are put into practice and not about rival theories about the relation of justice and prudence. Burnyeat writes that in at least ‘one interpretation’ of the ‘Digression’ in praise of philosophy in the *Theaetetus*,

We are to be stirred to really serious reflection on what it is worthwhile and important to know. To make sure that we do not take the issue lightly, Plato puts the full power of his rhetoric into an extreme expression of his own vision of the human condition.<sup>60</sup>

However this perspective is not only ‘one’ interpretation, as Burnyeat indicates, but is the main one we must adopt in order to see the full objective of Plato’s philosophy. Hans-Georg Gadamer’s perspective on Plato proves helpful when he comments,

Philosophers not only think differently, they exist differently – differently from *das Man* (everybody), or as Plato would say, *hoi polloi* (the many). They are differently disposed insofar as they hold to what is true. The decisive passage in Plato is *Theaetetus* 174aff., where the otherworldliness of the philosopher is portrayed from the viewpoint of *hoi polloi*: he appears hopelessly inept and is mocked by maidservants (and sophists).<sup>61</sup>

The contrast of vision implicates different perceptions of existence.

Through the contrasting lives Plato shows the common human experience and dilemma of the choice of lives, but also the universal help that is found within philosophy. Within such a contrast of lives is the idea of a universal human dilemma of choice between types of existence, but also the universal help that is given through

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<sup>58</sup> Voegelin, *Plato and Aristotle*, 70.

<sup>59</sup> Bryan Magee, *Confessions of a Philosopher* (Phoenix: London, 1997), 80.

<sup>60</sup> Myles Burnyeat, *The Theaetetus*, 36.

<sup>61</sup> Gadamer, *Idea of the Good*, 39.

philosophy in the experience of the reality of the divine. Eric Voegelin comments that within philosophy, for Plato,

the motivating experience became clear, that is, the discovery of a universal humanity which can be recognized as such only in relation to a universal transcendental realissimum. The one, unseen, greatest god, who is the same for all men, is correlative with a sameness of men that is now found in the sameness of their transcendental experiences.<sup>62</sup>

Voegelin writes that such a conception is borne earlier even in Heraclitus who, employing the symbol of humanity being divided between those asleep and those awakened through the search for wisdom,

distinguished between the men who live in the one and common world (*koinos kosmos*) of the logos which is the common bond of humanity (*homologia*) and the men who live in the several private worlds (*idios kosmos*) of their passion and imagination, between the men who lead a waking life and the sleepwalkers who take their dream for reality.<sup>63</sup>

The basis of this contrast of lives is a way of perception through the enlightenment of philosophy. The idea and metaphor of vision and the philosophical life is taken up by Murdoch who writes that, 'Sight is the dominant sense' in our world, and a 'visual world' is the 'source of our deep imagery and thought-modes.'<sup>64</sup> For Plato, the problem which lies in these contrasts is one of a lack of perception of many, the looking constantly to that which is seen with the eye and missing entirely the truth which is known by the soul. For Plato, 'ordinary awareness', Murdoch writes, is a 'state of illusion', what is needed within the soul is a 'gradual change of consciousness whereby the veil of appearance was (is) penetrated by moral-intellectual cognition.'<sup>65</sup> Murdoch continues, 'Life is a spiritual pilgrimage inspired by the disturbing magnetism of *truth*, involving *ipso facto* a purification of energy and desire in light of a vision of what is *good*.'<sup>66</sup> The perception that is achieved rests upon the desire and love of the seeker to go beyond the sensibly perceived, and to see with the eyes of the soul. The human dilemma is one of choice between differing visions which in turn affect directly the way life is lived. Humanity must go beyond the sensually perceived and see with the soul as philosophy is not only a *way* of perception, but a *change* of perception as well. Such

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<sup>62</sup> Voegelin, *Plato and Aristotle*, 67.

<sup>63</sup> Voegelin, *Anamnesis*, 98.

<sup>64</sup> Murdoch, *Metaphysics*, 462.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 222.



a point is even made by Karl Barth, who, in a remarkable comment in his *Commentary on St Paul's Epistle to the Romans*, reflecting on the words of *Romans* 1:20 that the 'invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead,' is reminded of Plato's own thought in that,

This we have forgotten, and must allow it to be brought back once more to our minds... Plato in his wisdom recognised long ago that behind the visible there lies the invisible universe which is the Origin of all concrete things... The clear honest eyes of the poet in the book of Job, and of the preacher Solomon had long ago rediscovered, mirrored in the world of appearance, the archetypal, unobservable undiscoverable Majesty of God.<sup>67</sup>

What is learned through Plato is that the life of wisdom is found in seeing beyond that which is temporal and changing to that which is eternal reality. Such a vision is not, for Plato, an escape from the world, but is an ascent in order to find a true way of life, a way of knowing that which is ultimately real. For Plato, such a life is found when the soul literally participates in the divine reality.

### The Religious Aspect of *Methexis*

In Plato is a perspective of an interaction between the world and the divine reality, a relationship of the objects of the world involved with the divine Forms which is described through the idea of participation (*methexis*). Yet, this participation, *methexis*, speaks of the Forms in relation to the world as well, implicating a mutual interaction between the two. Because it is a way of interaction, the notion of *methexis* is a philosophically religious idea which gives insight to the religious dimension of Plato's philosophy as a whole, and a perspective of his philosophical theology.

In the *Phaedo* Socrates conveys the relational role between the divine and the world as one of participation when he says:

if there is anything beautiful besides the Beautiful itself, it is beautiful for no other reason than that it shares (μετέχει) in that Beautiful, and I say so with everything.... (*Phaedo* 100c)<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 397.

<sup>68</sup> Grube's translation in Cooper, *Plato: Complete Works*.

For Socrates, the explanation of how something is Beautiful is due to an idea of its literal participation in the Form itself. Similarly, Diotima's words in the *Symposium* echo this same perspective as things participate in the Form: Beauty is, 'not anywhere in another thing...but itself by itself with itself,...always one in form; and all the other beautiful things share in that, in such a way that when those others come to be or pass away, this does not...' (*Symposium* 211b) In the *Republic*, Socrates says that it is through this recognition of participation that one is 'awakened' to that which is true:

But someone who... believes in the beautiful itself, can see both it and the things that participate in it and doesn't believe that the participants are it or that it itself is the participants – is he living in a dream or is he awake?  
(*Republic* 476d)<sup>69</sup>

For Plato, the recognition that all things participate, in some way, in the Forms provides the basis for the life of wisdom.

Yet, how the objects participate in the Idea is one that is, for Plato, mysterious and difficult to put into terms, as Socrates says in the *Phaedo*:

I no longer recognize those other sophisticated causes, and if someone tells me that a thing is beautiful because it has a bright color or shape or any such thing, I ignore these other reasons – for all these confuse me – but I simply, naively and perhaps foolishly cling to this, that nothing else makes it beautiful other than the presence of (παρουσία), or the sharing in (κοινωνία) or however you may describe its relationship to that Beautiful we mentioned.... (*Phaedo* 100c-d)<sup>70</sup>

That *methexis* is a reality is unquestioned, but to explain the experience of this idea in its fullness is utterly difficult. As Socrates admits, he is at a loss at explaining how the relationship between the Form and the particular can be conveyed for 'sophisticated' causes are confusing, but in some way it is that the presence (*parousia*) of the Form, or the communion (*koinonia*) with the Form, describes the Form's presence in the world.<sup>71</sup> What is seen through Socrates' words is not the explanation of the idea as much as it is that the philosopher knows and experiences the divine interactive with the world and upon that constructs the notion.

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<sup>69</sup> Grube's translation, revised by C.D.C. Reeve in Cooper, *Plato: Complete Works*.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> David Ross however considers both *parousia* and *koinonia* in terms of immanence. Ross, *Plato's Theory of Ideas*, 228 ff..

Yet, for certain, the explanation of how objects participate in the Forms is a crucial problem for Plato's own thought as witnessed in the *Parmenides*. (129ff) In the dialogue, Parmenides begins with attempting to clarify what Socrates' means by 'participation':

Have you yourself distinguished (διήρησαι) as separate...certain forms themselves, and also as separate (χωρῖς) the things that partake (μετέχοντα) of them?... Is there a form, itself by itself (αὐτὸ καθ' αὐτὸ), of just, and beautiful, and good, and everything of that sort?... Things that might seem absurd, like hair and mud and dirt, or anything else totally undignified and worthless? (*Parmenides* 130b-c)

How the Forms are able to remain separate but in some way involved with the world is the issue that Parmenides focuses upon, and how one is able to define that relationship: Do objects partake of the Forms? What are there Forms of? Is there a form for everything? even things that seem as absurd as hair and dirt (as possibly *Republic* 596a indicates)?<sup>72</sup> In attempting to answer Parmenides' questions, Socrates' thought that things 'resemble' the Forms is met with Parmenides' explanation that this leads to a 'vicious regress' (the 'third man argument').<sup>73</sup> The Forms in the end seem so separate as to be unknowable altogether. However, Parmenides, interestingly enough, never questions the reality of the idea of participation, or doubts the Forms' existence, but questions how this idea of participation is to be defined. As Parmenides concludes, to convey how participation occurs is itself a difficult subject, one that escapes a full answer,

The forms inevitably involve these objections and a host of others besides... Only a very gifted man can come to know that for each thing there is some kind, a being itself by itself, but only a prodigy more remarkable still will discover that and be able to teach someone else who has sifted all these difficulties thoroughly and critically for himself. (135a)<sup>74</sup>

But, as Parmenides establishes, the idea of the Forms and the notion of participation is needful for any philosophical discourse to take place, as he says to Socrates,

if, in view of all these difficulties and others like them, a man refuses to admit that forms of things exist or to distinguish a definite form in every case, he will have nothing on which to fix his thought, so long as he will not allow

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<sup>72</sup> Murdoch, *Existentialists*, 409.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 409. The Form will always have something it is like as well until there is no Form at all at the end but only an infinite regress. The 'third man argument' is used by Aristotle in his criticism of the Forms in his *Metaphysics*: the Form will always have something it is like as well until there is no Form at all at the end but only an infinite regress.

<sup>74</sup> Mary Louise Gill and Paul Ryan's translation in Cooper, *Plato: Complete Works*.

that each thing has a character which is always the same, and in so doing he will completely destroy the significance of all discourse. But of that consequence I think you are only too well aware. (135c)

Though the notion of *methexis* is mysterious and beyond explanation, it is an essential understanding of philosophy and a reality of the philosophical experience.

By way of commentary, several have seen in the *Parmenides* a great insight into the question of the Forms as a whole. Gregory Vlastos writes that *Parmenides*, is a record of honest perplexity. Plato now recognizes the gravity of difficulties he had taken lightly heretofore.... He is taking a second, very hard, look at his ontological theory – which is not to say that he is ditching it.<sup>75</sup>

Iris Murdoch even writes that in the end, ‘No sense can be made of the idea of ‘participation’, the relation between a particular and a ‘similar’ Form.’<sup>76</sup> Yet, as Gerard Watson writes, the ‘testing’ by Parmenides, ends with a paternal admonition to a young Socrates<sup>77</sup> that however great the apparent difficulties in the theory might be, the theory of the Forms’ and the notion of participation must be pondered.<sup>78</sup>

(*Parmenides* 135c) Watson comments that,

The *Parmenides* is regarded by many as a turning point in Plato’s thought. It is certainly an important dialogue and the second half is not simply exercise or gymnastic. Plato is obviously very much concerned with the problem of the one and the many in the *Parmenides*, with the difficulties in the notion of the one, and with the relations between one and being.<sup>79</sup>

The dialogue remains, as Watson writes, ‘a sort of balance sheet on the question to date.’<sup>80</sup> All said, we are left in the *Parmenides* with a great awareness of a problem of expression. However, the problem of *methexis* is one which must be understood in a philosophical and religious context. *Methexis* is a doctrine that is first and foremost for Plato an experience, an experience beyond description, and one that incorporates various terminology to explain the idea.

The religious experience of the idea of participation is found when the various phrases are considered to describe the doctrine. As Socrates admits above in

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<sup>75</sup> Gregory Vlastos, ‘Separation in Plato’, *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, vol. V, Julia Annas, ed. (Oxford at the Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1987), 192, n. 16.

<sup>76</sup> Murdoch, *Existentialists*, 409.

<sup>77</sup> Watson adds here that the young Socrates in the *Parmenides* would have stood for other young men in the Academic in the 370s BC and afterwards.

<sup>78</sup> Watson, *Greek Philosophy*, 14.

<sup>79</sup> Watson, *Unwritten*, 26.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

the *Phaedo* (100c-d), he is at a loss when it comes to the ‘sophisticated’ explanations and terms of how the Forms and the world relate, but that such a relationship exists is a certainty for the true philosopher because it is one which they experience.

Gadamer writes that it is striking that, ‘throughout the dialogues the terminology used for the relationship between idea and appearance is extremely free: *parousia* (presence), *symploke* (interweaving), *koinonia* (coupling), *methexis* (participation), *mimesis* (imitation), and *mixis* (mixture) are all found alongside each other.’<sup>81</sup>

Gadamer comments of the *Parmenides*,

Might it have been Plato’s actual intent in the *Parmenides* to make us so acutely conscious of the ontological problem in the relationship between idea and appearance that the very inappropriateness of the solutions discussed demonstrates the dogmatism implied in the question itself?<sup>82</sup>

Although the actual relationship of the Form and the particular is beyond any one word which houses the entire thought, what can certainly be said is that *methexis* is an experience and a religious experience because of the fact that it involves an idea of the divine in relation to the world. Indeed, all of Plato’s terms used in describing the relationship of the Forms and the world are relational, communicative, and not simply one-sided either on the part of the Form forcing its attributes onto the particular object, or the objects simply passive to the Form, but in relation to one another. It is this relationship that the philosopher realises and into which he enters through the practice of the philosophical life.

The importance of the idea of *methexis* to Plato’s philosophical theology is that it bespeaks an aspect of the relationship and connectedness between the divine Forms and the world, which the philosopher experiences. For Aristotle, such an idea is not new in Plato nor unique, but he comments that the idea of Plato in his doctrine of *methexis* is simply an alteration of the Pythagorean word of ‘imitation’ (μίμησις).<sup>83</sup> However, the significance of Plato’s term betrays an important aspect of a ‘connectedness’ of the world with the Forms more than Aristotle admits, enhancing an understanding of the relationship of the world to the divine which is more ‘participatory’, revealing the aspect of the idea as a whole. Gadamer writes of

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<sup>81</sup> Gadamer, *Idea of the Good*, 10.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.* In fact, adds Gadamer, the picture of the youthful Socrates may prove this point. (*Idea of the Good*, 10, n.2)

<sup>83</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 987b.



*methexis* as a ‘new word’ which, ‘brings out the logical connection of the many to the one, the thing ‘in common,’ a connection which is not implied in the Pythagorean notion of *mimesis*.<sup>84</sup> Cornford, going even farther, suggests an even more religious meaning by arguing that the term, *Mimesis*, has the same significance as the mythological meaning.<sup>85</sup> *Mimesis*, Cornford writes, is not ‘imitation’, but carries the sense of ‘embodying’ or ‘representing’ the Form.<sup>86</sup> Thus, the idea that Plato is simply changes the name of the idea to something else is not correct but *methexis* has a greater significance than what ‘imitation’ can convey. The experience of *methexis* of the divine is not to simply envision the divine and be aware of one’s distance, but it is to become involved with the divine, to be part of it, and to relate to it through participation. In contrast, the Pythagorean notion of ‘imitation’ still connotes distance, of standing outside and away from the Forms, observing at a distance and imitating what one sees. With Plato’s *methexis*, a far deeper relationship of the divine in relation to the world is portrayed.

Through the idea of *methexis* the object ‘participates’ in the Form by not only as imitating the Form but also taking part in the aspect of the Form itself. Through *methexis* the object *participates* and becomes involved within the divine and does not simply stand at a distance. Gadamer comments that if we pay attention to Plato’s use of terms, we will see that *methexis* involves not simply a way of perception but a way of seeing ‘real relationships.’<sup>87</sup> Thus, to understand the Forms’ relation to the particulars as conceived in the human experience is not to say that such a relation is only a construct of the imagination, but that *methexis* entails a ‘real’ relationship, one which is an ontological, objective reality. If we understand *methexis* in this way, then the relationship conveyed in *methexis* is one of depth that links the particular and the divine together. In turn, *methexis* leads to a more profound concept of understanding the world’s involvement with the divine in that all things do not simply imitate but participate in the Forms, and through this participation are in relationship to the divine.

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<sup>84</sup> Gadamer, *Idea of the Good*, 11. As noted by Gadamer: See J. Klein, ‘Die griechische Logistik’ in *Quellen und Studien zur Geschichte Mathematik*, vol. 3, no. 1 (1934), and vol. 3, no. 2 (1936).

<sup>85</sup> Cornford, *From Religion to Philosophy*, 254.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>87</sup> Gadamer, *Idea of the Good*, 11.

However, as much as Plato speaks of the relationship and connectedness of the world to the divine Form, he insists that the Forms always remain distinct in their glory from the world. Plato describes the Forms as ‘themselves by themselves’ (*auto kath auto*), and speaks of the Forms as existing in ‘separation’ (*chorismos*) from the world. (*Parmenides* 130b). Throughout the *Parmenides*, the idea of the separation of the Form from the world is a foundational debate within the dialogue. Parmenides’ criticism of the Forms is how that the Forms as divine remains separate, ‘themselves by themselves’, while still recognising that objects participate in them, recognising the Forms’ relationship with the world (130bff) Gregory Vlastos, concerning himself with this conception of separation (*choris*), writes however that ‘*chorizein* does not occur here nor anywhere else in the debate nor is it ever applied to the forms by Plato anywhere in his corpus’<sup>88</sup> – the forms are ‘*distinguished* from their participants, while nothing is said here to *separate* them from the latter.’<sup>89</sup> For Vlastos, Plato does not draw a deep separation between the Forms and the particulars as he uses the word *diairein* rather than *chorizein* in which the Form is not completely separate, but ‘distinguished’ from the particular. Though Vlastos’ point raises the issue of the presence of the Form in all things and a closeness of the divine to the world, he misleads by saying that *chorizein* is not mentioned when the word *choris* is actually used by Parmenides to describe the Forms to which Socrates agrees. (*Parmenides* 130b) Plato himself grapples with this whole idea in his own writing, for it is an issue of how the Forms are separate while still retaining a notion of participation.

In Plato, however, the two ideas of participation and separation share a complementary role in the philosophical theology of the Forms which arises from the philosophical experience of the divine. In an example from the *Symposium* (211a), both ideas are joined together in the vision of the Beautiful. As Diotima says, after being ‘initiated so far in the mysteries of Love’ and ‘viewing all aspects of the beautiful in due succession’, the lover finally draws near the ‘final revelation’ of the envisioning of Beauty itself. The vision and experience of this Beauty is one that exists in its own glory but is that which is experienced in the beautiful objects as they participate in the Form. As Diotima says, the lover will see Beauty itself, ‘*subsisting itself and by itself* in an eternal oneness, *while every lovely thing partakes of it* in

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<sup>88</sup> Gregory Vlastos, ‘Separation in Plato’, 188.

such sort that, however much the part may wax and wane, it will be neither more nor less, but still the same inviolable whole.’ (211b)<sup>90</sup> Even in the *Parmenides*, the question at the beginning of the exposition on the One is a quest to discover the relation of the many and the One, what each is in relation to themselves and itself, and in relation to the other. (136a**ff**) Thus, as in the exposition of the One, the full understanding comes when it is understood as in itself, separate, but also in relationship to others – a similar question to that which is included in the notion of *participation*. Even further, the philosophical vision of the One is that which the philosopher envisions and experiences.<sup>91</sup> The exposition of the One is based upon the experience of the divine, as Parmenides says to Socrates, ‘All this you must do if, after completing your training, you are to achieve a full view of the truth.’ (136c) It is such an experience that is the underlying quest of Plato throughout his work, and it is this experience which governs the ideas of the nature of the Forms.

The philosophical experience of the Forms for Plato shows that they are both separate (*chorismos*), in utter distance from the world, but also near, known through the act of objects participating within them (*methexis*). The two notions form a complementary view and not one that is contrasting, as Plato’s theory is based upon an experience of the divine and not one based upon an idle speculation removed from existence. The confusion of ideas regarding the notion of participation occurs when the Forms are taken away from the philosophical experience, and made to fit within a framework of a treatise. Gadamer displays the confusion of questions surrounding this issue when he writes,

Did Plato at first really underestimate the problem in the participation of the appearances in the ideas? Did he teach that the ideas were apart for themselves until one day he too recognized that the problem of participation entailed in the postulation of such ideas was altogether insoluble? Do both postulations belong together: the ideas for themselves the so-called *chorismos* (separation), and the difficulty, to which one is thereby exposed, concerning participation, or *methexis*, as it is so-called? Could it be that *chorismos* and *methexis* go together even from the start?<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 189.

<sup>90</sup> Italics mine.

<sup>91</sup> Historically, Parmenides’ own vision of the One was one of a philosophical and mystical experience. See Kathleen Freeman’s, *Ancilla to the Presocratic Greek Philosophers*, ‘Parmenides’, 42**ff**.

<sup>92</sup> Gadamer, *The Idea of the Good*, 9.

Gadamer's last question is the most important, for it is in such a perspective which attempts to not relegate an 'either-or' position to the idea of *methexis*, especially in relation to *chorismos*, but joins both ideas together, affirming what is experienced through the experience of philosophy itself. Indeed, the philosophical theology of the Forms is an explanation of the philosophical experience, and as such is difficult to put into final terms. As Aristotle writes, Plato never settles the problem of participation, of *how* it occurs, but leaves it an open question. His biting comment even shows the futility of such an enterprise:

...Although Wisdom is concerned with the cause of visible things, we have ignored this question (for we have no account to give of the cause from which change arises), and in the belief that we are accounting for their substance we assert the existence of other substances; but as to *how* the latter are the substances of the former, our explanation is worthless – for 'participation,' as we have said before, means nothing.<sup>93</sup>

It may be said that it is the logic that has been placed upon the Forms, a logic to some extent warranted and needed, has given the theory of Forms trouble, causing for some, its relegation to the heap of past, irrelevant, indefensible philosophies – a product of Plato's lofty speculation. Yet, for Plato, the Forms are a philosophical experience of the divine which transform the soul, and it is out of that experience that the doctrine of the Forms is established.

In attempting to answer the charges levelled at times against the Forms, Festugière writes that the application of logical categories upon the Forms is one that is 'forced' upon the theory in a way that attempts to address a problem they never address. Speaking of the Forms as a 'great philosophic doctrine,' Festugière writes,

that which exercises the most profound influence on men's souls is neither always nor even mainly that doctrine's logical and metaphysical structure. The influence comes rather from the ferment which gives the whole doctrine its life; from the impulse that leads it in one particular direction, from the impulse that lies in the heart of the philosopher and communicates itself to our hearts.<sup>94</sup>

Exhibited in Festugière's words is the aspect that in the Forms we are speaking of the philosophical experience which transforms the soul. For Festugière, Plato seeks the Eternal, an experience of the divine, and not the logic of a system:

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<sup>93</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics* I. 9. 26, translated by Hugh Tredennick (William Heinemann Ltd.: London, 1933).

<sup>94</sup> Festugière, *Personal Religion*, 42.

The essence of concrete things is, as it were, forced upon him by the logic of the system and even brings him into much difficulty, as one can see from the well-known problems of the *Parmenides*. They are not the primary objects of his search. The primary object is what we today should call the supreme categories of Being: the Beautiful (the *Symposium*), the Good (the *Republic*), the One (the *Philebus*).<sup>95</sup>

Similarly, for those such as Cornford, Plato's theory of the Forms, especially the idea of *methexis*, is in the end mysterious. How the Forms relate to the world is beyond a full definition as Cornford writes,

How is this relation to be conceived? How is it possible for one form or nature to be present in a plurality of things, and yet to remain one? This is the much-vexed problem of 'participation' (μεθέξις), which Plato could never solve to his satisfaction. We understand the problem and its insolubility, when we grasp that this relation called 'participation' (*methexis*) is, from the first, a mystical, non-rational relation, which defies rational analysis.<sup>96</sup>

Perhaps neither rational analysis nor logical construction can bear the full idea of *participation*. In fact, Plato never forces that which is eternal and divine into the finite constructions of philosophical language or terms. As early as the *Phaedo*, Cornford comments that Plato has become 'uncomfortable' about using terms such as *presence* and *communion* to signify his meaning of how the Forms and the world relate.<sup>97</sup> One is not sure, however, whether Plato was ever 'uncomfortable', but attempting to describe the how the Ideas and the world related by various terms which are all aspects of the one true relationship. The unrest with language always plagues Plato, as it does any philosopher who wishes to conceptualise the transcendent and divine in finite words and definitions. Throughout his writings, Plato seems more comfortable with a multiplicity of expressions of the divine, rather than in simply one, and seems to find that inexpressibility is the best way to describe the divine altogether (e.g. *Symposium* 211b, *Seventh Letter* 341c).

What the words of Festugière and Cornford indicate is the difficulty of putting Plato's philosophy into hard definitions and analyses. The difficulty of terminology is due, at least in part, because the knowledge of the Forms is one which is of a personal encounter with the divine, one that goes beyond mere words. To say

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<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>96</sup> F. M. Cornford, *From Religion to Philosophy*, 254. Cornford writes the concept of participation is illumined by the description of the worshippers of Dionysus who believed that, when they performed the mysterious rites of their religion, the one God entered into all of them becoming present in each.



that the relationship between the world and the Forms is one that is beyond description is not to question its factuality nor to say that certain terms can describe it, but to say that the power of words to express and define such a relationship is limited. Plato's objective is the *human experience of the Forms* as that wisdom is known in and through the encounter with the Ideas.

It is the embracing of both ideas of *methexis* and *chorismos* that gives Plato's full thought of the nature of the relationship of the Forms and the philosophical religious experience of the divine. The need in Plato to separate the Forms is to establish glory of the divine which, being separate from the world of flux, is that which is eternal and true reality. However, for Plato, the Forms are also experienced in the world as that things participates in them. Both aspects give meaning and value to existence in that the Forms, as divine, are the sources of wisdom and truth *beyond* the world of flux and change, but also are the sources of truth *within* the world in which all existence participates.

#### The Human Experience of Immanence, Transcendence, and Union

The questions of separation and participation which surround Plato's philosophical theology of the Forms are brought to another level of understanding in the questions of immanence and transcendence as related to the human experience of the divine in Plato. In short, the Forms are experienced as both near and at a distance and it is this nearness and distance that elicits a further perspective of the religious nature of Plato's philosophy. Iris Murdoch, speaking in religious language, comments that,

The Forms are magnetic, not just passively stared at, they enliven the energy of Eros in the soul and participate in the world. They are both transcendent and immanent.<sup>98</sup>

With Murdoch's words we are given a perspective that emphasises the religious implications of the immanence and transcendence of the Forms as directly related to the encounter with the divine. In Plato, these two ideas are held in tension in the philosophical experience, for though the philosopher experiences the divine as near and at a distance, the two ideas are complementary within the experience of the

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<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 255.

<sup>98</sup> Murdoch, *Metaphysics*, 461-2.

philosopher. Yet, from this experience of the divine as both immanent and transcendent, arises the further notion that the philosopher strives to be in relation with, even united to, that divine which is contemplated and experienced. What is shown within these three ideas of immanence, transcendence, and the union with the divine, is an aspect of Plato's philosophical theology which describes humanity in relation with the divine involving the sense of closeness to, distance from, and the desire for union with the divine, and what these mean to human existence.

### *Immanence*

In one aspect, the nature of the divine is immanent and near. Plato speaks of the Forms of Beauty and the Good as being seen shining through the mundane. (*Symposium* 211; *Republic* 507 ff.) In the *Phaedrus* and the *Symposium*, the Form of Beauty is one that is directly linked with the act of vision, 'the sharpest of our bodily senses,' as that which is 'most visible and the most loved.' (*Phaedrus* 249d)<sup>99</sup> We experience the philosophical vision of Beauty, radiant in its divine splendour, as it 'shines' forth from those particular things (*Phaedrus* 250d), even those things 'which makes it visible' (*Symposium* 212a), shining through the beauty of the beloved (*Phaedrus* 250dff), and drawing the beholder to virtue. It is when one has 'reared this perfect virtue' that he will be called 'the friend of god' and will 'put on immortality.' (*Symposium* 212)

Similarly, in the description of the Good in the *Republic*, it is the 'presence' of the Good (τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ παρῆναι) that gives to objects the ability to 'their being known.' (509) Socrates declares to Glaucon that the 'very existence and essence' of all things is derived from the Good itself. The centrality of the Good, although existing in transcendence, is for Plato profoundly immanent in all things. Plato's use of the imagery and symbol of light and sight in the description of the Good, symbolically brings the Good near in as it is that which illumines all things by its truth: a 'truth to the things known and the power to know to the knower.' (509e) Yet, the Good is an 'inconceivably beautiful thing', the very source of knowledge and truth which even surpasses them in beauty (*Republic* 508e).

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<sup>99</sup> Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff's translation in Cooper, Plato: Complete Works .

Vision, enlightened by philosophy, plays an important role in the realisation of the immanence of the Forms. Etymologically, the word *idea* defined as the eternal form in the world of being is synonymous with *eidos* or the way something looks.<sup>100</sup> Within this understanding, Gadamer writes that, *eidos* always refers to an object, 'how something looks', but it is the feminine form, *idea*, that, though itself able to designate objects, is a 'view of something.'<sup>101</sup> Thus, says Gadamer, in the case of the Good as the *idea tou agathou*, Plato 'implies not so much the 'view of the good' as a 'looking to the good' – a case of *apoblepein pros* a gazing upon and looking away from all other objects to view that one particular vision which is most important, which all other visions pale in comparison to.<sup>102</sup>

However, Plato writes that the Forms are intelligible but not visible as the 'many beautiful things and many good things' are those which 'can be seen but not thought, while the ideas can be thought but not seen.'*(Republic 507b)* We see the Forms with the eye of the soul and not with the eye of the sense. As Murdoch writes, the Forms are seen as 'objects of spiritual vision.'<sup>103</sup> Through the vision of the soul the philosopher is in relationship to the Form. Grace Jantzen comments that the immanence of the divine is that which is not external, 'as an active mind grasping and holding on to items of knowledge in an instrumentalist fashion.'<sup>104</sup> For Plato, says Jantzen,

knowledge occurred when a purified and unified mind was illumined, grasped by the truth. There is a sense... in which the vision of the truth is not so much a gaze upon something external, as a means by which the knower is connected or united to the truth, which is the cosmic order.<sup>105</sup>

However, even with this understanding of seeing with the soul, Plato does not do away with or negate the physical manifestation of the divine Form. It is certainly true what Murdoch and Jantzen point out, but Plato is insistent upon the appearance of the Form in the world. Jantzen does not give a full interpretation of Plato for she overlooks the fact that Plato as much as insisting upon the internal transformation of

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<sup>100</sup> J.O.Urmson, *A Greek Philosophical Dictionary* (Gerald Duckworth & Company: London, 1990), 48, 79.

<sup>101</sup> Gadamer, *Idea of the Good*, 27-28.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>103</sup> Murdoch, *Metaphysics*, 395.

<sup>104</sup> Grace Jantzen, *Power, Gender, and Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: 1995), 42.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.* Jantzen cites Charles Taylor's *Sources of the Self* as establishing this pattern as part of post-Cartesian thought.

the divine, establishes the role of the divine in the 'external' world as well. For Plato, the Forms are manifested in the world as objective truths, as well as known in that 'internal' and subjective world of the soul. As is shown in the case of the Form of the Good and the Beautiful, the Forms are present in the world through the act of things' participation in them: as in the Good and the giving to things their reality, and as in the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus* show, the presence of beauty in the beautiful object that leads beyond itself to the philosophical vision of the divine Beauty.

For Plato, the depth of such an immanence of the divine is known in the cosmic order itself. In the myth of the *Timaeus*,<sup>106</sup> the Demiurge<sup>107</sup> creates the cosmos by bringing chaotic matter into an order and beauty able to be comprehended. Looking at that which is unchangeable for a pattern (*Timaeus* 29a) the Demiurge comprehended the beauty of the 'eternal', and imposed it upon matter:<sup>108</sup>

Wherefore also finding the whole visible sphere not at rest, but moving in an irregular and disorderly fashion, out of disorder he [the Demiurge] brought order, considering that this (order) was in every way better than the other [chaos]. (*Timaeus* 30a)

As *Timaeus* indicates, the one who comes to contemplate this ordered cosmos is brought toward the divine as philosophy itself is born out of beholding, of seeing the divine order:

God has given them [eyes] to us... the sight of day and night, and the months and the revolutions of the years have created number and have given us a conception of time, and the power of inquiring about the nature of the universe. And from this source we have derived philosophy, than which no

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<sup>106</sup> Richard Rietzenstein writes that in the *Timaeus*, Plato blends 'Oriental ideas, which were imparted to him by Eudoxos, with Greek philosophy, to produce a 'natural teaching on religion' (*naturalis theologia*)...' Richard Rietzenstein, *Hellenistic Mystery-Religions: Their Basic Ideas and Significance*, transl. by John E. Stealy (The Pickwick Press: Pittsburgh, Pa., 1978), 5.

<sup>107</sup> Friedrich Solmsen explains that, 'Demiurge' (δημιουργος) is a word which Plato and the Greeks generally apply to an artisan engaged in useful activity, as a rule of a manual type. The work of this Demiurge corresponds in its nature to that of a human craftsman.' Friedrich Solmsen, *Plato's Theology* (Cornell University Press, 1942, 110. For Iris Murdoch this whole understanding of the cosmos as a work of art is made known in the Demiurge being an artist, which provides a very lucid understanding of Plato's conception – more so than a craftsman may in our own vocabulary. With the artist is a much more aesthetic understanding than the one given in the concept of a simple technical workman.

<sup>108</sup> Some assume that the 'eternal' are the Forms, but Plato does not say actually say this. It is not necessarily a wrong understanding, but Plato is ambiguous about what he has in mind. *Timaeus*' point is that he looked to that which is eternal, which like the Forms, is changeless, and it is this that the philosopher contemplates in the cosmos. (cf. Iris Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 429)

greater good ever was or will be given by the gods to mortal man. (*Timaeus* 47a-b)

A reading of the *Timaeus* which explores the religious ideas of Plato's philosophy recognises the various theological ideas within the myth, particularly that the cosmos is an image of the divine.<sup>109</sup> *Timaeus* says that the Demiurge places his mark upon the universe in that,

He (the Creator) was good, and the good can never have any jealousy of anything. And being free from jealousy, he desired that all things should be as like himself as they could be.<sup>110</sup>

The 'creator' through this act imparts divine goodness onto the universe.<sup>111</sup> In this act, writes Constantin Ritter, the Demiurge stamps his being onto the universe and in so doing becomes immanent in the cosmos:

The divine demiurge... forms the chaotic material in accordance with his thoughts... [and so] the Idea of the world can be conceived only as God's purpose and as being grounded in his spiritual nature. If the *Timaeus* informs us that God in his goodness 'desired that everything be as much as possible like himself,' he himself evidently was the prototype after which he patterned the world, and looking at himself he took from the fullness of his own Being that which he imparted to the world.<sup>112</sup>

All things show the presence of the divine as even time itself is an image of eternity as *Timaeus* says,

And so he (the Demiurge) began to think of making a moving image of eternity: at the same time as he brought order to the universe, he would make an eternal image, moving according to number, of eternity remaining in unity. This number, of course, is what we now call 'time.' (*Timaeus* 37d)

The significance of this passage, writes Peter Manchester is that,

the religious experience of eternity and time that is distinctive of Mediterranean spirituality in our period [time of Plato] is an orientation to temporal presence. With this we arrive at the notion of eternity proper, the Greek *aion*.... it is an experience of the divine Presence in the human present, a presence reflected both in the cosmos of nature and in the life of the mind.

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<sup>109</sup> For a contemporary example of seeking an ancient reading, see Eric Perl in his article 'The Demiurge and the Forms: A Return to the Ancient Interpretation of Plato's *Timaeus*', *Ancient Philosophy* 18 (1998), 81-92, who argues that the currently accepted reading, or 'scholarly' renditions of the *Timaeus*, sees the Demiurge as standing outside and contemplating the Forms, contemplating them, is not a full nor true interpretation of Plato and overlooks the more 'ancient' and the more 'philosophical' understanding of the *Timaeus*.

<sup>110</sup> *Timaeus* 29e.

<sup>111</sup> Which according to the *Republic* (379b) is the essence of the nature of God itself.

<sup>112</sup> Ritter, *Essence*, 372.



Here the characteristic religious problem is the competence of speculative mysticism to encounter divine creative power....<sup>113</sup>

In general, Friedrich Solmsen comments that Platonic philosophical theology as a whole (and even after Plato) understood a ‘celestial religion, the regular movements of the stars and planets, their harmony and concentus are recognized as the immediate expression and manifestation of the divine in nature.’<sup>114</sup>

As the cosmos is an image of the divine, there is a correspondence between the two which involves an aspect of immanence that is deeper than a simple acknowledgement of the *presence* of the divine in the cosmos, but one in which the very fabric of the cosmos is an image of God. The depth of this interaction is seen in the last paragraph of the dialogue as Timaeus says,

The world has received animals, mortal and immortal, and is fulfilled with them, and has become a visible animal containing the visible – the sensible God who is the image of the intellectual, the greatest, best, fairest, most perfect – the one only-begotten heaven. (*Timaeus* 92c)

The universe, says Timaeus, is ‘a likeness of the intelligible God perceived by the senses’ (εἰκὼν τοῦ νοητοῦ θεοῦ ἀϊσθητός *Timaeus* 92b). Ritter’s free translation of this last paragraph of the *Timaeus* is even more to the point:

We have shown how this world came into Being. It is singular and came into its Being of its own accord. It is perfect in its nature and in its appearance; it is visible and embraces all fullness of the visible; it is a living organism in which all other mortal and immortal organisms have their Being; it is the visible image of God whom we can conceive in thought alone.<sup>115</sup>

Edith Hamilton comments that, as Plato indicates,

the visible world is a copy, an image, of what is eternal and true. It is a changing reflection of that which is changeless and therefore, imperfect though it is, in it can be found the truth, God the Creator, the all-good....<sup>116</sup>

The lesson given in the *Timaeus* from Plato personally, says Hamilton, is the ‘vision to see ‘the beyond’ and that the ultimate truth is God, our Creator and Father.’<sup>117</sup>

The point of the *Timaeus*, Hamilton continues, is a, ‘statement of scientific truth combined with mythical truth in which great spiritual truths can be found.’<sup>118</sup> Plato, says Hamilton,

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<sup>113</sup> Peter Manchester, *Classical Mediterranean Spirituality*, 393.

<sup>114</sup> Solmsen, *Plato's Theology*, 178.

<sup>115</sup> Ritter's translation of *Timaeus* 92c in *Essence*, 281.

<sup>116</sup> Edith Hamilton *Plato*, 1152.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*

Would have pointed out that science cannot be accurately true since it deals with the temporal, the finite, the forever changing, never with the eternal. But yet the visible world is a copy, an image, of what is eternal and true. It is a changing reflection of that which is changeless and therefore, imperfect though it is, in it can be found the truth, God the Creator, the all-good. That is the matter of importance, not scientific accuracy, but to catch a glimpse of the 'the beyond, which ever thereafter the soul will strive to reach.'<sup>119</sup>

Through the cosmos being an image of God, the one who knows wisdom, for Plato, is the one who sees oneself connected to the cosmos, one who not only sees the cosmos as an image of the divine, but who also feels himself or herself in relationship to that order.

Reflecting upon the religious ideas of the myth of the *Timaeus* allows an even further perspective and an image to be gleaned which speaks directly to the philosopher in his or her own relationship to the cosmos. As the cosmos is both that which the philosopher contemplates and is an image of the divine, philosophical contemplation brings the philosopher into correspondence with the divine order and a relationship with the divine. In the life of philosophy, the philosopher is one who, even like the Demiurge, is in true relation to the divine reality. The philosopher, like the Demiurge contemplating the eternal Forms, is one who contemplates and is in relationship to that divine which is above and beyond any traditional pantheon as the true source and cause of all things. As the Demiurge brings order out of chaos, so too is the philosopher one who realises the order and applies it to the metaphorical 'chaos' of the world. In short, what can certainly be said is that Plato intends the *Timaeus* as a philosophical myth that attaches itself to the reader's soul, bringing the individual to the experience of philosophy – an experience that celebrates the divine known through the cosmos and follows that divine in one's life.

The image of the divine in the cosmos, and the philosopher's relationship to that divine, is particularly seen and culminated in the theological idea of Soul ( $\psi\upsilon\chi\acute{\eta}$ ) which permeates the cosmos. To Plato the cosmos is made alive ( $\zeta\omega\acute{\alpha}$ ) through and with this power which, as in the words of the *Timaeus*, the Demiurge gives 'life' or 'soul' to the body of the world fashioning it as a living thing. (*Timaeus* 30c) In the *Phaedrus* (245c), Soul is defined as that which is immortal and ever in

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<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*

motion, involved with the entirety of the world's processes. In the *Laws* (896e), Soul is the universal cause of all things, 'of good and evil, fair and foul, right and wrong' and even, 'all contraries,' controlling 'all things universally that move anywhere', even heaven itself.

In Plato's philosophical theology, through the concept of Soul the universe is permeated with an animating force. Friedrich Solmsen has written that there is a provocative concept given in the *Timaeus*, and even more specifically in the *Laws* in the concept of the World Soul, that conveys the universe as *alive*, as in the words of the *Timaeus* (30c) that the world is made to be 'a living creature truly endowed with soul and intelligence'. In this, Solmsen writes, Plato forms a decisive point in this question of life in Nature for,

Nature now becomes alive – truly alive as something more and better than a shadow or copy. At the same time, it becomes divine, because its life flows from a source which is eternal, rational, perfect, and good. In a sense Nature had long, perhaps always, been alive and divine, to the Greeks; but its divine quality is now restored to it on higher and philosophical level.<sup>120</sup>

In many philosophical perspectives, including the Pre-Socratics, the cosmos as being 'alive' is a recognised concept as Solmsen writes,

The modern historian of philosophy may wish to insist that even for the Pre-Socratic thinkers Nature was by no means dead and that the divine quality of the Cosmos is fully recognized in their systems... There is Life in Heraclitus' Flux, and God is in the World, being 'day, night, winter, summer, war, peace.'<sup>121</sup>

Yet, says Solmsen, even though the Pre-Socratic philosophers held such a perspective, Plato's conception of the cosmos as alive is 'much richer' through the conception of 'Soul' as it,

includes besides the elements of Life and Divinity also those of goodness and rationality. In addition, an order of ontological precedence and cosmic priority has now been established for the spiritual and the material in the Universe, and the whole theory of Nature has accordingly been revised with great energy.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Solmsen, *Plato's Theology*, 90.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.* What cannot be established, however, is that Plato is the first to think of such an idea, for the aspect of the universe as alive, is seen even in the Pre-Socratics. Perhaps Plato's thought is in the way of the evolution of the idea, and perhaps even a betterment of the idea as Solmsen suggests, but yet it is in not a unique and individual conception. For the whole thought of Nature as alive seems found in Greek thought throughout in various individuals. Plato synthesises the provocative idea passed on

As the universe is made 'alive' with the power of Soul, the relationship between the divine and the cosmos becomes even more intimate, an intimacy which the philosopher experiences. For Plato, matter is lifeless and chaotic but through the action of the Demiurge is given life. (*Timaeus* 30c) In the *Laws* (892 ff), the idea of life and the intimacy between the cosmos and the divine is further accentuated through the concept of the World Soul as running through all things. Ritter comments that,

Matter or the physical in and by itself is never beautiful. In accordance with its nature, matter is void of every definite characteristic. Only the ensouled physical object which is illumined by thought is beautiful. Therefore, a spirit (or soul) must dwell in all parts of the physical, sensible world, which we find beautiful. The whole world appears to be formed and ruled by a spiritual power.<sup>123</sup>

This 'spiritual power' gives a means for the soul to be in intimate relationship with the cosmos due, as A. E. Taylor writes, 'as a consequence and embodiment of an orderliness which is more intimate and profound and has its seat in the cosmic Psyche.'<sup>124</sup>

Yet, even further, scholars such as Ritter, Murdoch, and Weil, see in the idea of the *Anima Mundi*, as in the *Timaeus* (34b) where the soul, diffused throughout the body of the world makes it a 'blessed god', conveys a deep immanence of the divine which the philosopher experiences. Ritter comments that, 'we may with certainty say that this soul is immanent.'<sup>125</sup> Iris Murdoch in this same persuasion writes that Soul is, 'stretched out through the whole of the world and wrapped round its exterior.'<sup>126</sup> As Murdoch notes, the creation of the World Soul in the *Timaeus* 35-37, 'initiates a divine beginning of unending intelligent life forever.'<sup>127</sup> Simone Weil adds a further perspective in that the *Anima Mundi* penetrates the entirety of the universe containing in itself 'the substance of God united to the principle of matter.'<sup>128</sup> However, cautions Weil, we are not to read this as pantheism in Plato for the soul, 'is not in this body but contains it, penetrates it, envelops it upon all sides,

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from his predecessors and through his own thoughts incorporates it into his own philosophical theology.

<sup>123</sup> Constantin Ritter, *Essence*, 259.

<sup>124</sup> Solmsen, *Plato's Theology*, 115.

<sup>125</sup> Ritter, *Essence*, 371.

<sup>126</sup> Murdoch, *Metaphysics* 107.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>128</sup> Weil, *Intimations of Christianity*, 92.

being itself outside space and time; being not entirely distinct from these but governing them.’<sup>129</sup> What can be gathered from Plato’s concept is that the World Soul involves an ultimate nearness of the divine within the cosmic order and an intimacy that is experienced in Plato’s philosophy.

### *Transcendence*

However, the intimacy of the divine immanence is counteracted, or better is complemented, by an acute sense of distance between the divine and ourselves. The divine for Plato is not only known in its immanence, it is known in its transcendence as well. The oneness with, and the immanence of, the divine in the cosmic order is complimented by the transcendence and distance of the divine, accompanied by a sense of unrestfulness with the world. Within the contemplation and elation with the cosmic order, Plato still makes us aware of the evil that is present in society and a world in flux. For Plato, there is an acute sense of the transcendence and distance of the divine: a source of *being* above the flux, a source of salvation for the soul, even within it, but a divine that is different and distanced from the soul as well.

In the two examples of the *Republic* in the concept of the Good and in the myth of the *Timaeus* Plato conveys humanity’s distance from the divine. The Good, as that which gives to all things truth and knowledge, is also that which exists in utter transcendence. For Plato, though present in all things that are known, the Good is never fully present for we only realise its presence through its effects and in what it gives. As Gadamer notes, analogous to the sun, the Good is only present through the gifts of knowledge and truth (*gnosis kai aletheia*) that it bestows.<sup>130</sup> Iris Murdoch notes this as well when she comments that we cannot really grasp the Good directly through the soul, or have a first-hand experience of it. Plato does not give, says Murdoch, a ‘picture of an ultimate erotic union as ultimate knowledge, as in union with a god... but Plato spoke only of (perhaps) glimpsing the Form of the Good, not of presuming to touch it.’<sup>131</sup> For Plato, the Good is beyond description, as well as beyond being (*epekeina tes ousias*). (*Republic* 509aff)

The question of the transcendence of the divine is a question which concerns the human condition as a whole. To Murdoch, the activity and imagery of vision is

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<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>130</sup> Gadamer, *Idea of the Good*, 28.

<sup>131</sup> Murdoch, *Metaphysics*, 462.



at the centre of human existence, wherein we are conscious of ourselves as both ‘inward and outward, distanced and surrounded’ by the Forms.<sup>132</sup> However, we are also aware, says Murdoch, that ‘we are strained and stretched out (like the *Anima Mundi* in the *Timaeus*), we live with intuitions of what we also realise as very distant.’<sup>133</sup> Through the envisioning of the Forms we find ourselves as both surrounded yet knowledgeable of the distance of the divine, knowing the divine within our souls, but aware also of the distance of the divine away from human life. In the same passage as declaring that the patterns of the universe manifest the divine, Timaeus declares that the God who is ‘the father and maker of all this universe is past finding out, and even if we found him, to tell of him to all men would be impossible.’ (28c) For us to be able to give an account of that which is eternal and unchanging is difficult because of our humanity (29d). To Plato, there is an implied distance between human knowledge and the knowledge of the God who orders it. Plato, for Murdoch, indicates through such concepts, a distance between ourselves and the cosmos, which, for Murdoch, is a way of Plato facing the unrest within the world. What emerges from such a perspective is not a positive reading of order and harmony in the cosmos, but one in which Plato is grapples with the nature of existence. A God who is unknown and ‘past finding out’ is revered, but it is a reverence charged with human *pathos*.

Significant to the expression and the human *pathos* of divine distance is the *Timaeus*’ concept of ‘Necessity’ (*anagkê*). The creation of the world is,

the combined work of necessity and mind. Mind, the ruling power, persuaded necessity to bring the greater part of created things to perfection, and thus and after this manner in the beginning, through necessity made subject to reason, this universe was created. (*Timaeus* 48a)

Necessity, as the materialistic chaos and the ever present force in matter, at first, rallied against the power of the ruling Mind and its reason and order, but in time was persuaded and subjected to reason. From this, says Timaeus, we see the two forces of the cosmos,

Wherefore we may distinguish two sorts of causes, the one divine and the other necessary, and may seek for the divine in all things, as far as our nature admits, with a view to the blessed life, but the necessary kind only for the sake of the divine, considering that without them and when isolated from

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<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 461-2.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*

them, these higher things for which we look cannot be apprehended or received or in any way shared by us. (*Timaeus* 68e-69a)

The idea of Necessity for Murdoch and Weil provides a basis for understanding human existence and the way of the philosophical life. Within the myth, humanity is given the choice of a way of life, as Murdoch writes, ‘Plato, turning to us, says that we must distinguish these (the divine and the ‘necessary’),<sup>134</sup> and so live. ‘We are (potentially) spiritual beings’, says Murdoch, ‘but also finite, seeking the divine in a contingent spatio-temporal world material scene.’<sup>135</sup> Citing the example of Simone Weil’s obedience to suffering as significant to understanding this aspect of the myth in a religious light, Murdoch writes that Weil ‘connects necessity with a spiritual obedience prompting purification and love.’<sup>136</sup> Weil, says Murdoch, ‘stays with the reality (the truthful experience) of suffering, affliction, *malheur*, seeing this as a kind of absolute condition capable of spiritual use.’<sup>137</sup>

We can see the world, nature and its laws, in the light of the good, and experience a purified suffering which is a *unique* form of rapture. In obedience we can see the whole cosmos in this light and take an inspired joy in *its* obedience....<sup>138</sup>

Necessity as a cosmic force is that which the philosopher, like the Demiurge, reacts against. As Eric Voegelin describes it, the ‘resistance’ to the idea has now become as eternal as the idea itself, and all that is able to counteract it is the power of the *Nous*.<sup>139</sup> As is indicated through Plato’s myth, humanity is plagued by the necessity of things, which is the fate of the world, but through the power of *nous*, through the pursuing of philosophy, necessity is persuaded (*peitho*), subjected to reason and subdued. The weightiness of the concept of Necessity is taken at a personal level within the philosopher’s life.

Realised in the philosophical life itself, the *Timaeus* depicts, generally speaking, the closeness of the divine in its immanence, but also the sense of distance and the estrangement of humanity from the cosmos as well as a general feeling of unrest which arises from the sense that the world must be explained. Murdoch writes that the image of the Demiurge is as a ‘divine artist, looking toward a perfect model,

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<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*

*paradeigmai* (the spiritual Forms, *qua* the Good), who creates out of contingent given material an imperfect copy.’<sup>140</sup> The *Timaeus* portrays the Demiurge as ‘looking away’ from the cosmos and looking to the eternal, to the Forms which are the sources of that order.<sup>141</sup> For Murdoch, Plato’s picture is one in which, ‘One might perhaps pursue the thought about the *Timaeus* by saying that the Demiurge looking at his creation is like the perfect spectator looking at the perfect tragedy.’<sup>142</sup> Murdoch continues that,

The cosmic deity seems more to express the inaccessibility of the absolutely real than its accessibility. In the early dialogues the spiritual world is so close that we seem to be God’s children. In the *Timaeus* we are his grandchildren. In the *Laws* we are his toys. Our frailty is insisted upon. We are scarcely real (like, 889c, the products of art), we are abject creatures, *ταπεινοί*, dangling from strings of pleasure and pain (*Laws* 644, 716, 902-7). In the *Phaedo* and the *Theaetetus* Plato uses images of escape to God. In the *Laws* the imagery is often of almost total separation and slavery.<sup>143</sup>

For Murdoch, Plato makes us aware of our ‘distance’ from the divine, a distance which is ingrained in the intuition of the soul and seen through the act of vision. Although in a positive sense we see the cosmic order and know philosophy (*Timaeus* 47a), in the vision of the divine one perceives distance as ‘the visual image is an image of distance and non-possession.’<sup>144</sup> To envision something is at the start to recognise that there is something other, something outside of us. Critical of Plotinus’ speaking of *union* with the One, Murdoch writes that Plato’s divine is one of distance and transcendence, not one that we have union with, or that we can hold as, ‘Plato spoke only of (perhaps) glimpsing the Form of the Good, not of presuming to touch it.’<sup>145</sup> However, the use of vision that Plato suggests brings the divine within human experience; vision and sight are sources of deep imagery, symbols of the philosophical way of life in Plato. Murdoch writes that indeed, ‘Sight is the dominant sense’ and, ‘our world, source of our deep imagery and thought-modes, is a visual world, our idea of the world is of a visual world.’<sup>146</sup> Although to envision we may always stand at a distance, it is because of vision that we are led to realise the

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<sup>139</sup> Voegelin, *Plato and Aristotle*, 202.

<sup>140</sup> Murdoch, *Metaphysics*, 107.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>143</sup> Murdoch, *Existentialists*, 439-440.

<sup>144</sup> Murdoch, *Metaphysics*, 462.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*

closeness of that which we are seeing. For Plato, the vision that brings the soul close to the divine, is the same vision that realises an utter distance with the divine.

*Immanence and Transcendence, and Union*

To understand philosophy in its religious dimension in Plato at a deeper level, we must speak of experiencing both the immanence *and* transcendence of the divine, as the philosopher encounters the divine reality of the Forms as ‘present’ and at a ‘distance’ to his life and to the world. It is ‘immanent transcendence’, to borrow George Steiner’s description of Simone Weil’s appeal to Iris Murdoch,<sup>147</sup> that is applicable to the human experience of the Forms in Plato. In the words of Steiner, it is an ‘otherwise contradictory ideal of immanent transcendence, of down-to-earth ‘rapture’ or illumination’ that draws Murdoch to her own admiration of Weil,<sup>148</sup> and it is this ideal that describes the philosophical experience of the Forms.

Through the experience of the Forms there is an expression of both the nearness and distance of the divine in the human experience. We envision, and know this act to be one of distance, but we also ‘see’ the divine Form in the particular and know the close proximity of the divine as well. In Plato, the way of the philosophical vision is one that involves both the immanence and transcendence of the divine. Yet, in Plato, we encounter the divine in the soul in the philosophical vision and come to an intimate encounter with the eternal. In his study of Plato’s Ideas, David Ross concludes that Plato uses both notions in regard to the Forms. By studying the words that Plato employs to describe the relationship between the Forms and their particulars, Ross finds that both immanence and transcendence are represented.<sup>149</sup> Ross writes,

The only conclusion possible seems to be that, while he was not quite satisfied with either expression, he saw no way of getting nearer to the truth than by using both, the one stressing the intimacy of the link between a universal and its particulars, the other stressing the failure of every particular to be a perfect exemplification of any universal. He may even have had an inkling of the fact that the relation is completely unique and indefinable.

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<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>147</sup> From George Steiner’s Foreword in Murdoch, *Existentialists*, xiv.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>149</sup> See Ross, ‘Retrospect’, in his *Plato’s Theory of Ideas*, 225 ff.

Both 'sharing' and 'imitating' are metaphors for it, and the use of two complementary metaphors is better than the sole use of either.<sup>150</sup>

In the accounts of Beauty and the Good in the *Phaedrus*, *Symposium*, and *Republic* respectively, it is both the immanence and transcendence of the Forms that enamours the philosopher. The closeness and immanence of the divine and the divine's distance and transcendence is balanced, as the immanence of the Forms leads to an encounter with the divine wherein the soul is transformed, and the Forms, existing in their transcendent and utter reality, give meaning to life as that which lies above the flux and evil of the world. As Guthrie writes, in Plato, 'the language of 'transcendence' never superseded altogether the language of 'immanence.'<sup>151</sup> In Plato then we are confronted by the mystery of the Forms which does not end the search for answers, but prompts us to regard the Forms as being both immanent and transcendent.

The nature and experience of the divine in Plato cannot be contained in logical propositions, but exceeds beyond a tight logical system to be comprehensive and embracing of opposite aspects. Plato's divine is not illogical, but beyond logic, embracing the tension of what appears to be contradictory concepts. As the Forms are both immanent and transcendent, they convey an all-inclusive concept of the divine. Cornford suggests that if we consider Platonism to be primarily a theory of the Forms, then the 'Ideas,' will turn out to belong to the mystic tradition.<sup>152</sup>

Cornford explains that,

The Idea is to be, somehow, the supersensible *ground* (ἀλ' τίνα) of the existence of sensible things which become and perish in time. In order to be so, it must impart its nature in some inexplicable way, which can only be described figuratively. It is like an original (παράδειγμα) which casts a copy (μιμήμα), or likeness (εἰκὼν), of itself into a mirror, or some other reflecting medium. The supersensible world is an immutable hierarchy of Ideas, or Types, which throws its image upon the everflowing stream of time. Or, it is a heaven of divine souls, which impart themselves to the groups of transitory things that bear their names. The whole conception is manifest mythical....<sup>153</sup>

If taken outside of the religious experience, the aspects are in conflict with one another, but if taken within the context of the religious experience that Plato provides

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<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, 231.

<sup>151</sup> Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, Vol. IV, 116-117.

<sup>152</sup> Cornford, *From Religion to Philosophy*, 242.



in his philosophy, both aspects become part of the same philosophical experience. The philosopher experiences the Forms as distant, in their glory, apart from the world, but also experiences them in the soul, in the very nearness of his being, through desiring them, loving them. As Ugo Bianchi writes, the term 'mystical' may connote three ways of the experience of the divine: one as distanced and indirect, secondly, seen in its interference at human level, or a third, the 'mysteriosophical', which is the position of Plato, which is a blending the ideas of distance and nearness together.<sup>154</sup>

It is through the philosophical *experience* that both aspects of immanence and transcendence are known and the differences between these two concepts are transgressed. The philosopher experiences the intertwining of these two ideas and not their exclusion from each other into separate realms. Interpretively, we must remember that the constructs of immanence and transcendence themselves are placed upon Plato and not derived directly from his texts. Yet, it is in the experience of the philosopher that the Forms are contemplated in their transcendence, glory, and utter reality, but simultaneously known as active in the world as unto that which the philosophical soul is drawn. Within such an experience, the Forms surround the philosopher, but are utterly distant as well. As we have seen above, both immanence and transcendence are not only represented in Plato, but are needful to human existence. The philosopher builds his or her life upon an ascension toward the Forms and away from a world which follows change and evil, but also builds it upon an ongoing encounter with the divine that is experienced shining through the everyday objects of the world. Cornford writes of Plato's Forms, that the theory is 'another attempt to succeed... in relating the one God, who is good, to a manifold and imperfect world.'<sup>155</sup> It may be that Plato's overall motive is to relate a divine to the experience of the philosopher in two ways which amalgamate immanence and transcendence, nearness and distance into one experience. As Bernard McGinn writes, philosophical contemplation in Plato can be described, 'as the way in which

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<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, 257.

<sup>154</sup> Bernard McGinn, *Foundations of Christian Mysticism* (SCM Press: London, 1992), 24.

<sup>155</sup> Cornford, *From Religion to Philosophy*, 242.

*nous*, a divine exile in the world of appearances, opinions, and time, unites the two realms through its intuitive contact with the presence of the Absolute.<sup>156</sup>

The idea of the immanence and transcendence in describing the religious philosophical experience in Plato culminates in a metaphysical view of the relation between the phenomenal and noumenal. Nicolas Berdyaev writes that,

At a certain stage in human self-consciousness, philosophy emerges out of dualistic thought, out of the distinction between the world of sense and the world of ideas, of phenomena and noumena, of appearances and things-in-themselves. Such an emergence was achieved by Plato... The philosopher discovered that the world of the sense, the phenomenal world, is not the true world, nor is it the only world.<sup>157</sup>

Because the noumenal and the phenomenal join together in Plato, he is able to give insight, for those like Murdoch, to contemporary metaphysical and theological thought as she writes,

Plato (more than any other philosopher) 'saves' metaphysics by showing how the noumenal and phenomenal exist *inside* each human life. There is nowhere else, it is all here.<sup>158</sup>

Murdoch's understanding provides a perspective which sees the immanent and transcendent, seen here in the terms of the phenomenal and noumenal, as interrelated. Yet, different to other perspectives of this same sort, Murdoch sees the need for both in humanity. The necessity of an elsewhere, as Murdoch elaborates, is not needed for the world itself becomes a place where immanence and transcendence, the intellectual and the passionate, become intertwined. Both the phenomenal and the noumenal are present at the same time within the experience of the Forms. On this front, Karl Jaspers also offers a view which incorporates a union of subject with object, and one that is similar to that suggested by both Murdoch and Berdyaev.

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<sup>156</sup> McGinn, *Foundations of Christian Mysticism*, 25-6.

<sup>157</sup> Berdyaev, *The Beginning and the End*, 7.

<sup>158</sup> Murdoch, *Metaphysics* 182. The search for that which is both subject and object is one that involves the philosophical experience. For Murdoch, the perspective that is applicable to Plato's philosophy as a religious way of life is one that does not see a divine world existing apart, but one that sees the Forms as interactive within the world at large – in her words, 'there is no Platonic 'elsewhere', similar to the Christian 'elsewhere.' (*Metaphysics*, 399) What Murdoch insists is that we must imagine the Forms as not dwelling in some other world totally apart from our own, but as that part of the world which is true reality. In one respect, Murdoch attempts to demythologise Plato by establishing the Forms as part of the world and not in some heavenly realm. Within such an understanding we are given a modern interpretation of the 'place' of the Forms. The heavenly realm of the Forms, as it were, is one which exists beyond that which is seen, and not in some 'other' world. Their transcendence is an idea of ontology rather than physicality. One can then still speak of the Forms as 'above' or 'beyond' the sensible objects.

Jaspers writes that, ‘Ours is not an ontological search for a world of objective definitions, but a periechontological one for the source of subject and object, for their relations and interrelations.’<sup>159</sup> The philosophical search is for that which is both subject and object, and one which incorporates both subject and object in itself.<sup>160</sup>

The experience of the immanence and transcendence of the Forms and the experience of the phenomenal and noumenal elicits a further aspect which involves the soul’s desire for union with this divine that is both seen within the world and known in its transcendence. Gerard Watson writes that this ‘immortal union of the soul with God’ is what Plato is primarily concerned with and that it is ‘fundamental to his philosophy.’<sup>161</sup> Such a desire for union with the divine is brought about because the soul is related to the divine in its nature. Watson writes that throughout Plato’s writing, from the *Apology* through the *Laws*, one thing remains constant in Plato: that ‘it is through the soul that we are related to the divine.’<sup>162</sup> For Plato, the soul is akin to that divine that it seeks and desires through the philosophical life. As in the *Phaedo*, the soul is most like the divine, ‘deathless, intelligible, uniform indissoluble, always the same as itself’, whereas the body is most like the ‘human’: ‘mortal, multiform, unintelligible, soluble and never consistently the same.’ (80b)<sup>163</sup> At death (literally as well as metaphorically in the practice of the philosophical life) the soul, the ‘invisible part’, goes to a ‘place that is, like itself, glorious, pure, and invisible... into the presence of the good and wise God...’ (80d) As ‘like is drawn to like’ (cf. *Laws* 837a) so the soul naturally possesses a passionate desire to be with the divine to which it is most akin. Thus, the philosophical contemplation of the soul upon the divine is not simply intellectual, but one which involves the emotions as well, joining the intellectual with the passionate – the entirety of humanity, involved

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<sup>159</sup> John Macquarrie, *Existentialism* (London: Hutchinson, 1972), 192. Jaspers metaphysical notion of that which is ‘periechontological’ comes close conceptually to an idea of a One and a unity behind all things in which distinctions of distance and being such as subject and object are unified. Jaspers understands that the ‘ever-present’ subject-object dichotomy between that which is perceived and that which perceives is broken down in his notion of the all-encompassing term of the Comprehensive: ‘What is the meaning of this ever-present subject-object dichotomy? It can only mean that being as a whole is neither subject nor object but must be the Comprehensive, which is manifested in this dichotomy.’<sup>159</sup> See Jaspers, *Way to Wisdom*, 30.

<sup>160</sup> As John Macquarrie describes it, an encompassing of both subject and object.. Macquarrie, *Existentialism* (London: Hutchinson, 1972), 192.

<sup>161</sup> Watson, *Greek Philosophy*, 28.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>163</sup> Grube’s translation in Cooper, *Plato: Complete Works* .

in the process. As McGinn notes, 'while beatitude for Plato is essentially a cognitive state, because the Good that is grasped in the act of contemplation is identified with the Beautiful that is the goal of *eros*, contemplation also produces loving joy in the soul.'<sup>164</sup> Employing Festugière, McGinn continues that, 'the seeing involved in Plato's contemplation is not a defining, but is based on 'an immediate union... of a mystical order' in which both knowledge and love play complementary roles in attaining an intuitive contact with the presence of true Being.'<sup>165</sup> René Arnou further explains,

Platonic contemplation appears as a sudden and immediate vision of true Being, or, if one ascends as far as possible on the scale of values, a union with the Supreme Good, a mysterious union which is not just the vision of an object by a subject, but the taking possession of the subject by a superior reality in such a way that the love that responds to the attraction of the Beautiful and the Good enjoys a role just as necessary as the intelligence which gazes.<sup>166</sup>

Such a union with the divine is, in the deepest sense, personally involving for the soul. But still, even in light of such a consideration, although the soul seeks a union with the divine that involves itself personally, the divine as a 'personal' being is not particularly expressed in Plato. Plato indeed speaks of a personal God as in the strong case in the *Apology*,<sup>167</sup> but also of the relationship and union with the Forms which are impersonal in their nature but spoken of in personal terms. Bernard McGinn illumines this idea of that the 'Beautiful-Good' is not personal 'in the sense in which later monotheistic mystics strive for union with the God of revelation, but Plato's description of the unitive vision with the Beautiful-Good is not totally impersonal either.'<sup>168</sup> As McGinn goes on to say,

The fact that Plato describes the Form that takes possession of the lover as a god, or at least as divine, certainly left the door open for personalized readings that may go beyond but that are not necessarily contrary to his descriptions of that indescribable supreme moment.<sup>169</sup>

Gerard Watson writes that Plato is shaped by two traditions: one, the personal, and sometimes 'all too human' Greek religion,<sup>170</sup> and the tradition of the philosophical

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<sup>164</sup> McGinn, *Christian Mysticism*, 27.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*, 27-8.

<sup>167</sup> See especially Mark McPherran's, *The Religion of Socrates*.

<sup>168</sup> McGinn, *Christian Mysticism*, 27.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>170</sup> Watson, *Greek Philosophy*, 24.

schools emphasising the conceptual and impersonal, but, says Watson, 'Plato combines and blends both these traditions'<sup>171</sup> Here we find again the 'both-and' aspect of Plato's philosophical theology in which the philosophical experience is *both* personal and impersonal: the divine which is beyond a personal being is portrayed in images as being personally known, and humanity, always personal, is united with that which is beyond any description of personality. Thus, such a union is described in terms which include both personal and impersonal ideas, but a union with that which is part of the very fabric of the soul.

The union for which Plato's philosophy strives is not only deeply personal, it is also one that is cosmic in its nature as well. As the soul desires that which is above the world and transcendent, it is also a union with a divine which is known in the cosmos itself. As André-Jean Festugière writes, in one aspect of his quest for unity, Plato desires a union with 'the God of the world' a God who is 'cosmic'.<sup>172</sup> For Plato, the union with this immanent divine, this 'cosmic God', is one which is facilitated and secured in a certain way of life and existence for the philosopher which involves the imitation of the divine in an ethical life. One is not only to understand the cosmic as a manifestation of the divine, but to contemplate that order and bring it to bear upon one's way of life. In the *Republic* (500c) Socrates says to Adeimantus that,

the man whose mind is truly fixed on eternal realities has no leisure to turn his eyes downward upon the petty affairs of men, and so engaging in strife with them to be filled with envy and hate, but he fixes his gaze upon the things of the eternal and unchanging order, and seeing that they neither wrong nor are wronged by one another, but all abide in harmony as reason bids, he will endeavor to imitate them and, as far as may be, to fashion himself in their likeness and assimilate himself to them... Then the lover of wisdom associating with the divine order will himself become orderly and divine in the measure permitted to man.

In contrast to the man of the world, the philosopher has no time for living within strife, envy, or hate, but is witness to a universe that exhibits harmony and order which he or she imitates. As Timaeus declares, 'If a man has become absorbed in his appetites or his ambitions and takes great pains to further them, all his thoughts

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<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>172</sup> From Festugière, *Personal Religion*, 46. See also, Bernard McGinn, *Foundations of Christian Mysticism*, 26.



are bound to become merely mortal,' (*Timaeus* 90b)<sup>173</sup> however, if he contemplates the cosmic order, 'then there is absolutely no way that his thoughts can fail to be immortal and divine.' (*Timaeus* 90b-c) According to Timaeus, to seek to live one's life according to the order of the cosmos is to bring oneself into harmony with the cosmos, and to bring oneself in line with the true inclination of one's own soul, but to live one's life simply for mortal gain ends up within the same chaos of the world's system, out of union with the cosmos and the essence of harmony and justice and out of union with himself. (*Timaeus* 90c-d) The cosmic order manifested outside of the soul, and the order which is within the soul, are of the same 'substance'; the soul is a microcosm of the cosmic order. As in the *Timaeus*, the union of the soul with the cosmic order is a familial relationship for,

there is a kinship between them (the orbits of intelligence in the universe), even though our revolutions are disturbed, whereas the universal orbits are undisturbed. So once we have come to know them and to share in the ability to make correct calculations according to nature, we should stabilize the straying revolutions within ourselves by imitating the completely unstraying revolutions of the god. (47c)

The divine which is manifest in the cosmic order is what the philosopher imitates, and through that imitation is brought into relationship, even union, with the divine. Simone Weil writes that, there is a lesson we can learn from the *Timaeus* in that,

this world, at the same time as it is the mirror of this Love which is God himself, is also the model we must imitate. For we also have originally been, and must again become, images of God.<sup>174</sup>

Such an imitation is a way of union with the divine that gives to human existence the sense of wholeness that it desires. As George Thomas notes, 'unlike many modern existentialist, however, Plato is convinced that man can attain authentic existence only by conforming his character and conduct to the structure and purpose of the cosmos of which he is a part.'<sup>175</sup> The cosmos is then a source for worshipping the divine, a point where the divine is known, but it is also a point where the soul joins to the divine knowing the wholeness and peace for which it searches. From the *Timaeus* as well as the *Laws*, André-Jean Festugière writes that the relationship

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<sup>173</sup> Donald J. Zeyl's translation in Cooper, *Plato: Complete Works*.

<sup>174</sup> Weil, *Intimations*, 103.

<sup>175</sup> George Thomas, *Religious Philosophies of the West* (Charles Scribner's Sons: New York, 1965), 9.

achieved with the divine is one characterised as *assimilation* to God through the action of becoming like God:

Since these movements are regular, and since all autonomous motion implies the presence of a soul... Since the human soul... comes from the heavenly bodies, it is related to them, and its function in the human body is to impose upon the body an order similar to that of the heavens... since this World-Soul is God, since the World is a god, and since the heavenly bodies are gods, to establish within oneself an order like that of the heavens is to assimilate oneself to God. Thus Plato, ever faithful to the principle of ὁμοίωσις θεῶν – becoming, or being made, like God, – simply enriched this precept here with a new meaning and with moral and spiritual possibilities hitherto unsuspected.<sup>176</sup>

But yet, such a union is one which is humbly received and understood. Iris Murdoch writes that there is still distance and difference between ourselves and the divine and it is in that humility that we live. She writes that,

We were never told to ‘copy’ the Forms by producing something else, but only to become able to see them and thus in a sense to become like them. In the *Timaeus* myth they are more remote from us, seen by God and by him creatively transformed into another medium. Our humbler task, as part of creation, is to understand the Forms through the cosmic intelligence which is akin to our own.<sup>177</sup>

Even with such a provocative theology, some wish to dispense altogether with any relevance of such an ethic that is based upon a perceived cosmic order. Don Cupitt rejects all correspondence between the soul and the cosmos, as a continuation of ‘Bronze Age thought’, as he comments:

They (Plato and other Greek philosophers) want things to run like clockwork, law-abiding, benign and harmonious at all levels: so that Plato will readily argue that just as in a well-governed state everything *would* be done in obedience to wise and benevolent laws, so at the cosmic level that is surely how everything actually *does* happen – and therefore, of course, *ought* to happen in the state and, uh, in our own souls too. He argues from a conditional *ought* here below, to an actual *is* above; and thence back down to substantive *oughts* here below again. Because we want law and order on earth, we know it must already exist in the heavens and *therefore* must also be brought into effect down here on earth.<sup>178</sup>

The point that Cupitt ridicules in Plato is a point based upon a misreading of Plato in two ideas: one is that Plato has a bottom-up ethic in the philosophical life, and secondly, which is indirectly suggested, is that Plato is out of touch with reality as we

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<sup>176</sup> Festugière, *Personal Religion*, 105.

<sup>177</sup> Murdoch, *Existentialists*, 436.

know it. Technically, against Cupitt, Plato does not attempt to establish a way of the philosophical life and the way humanity 'ought' to be and then place that upon what actually 'is' in the divine. Plato's is a directly opposite understanding in that that which 'is' and manifest in the cosmos is that which we 'ought' to be. For Plato, as stated in the *Timaeus*, it is because of the order beheld in the cosmos, that humanity has the model it is to follow in life. Plato's is not a means of transposing human order on the cosmos, but the cosmic order on humanity. But the valid point is that humanity is brought into harmony with the cosmic, with all things, and is not rebellious in its evil. Plato and the other Greek philosophers understand the depth of human existence as a whole, its aspirations and its dilemmas, and are not simply and naively wishing for some weak ordered society but are grappling with the quest for wisdom within the human dilemma. As Murdoch points out, Plato's position is not naïve, as Cupitt seems to indicate, but is a struggle with the longing for harmony in his soul in contrast to what he faces in existence. For Murdoch, Plato is not given over to seeing a 'fundamental natural rhythm (as in the strife of opposites) which unites the aspirations of the human soul to a harmonious background in the flux of nature....,' but he rejects this perceived harmony, relating 'these spiritual aspirations to our evident existence as accidental beings in an accidental world....'<sup>179</sup> The striving of bring oneself into line with the divine manifest in the cosmos is an attempt to bring the soul into union with the divine wherein is found the remedy for the evil that the soul faces. Reflectively, it is Cupitt's understanding that draws us away from the world and not toward it. In Cupitt's perspective we do not face reality in Plato, for we must reject any sense of the eternal altogether. In this Cupitt throws away human intuition toward the eternal which Plato realised. Plato realises that the unity with the divinely ordered cosmos was an acknowledgement of reality and not its disparagement. Plato's philosophical theology is provocative in that it recognises our tendency to see humanity as not simply a coalescing of accidents, but that there is an intuition of the soul toward an ordered cosmos, and taking that appreciation one

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<sup>178</sup> Cupitt, *AfterGod*, 38.

<sup>179</sup> Murdoch, *Metaphysics*, 144. Even in Presocratic philosophy, human existence is addressed in light of attempting to engage with a perceived discord: in Empedocles as he strives for union in his Love and Strife, and even in Heraclitus when he speaks of a God comprised of cosmic opposites.

step further, seeing that the contemplation of this order is needful to human existence.

What is recognised through the ideas of immanence and transcendence, and the union with the divine, is the notion of the human experience of the divine in existence. For Plato, the divine is ever close but ever distant and it is through philosophy that the soul secures this understanding. But it is an understanding that is crucial in conceiving human existence and what is, for Plato, a fulfilment of the need for meaning in humanity. In Plato's philosophical theology, philosophy is the means of returning to the divine, and living life in light of that which is truly reality. As much as it is an outward turning of the soul toward a divine known in its immanence and transcendence, it is also a turning inward of the soul to itself. For Plato, the divine reality to which philosophy strives is that which not only lies external to the philosophical life, it is also that reality which is known acutely within the soul.

#### The Religious Experience of *Anamnesis* and the Way of Return

The doctrine of *anamnesis*, the recollection of the soul, plays a significant role in the religious dimension of Plato's philosophy, and in particular, in understanding the soul's relationship and union with the divine. The doctrine of *anamnesis* centres upon the a *return* to the divine through the memory of the Forms that is latent within the soul. In the words of Simone Weil, *anamnesis* is 'an orientation of the soul toward something which one does not know, but whose *reality* one does know.'<sup>180</sup> In its religious dimension, *anamnesis* represents an aspect of the soul's relationship to the divine in that it is a knowledge of the divine which the soul already knows through looking inward upon itself, and is an aspiration of the soul returning back to a relationship with the divine which it once enjoyed.

For Plato, philosophical knowledge is within the soul, and is rediscovered when the soul looks inward upon itself. To understand *anamnesis* one must consider the *Meno* which, according to Murdoch, offers the best commentary on *anamnesis* when the slave boy's answering of mathematical questions is used by Socrates to prove that the boy had the answer within him. So profoundly regarded is *anamnesis* within the *Meno*, that 'there is indeed no limit to the power of remembering since

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<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*, 505.

‘all nature is akin and the soul has learnt everything,’ (*Meno* 81d) and ‘nothing prevents a man, after recalling one thing only – a process men call learning – discovering everything else for himself, if he is brave and does not tire of the search, for searching and learning are, as a whole, recollection.’ (*Meno* 81d) To Plato, learning is not an importation of knowledge but a matter of recollecting knowledge and drawing out the eternal truths that are already within the soul. (*Phaedo* 72e; 91e) As Socrates says in the *Phaedo*,

we acquired this knowledge before birth, then lost it at birth, and then later by the use of our senses in connection with those objects we mentioned, we recovered the knowledge we had before, would not what we call learning be the recovery of our own knowledge, and we are right to call this recollection [ἀναμνησκεισθαί]? (*Phaedo* 75e)

As Socrates observes, relying on an idea of the pre-existence of the soul, an infant seems to forget about the knowledge it had before it was born, and must be reminded of that which it knew. As Murdoch writes, the soul, existing before being born in a body, becomes ‘confused by ordinary sense perception, but can gain some refreshment from the contemplation of eternal objects to which it is akin and which it feels prompted to rediscover.’<sup>181</sup> For Plato, the knowledge needed in the soul is not one that is imported into it, as from the outside, but is latent in the soul waiting to be reawakened. As Kierkegaard describes it,

One who is ignorant needs only a reminder to help him come to himself in the consciousness of what he knows. Thus the Truth is not introduced into the individual from without, but was within him.<sup>182</sup>

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<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*, 406.

<sup>182</sup> Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 1974), 11-12. Kierkegaard argues between the Teacher (Christ) and Socrates. The doctrine of Plato’s *anamnesis* has no place for Kierkegaard in Christian thought because, Niels Thustrup writes, the ‘highest truth, saving truth, comes to human being from the outside.’ (xcii) Though it is far from my purpose here to compare Platonic theology with Christian theology, it must be said that Kierkegaard’s basis of his whole argument is faulty in that he strikes too much of a dichotomy between having or not having truth instead of seeing that *anamnesis* in Plato is about recollecting that memory which is latent in the soul, and does not warrant that no more understanding is ever to be had. In effect, Kierkegaard adopts Meno’s position in that how does one know truth or search for it, if one does not know what it is, or if one knows it, why does one search. (*Meno* 80ff) The answer to the dilemma is that truth is a quality and a quantity in that one can have a greater degree of truth or lesser. To Plato *anamnesis* is the process whereby one recollects, or gets in touch with the latent ideas and truths in the soul that were there before the soul was born. *Anamnesis* is not constituted by an either-or for Plato as it is for Kierkegaard, but is a state of beginning to learn the fullness of the divine. In the end, Kierkegaard is too protective of Christian thought to be helpful for in his defense of Christianity he misses the true point of Plato’s *anamnesis*.



As Kierkegaard goes on to point out, recollection, receiving further development by Socrates, ‘ultimately becomes the point of concentration for the pathos of the Greek consciousness, since it serves as a proof for the immortality of the soul; but with a backward reference, it is important to note, and hence as proof for the soul’s preëxistence.’<sup>183</sup>

If the *Meno* speaks of the more rational side of *anamnesis* in what learning and knowledge are, the myth of the *Phaedrus* depicts the more passionate side of *anamnesis* in that it is the return of the soul back to a relationship with the divine. In the myth, the human soul had its pre-existence in a world beholding the ‘blessed and spectacular vision’ of the divine as it was initiated into the ‘most blessed’ mystery, ‘gazing upon the ‘perfect, and simple, and unshakeable and blissful. (*Phaedrus* 250c)<sup>184</sup> But yet the soul turned away from this contemplation of ‘true being (τὰ ὄντα)’ (*Phaedrus* 250a) and fell to earth entering into the human body. Because of this origin of the soul, the soul longs to return to that divine vision that it once beheld. When the philosopher beholds an image of the divine Beauty he is filled with longing for that which his soul once beheld. (*Phaedrus* 250d ff.) Such a desire moves us in an ‘anamnesic reversion of thought from the sensible to its intelligible ground.’<sup>185</sup> Bernard McGinn comments that in Plato’s myth, although all souls receive their wings back eventually, the philosopher has a shortcut to this goal because he can remember when his soul ‘rose up into real being.’<sup>186</sup> McGinn continues that in humanity’s fallen (and forgetful) condition, ‘it is beauty entering in by means of sight....that begins the philosopher’s return.’<sup>187</sup>

The evocative theological issue found in the experience of *anamnesis* is that it is, for Plato, a universal experience of humanity, a ‘collective consciousness’, wherein the divine is remembered within the soul. Murdoch describes *anamnesis* as an idea based upon the ‘unconscious knowledge’ latent within the soul that goes ‘very far back in Plato’, adopted from the Pythagoreans who considered the soul as

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<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*, 11-12.

<sup>184</sup> Plato’s reference is to the notion of communion that is found in the ancient mysteries. The mystery religions sought first and foremost a communion with the god.

<sup>185</sup> Werner Beierwaltes, ‘The Love of Beauty and the Love of God’, *Classical Mediterranean Spirituality*, 298.

<sup>186</sup> McGinn, *Foundations of Christian Mysticism*, 28.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

imprisoned in the body (*Phaedo* 62b).<sup>188</sup> As Murdoch notes even the Muses are the daughters of Memory.<sup>189</sup> What is represented in *anamnesis* is a knowledge that is at times more than we can understand or fathom for ‘the human mind is potentially connected with an obscure elsewhere.’<sup>190</sup>

In one aspect *anamnesis* involves the soul turning within itself and realising the memory that lies deep within. Karl Barth, though of course standing at a totally different theological juncture to Plato, gives a perspective on *anamnesis* when he writes that, ‘Recollection means inwardness, *Verinnerlichung* – ‘man’s return from the distractions of the outside world and reentry into himself to find God there.’<sup>191</sup> To recollect in Plato is to come back into the soul and remember, as in the doctrine of ‘knowing thyself’ becomes a matter of turning inward, in order to find wisdom. The idea of recollection is an inward turning of the soul back upon itself in order to find the latent truth which is already present within it. Through this ‘inward turning’, one finds the eternal truth already inside the soul.

The religious nature of *anamnesis* is considered by Murdoch who calls it, a ‘spiritual memory’, as it belongs to the individual who remembers and recollects the vision of the Forms when the soul beheld them ‘face to face’ before its coming into the body.<sup>192</sup> As a ‘spiritual memory’, the example of the *Meno* is as much a religious understanding as is the *Phaedo* or the *Phaedrus* as it is based upon an understanding of the soul’s previous encounter with the divine. Gadamer however writes that here is no proof here of any religious attachment,<sup>193</sup> no reference to the soul’s pre-existence as it is seen in other myths. (*Phaedrus*, *Phaedo*) Yet, Gadamer misses a valid point in his quickness to remove the attachment of religious nature to *anamnesis* as it is depicted even in the *Meno*. To posit the point that this is not at all part of religious thought on Plato’s part is to overlook a vital understanding of *anamnesis*. For Plato, the recollection is part of the soul, a link with the divine, and because of Plato’s philosophy is a return to the divine, involves a deeply religious

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<sup>188</sup> Murdoch, *Existentialists*, 407.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>191</sup> Fergus Kerr, *Immortal Longings: Visions of Transcending Humanity* (SPCK: London, 1997), 25.

<sup>192</sup> Murdoch, *Metaphysics*, 23. In considering modern psycho-analytical theory, Murdoch writes that, ‘Freud, who says that his ‘libido’ coincides *exactly* with Plato’s Eros, does not, so far as I know, discuss Plato’s *anamnesis*, the ancestor, as one would imagine, of the Freudian concept of the unconscious, as well as of Jung’s archetypal folk memory.’ (*Metaphysics*, 23)

implication as well. *Anamnesis* is never divorced from the deep pondering of the soul, the link of the soul with its pre-existent state. If we see *anamnesis* in light of being part of the depth of the *psyche*, then the deep spiritual nuance becomes clearly visible. As can be seen above, *anamnesis* is tied completely in Plato's mind with a returning toward the divine and plays a significant role in the soul's encounter with the divine. Erik Davis gives the insightful remark that in Plato is the 'simultaneous embrace of rational thought and mysticism' which 'underscores... that the works of reason cannot be so easily riven from more otherworldly pursuits.'<sup>194</sup> The religious nature of philosophy is always present in Plato simply for the fact that the two cannot be extracted one from the other. As that philosophy and a religious way of life is linked, so also is knowledge to the soul, and the way of the *Meno* is to bring about that which will lead the slave boy to philosophy, or better, the transformation of his soul.

Exhibited in the doctrine of *anamnesis* is a deep and indelible relationship between the soul and the divine which the soul remembers and to which the soul longs to return. *Anamnesis* suggests that the Forms are part of the *psyche* itself, existing in their fullness beyond, but are within the soul in its memory. *Anamnesis* is an illumination of the soul which perceives the Forms as permeating all facets of existence. The one who realises the memory of the Forms within the soul sees the Forms as being present within the soul as well as being that reality which is manifest in the world. As Iris Murdoch puts it, in *anamnesis* the world of the Forms is 'rediscovered.'<sup>195</sup> (*Phaedo* 75e) In Plato's doctrine the memory of the Forms is emblazoned upon the soul due to the soul's pre-existence with the divine, which is a relationship and passion stronger than any ties with the passions of the body which are part of the ever changing, undependable reality.

As part of the soul's memory, *anamnesis* occupies a place of knowing and not knowing, of possessing a deep knowledge of the divine but not recalling that knowledge right off, but having to be reminded of it and to recollect it. Christopher

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<sup>193</sup> Gadamer, *Idea of the Good*, 53

<sup>194</sup> Erik Davis, *Techgnosis: myth, magic, and mysticism in the age of information* (Harmony Books: New York, 1998), 28.

<sup>195</sup> Iris Murdoch, *Existentialists*, 407.

Smith, notes that Gadamer sees this position of humanity in Plato, which for him illumines the ‘both-and’ nature of Plato’s idea:

human beings never have insights that are fully clear and distinct, but only partial insights within persistent obscurity. Thus any *aletheia*, or truth, that they know is embedded in *lethe*, or forgetfulness. This concomitance of knowing and not-knowing (which Heidegger would call, *Gleichursprünglichkeit*) has far-reaching consequences. For one thing, it renders the project of Cartesian methodology incapable of execution: since there is no certain starting point, no certain conclusions can be drawn. For another, it makes systematic unity and conclusiveness unachievable: we always find ourselves *in media res* – under way in the middle of things whose beginning and end are beyond the horizons of our knowing...Consequently, our inquiry will remain inconclusive (*unabschliessbar*).<sup>196</sup>

Although Gadamer’s words show the human predicament that is implicit within Plato’s doctrine, his conclusion that because *anamnesis* is a ‘not-knowing’ means that nothing conclusive can ever be reached is taking Plato’s thought too far. Contrary to Gadamer, Plato sees *anamnesis* as the remembrance of a certainty of knowledge, and it is only the unphilosophical life which is ‘embedded in forgetfulness’ and not all of human life as Gadamer indicates. For Plato, the certainty of the Beautiful and the Good establishes that something is known, but is known in a process of realising deeper and deeper truths about that divine that we are drawn to, as Socrates says, we move from one thing to another ‘recalling’ – what men call ‘learning’ – recollecting various things gradually. (*Meno* 81d) Recollection makes the philosopher ‘energetic and keen on the search,’ (*Meno* 81e) not removing it to uncertainty and ignorance.

Even though it is the inward realisation of that which is certain, the recollection is not one of face-to-face encounter but a memory, a drawing, a desire to see the divine once again. Humanity is thus in a place of movement, remembering but wishing to see face to face, recollecting but not fully realising. Thus philosophy itself for Plato is a way for a middle existence, between a divine existence that was our possession but which was lost (*Phaedrus* 250a) which we now remember, and to which we are attempting to return. Through its recollection, then, the soul is returning to the divine whence it came. Thus, it is a *re-collection*, a recapturing of that which, though not lost, is latent. Jackson Hershbell suggests that it is possible

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<sup>196</sup> Gadamer, *Idea of the Good*, 55.

that Plato's dialogues themselves, 'were designed to 'remind' a reader of what was already known, to actualize latent knowledge...'<sup>197</sup>. *Anamnesis* is then, as a way of returning to the divine, is salvific for the soul.

Through *anamnesis* and the soul's return to the divine, we do not stand outside of the Forms as objects, but, in an existentialistic sense, are inextricably involved in the divine which we perceive. Through *anamnesis* the subject and object barriers are taken away, and the divine which is known in the soul is also that which has eternal reality. Hubert Dreyfus in an interview with Bryan Magee describing the work of Martin Heidegger gives a comment which is applicable in this context of Plato's *anamnesis*:

We are not detached from some external reality which is 'out there', trying to gain knowledge of it as something categorically different from ourselves, and trying to relate to it. On the contrary, we are part and parcel of it all, and from the very beginning we are in amongst it all, being in it, coping with it. In consequence we are not in any primary sense 'observing subjects' or 'knowing beings' in the way traditional philosophers have regarded us... We are beings in amongst and inseparable from a world of being, existences in an existing world....<sup>198</sup>

In relation to the Forms, we are directly involved with them, and in fact, find our reality and our happiness in the knowledge of them. The barriers of subject to object, and even Form to perceiver are broken down through *anamnesis* to the point that the philosopher is involved directly with the divine. In the doctrine of *anamnesis* it may be said that we become aware of our own being as well, acutely aware of our participation in the divine. Some suggest, however, that such a close relation with the divine involves the loss of personality,<sup>199</sup> that we are swallowed into the divine, into the divinity of the Forms. However, as Paul Elmer More writes,

Instead of looking forward to a future life of empty contemplation divested of memory, Plato regards memory as one of the chief proofs of immortality; instead of idealizing a state of being without self-consciousness, the highest aim of his philosophy is that a man should come to know himself. To say that 'Plato's philosophy in no way involves the duration of the individual' is to turn page after page of his writings into mere trifling.<sup>200</sup>

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<sup>197</sup> Jackson Hershbell, 'Orality and Literacy of Plato's Dialogues', *The Third Way: New Directions in Platonic Studies*, Francisco J. Gonzalez, ed. (Rowan and Littlefield Publishers, Inc.: Lanham, Maryland, 1995), 38.

<sup>198</sup> Bryan Magee, *The Great Philosophers* (Oxford University Press: 1987), 258.

<sup>199</sup> See Nussbaum's comments in Kerr's, *Immortal Longings*, 3.

<sup>200</sup> Paul Elmer More, *The Religion of Plato* (Princeton University Press, 1921), 72.



Through the centrality of *anamnesis* in Plato, we see that philosophy itself is a way of *return* for Plato – a return to the divine and, for Plato, to what it is to be truly human. The entirety of Plato’s thought can be considered as a philosophy of return and as *anamnesis* as a way of recollection a path toward that return. Even the memory, the vision, and the philosophical life, is an idea of Plato that is the notion of returning. In the genre of the *Phaedo*, Socrates is returning to his true home, which is not a part of the changing world. The world of the philosopher lies not in that which is sensually known, but in a memory of the soul, and thus, the life lived is simply, a passing through, a going back to one’s origin. We may add that existentially, the soul wanders looking for its home, and through *anamnesis* is constantly reminded of where it came from and that eternal reality to which it longs to return. In Plato then one remembers to live – the memory of the soul for Plato is a means of participating in the eternal. The theme of return is played out in an interesting correlation by Macquarrie who links Plato to existential thought through Heidegger’s concept of ‘thrownness’ (*Geworfenheit*). For Macquarrie we are never fully in control of our situation, for even though we can choose between various possibilities in our lives, we are still bound by the ‘facticity’ of our existence – that which we are not in control of and it is Plato who reminds him of this idea.<sup>201</sup> As Macquarrie writes, the *Republic* (618 ff.) shows that,

Plato was aware of this problem, and in the myth which he tells of pre-existent souls choosing their lots before they enter the world, sought to reconcile the elements of freedom and facticity in human existence. The point is that I never begin from scratch, so to speak, I am always already thrown into a situation, given over to my being.<sup>202</sup>

It is thus the idea of *returning* to the divine from which humanity has fallen, to which the philosopher longs to go back, which causes the unrest within the soul that philosophy satisfies. Plato’s philosophy is a return to the Forms, and the philosopher one who comes back to that from which he or she has fallen, ‘a fall from being’ as Eric Voegelin puts it,<sup>203</sup> that causes anxiety of being cast away and the way of philosophy is a journey back the divine – a returning to the divine that is a way of salvation.

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<sup>201</sup> John Macquarrie, *An Existential Theology: A Comparison of Heidegger and Bultmann* (Greenwood Press: West Port, Connecticut, 1979), 83.

<sup>202</sup> *Ibid.*

## Conclusion

The conclusion to be drawn is that in Plato, the philosopher's experience of the divine is one of religious encounter that involves the depth of human experience. The Forms in Plato are seen to be both immanent *and* transcendent, and the philosopher's experience of the Forms to be both near *and* distant. Plato's is a philosophical theology best characterised as '*both-and*' rather than either-or where the Forms, though occupying the divine realm outside of the force of the flux of the world, are known deeply within the human soul. What is established in Plato is that the encounter with the divine in the Forms is one that is a religious experience, one in which the philosopher encounters that which is ultimate reality, but that which is known deeply within the soul. The religious encounter of the Forms is one which is not only a perception of place, as of *where* they are, but is also a question of *meaning*, as the perception of the Forms transform human existence. Plato's is an inward turning of the soul to contemplate, literally, to remember the Forms, and an outward turning to perceive the Forms within the world which affects life and existence as a whole.

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<sup>203</sup> Voegelin, *Plato and Aristotle*, 70. Cf. *Phaedrus* 250a.

**CHAPTER FOUR:**  
**THE PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP WITH THE DIVINE:**  
**THE FORMS AND A GOD OF MANY NAMES**

The point to which philosophy as a religious experience moves in Plato is toward a personal relationship with the divine in the experience of the Forms and in the concept of God. As we have seen, Plato's philosophy is a religious encounter with the divine, yet the philosophical experience for Plato is one which is a personal relationship with the divine that is contemplated. In this chapter I wish to argue that the divine possesses in Plato a personal appeal in humanity's relationship to the Forms, and in that Plato conceives of a personal God who is linked to the life of philosophy. This experience leads to an understanding of the relationship between God and the Forms, exemplified in the question of the Good, and one that culminates in an experience of a God of many names and in the experience of an impersonal Divine that is beyond the traditional concept of a personal God. All of these views express an interpretation of Plato's philosophical theology that is insightful for contemporary thought.

The Philosopher's Relationship to the Forms

The vision of the divine in Plato is a religious experience that involves the philosopher's entire being. In the case of the Forms, the relationship the philosopher feels to the Form is one of personal involvement and devotion, where his or her life is given to that which is eternal: contemplating it, speaking or writing about it, living in its light, or dying for it if need be. It is in this interaction and personal relationship with the divine wherein, for Plato, is found wisdom. Such an interaction and relationship is one in which, as Gerard Watson writes, the Forms become 'personalised' as, 'Plato represents them as exercising an attraction and taking on a quasi-personal appeal' for the philosopher.<sup>1</sup> As Murdoch comments, the Forms in Plato are 'essentially objects of love.'<sup>2</sup> However, for Murdoch, the Forms exist in their eternity without reference to

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<sup>1</sup> Watson, *Greek Philosophy*, 25.

<sup>2</sup> Murdoch, *Metaphysics*, 144.

humanity and are portrayed in Plato as ‘separate and unresponsive.’<sup>3</sup> The personal devotion of the seeker of wisdom is one-sided, for Murdoch, as the Forms only have appeal but do not act. Yet, it can be shown that Plato conveys the Forms to be more than ‘objects’ which take on, in the words of Watson, a ‘quasi-personal’ nature in themselves, as visions of the divine with which the philosopher seeks to be in relationship.

In Plato, the philosopher’s devotion to the Forms is one based upon a vision of the Ideas that are described in deeply religious, even ‘personal’ terms. In the *Symposium* (211b) Diotima describes the vision of Beauty as an,

everlasting loveliness which neither comes nor goes, which neither flowers nor fades, for such beauty is the same on every hand, the same then as now, here as there, this way as that way, the same to every worshipper as it is to every other... Subsisting of itself and by itself in an eternal oneness, while every lovely thing partakes of it in such sort that, however much the parts may wax and wane, it will be neither more nor less, but still the same inviolable whole. (*Symposium* 211a-b)<sup>4</sup>

Such language conveys that which is very intimate, a vision of an entity and not simply an ‘object’. Likewise the vision of the Good in the *Republic* (509a) is one which Plato intends for the reader to envision and be captured thereby. The Good is said to ‘furnish’ the ability of things to be seen and is that which is fairer to look upon than even knowledge or truth as it is an inconceivable beauty that ‘gives’ (παρέχον) to the world, by its ‘presence’ (παρεῖναι), knowledge, truth, and existence. (509b) As can be seen by such wording, the Forms are much more than simple objects, but are that with which the philosopher becomes personally involved with in the philosophical vision.

Plato’s philosophy as the experience of, and love for the Forms, and the Forms’ interaction with the world, leads one to see that adopting a perspective of the Forms as lacking a personal aspect is too simplistic, for it is one that fails to see the personal nature that is involved in the way that the Forms are conceived in their interaction with life. However, to describe the Forms as ‘personal’ is to go beyond Plato’s conception completely and add things on to the text. In Plato, the divine is portrayed as both personal and impersonal, to the place that the impersonal idea takes on personal

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<sup>3</sup> Murdoch, *Metaphysics*, 144.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted from Gerard Watson, *Greek Philosophy*, 25.

characteristics, or a *personal impersonality*. The divine possesses, for Plato, a *subjective* and personal appeal for the philosopher, but also an *objective* and impersonal nature in and of itself. Yet, such distinctions of ‘personal’ and ‘impersonal’ are too easy to apply to Plato for it is the philosophical experience that is the point of focus in his philosophical theology. As the individual is seen to be personally involved in the divine in seeking the philosophical life, one cannot really make such a distinction between a subjective or objective nature in the divine or simply a personal or impersonal nature in the philosophical relationship that Plato describes. In Plato, the divine cannot be seen to possess a personal nature in the same way that humanity does, as the divine is eternal, unchanging, and uncapricious, but at the same time it is involved with the world, not lying in an impersonal, stagnant reality away from existence. The relationship and experience that Plato conveys is one which involves both concepts of the ‘personal’ and ‘impersonal’, incorporating an idea which actually lies beyond such a distinction. What certainly can be said beyond the terminology is that it is the nature of the philosophical experience, and the interrelationship of the one who seeks philosophy with the divine, that is Plato’s concern and it is this philosophical experience which defines the divine for Plato.

How the philosophical experience defines the divine in Plato is an idea approached in contemporary thought. One aspect of this subject is that capitalised upon by Martha Nussbaum in that the relationship that Plato calls for the philosopher to have with the Forms diminishes the individual. Interestingly, Nussbaum’s is not a denial that the philosopher is personally involved with the Forms, but is a question as to what that personal relationship means to the role of the individual or in other words, what does the philosopher’s relationship to this divine mean in terms of human relationship and status? To Nussbaum, the Platonic Form, as in the case of Beauty, is an ‘objective’ Idea and this is dangerous to the sanctity of the individual. Fergus Kerr, writing on Nussbaum’s perspective, writes that the vision of Beauty to Nussbaum is,

a way of transcending one’s dependence on the pleasures and pains of involvement with others, though by losing all that characterizes human life, to



end in self-abandonment to a totally non-human other – a recipe for losing one’s real humanity....<sup>5</sup>

For Nussbaum, life is diminished in such a vision for the individual is cast aside for the Idea which is the impersonal ‘other’. The lover, says Nussbaum, ‘must consider that the beauty in souls is more honourable than that in the body.’<sup>6</sup> By ‘looking towards the vast amount of the beautiful, he will no longer, like some servant, loving the beauty of particular boy or a particular man or of one set of customs’, be a slave captivated by ‘particularity’ and by those numerous occasions of beauty.<sup>7</sup> The experience of seeing Beauty itself, will, says Nussbaum, be a contemplation ‘unalloyed, pure, unmixed, not stuffed full of human flesh and colours and lots of other mortal rubbish.’<sup>8</sup> Such a way is a losing of one’s humanity into a non-human other, and that is what Nussbaum would avoid.<sup>9</sup>

In a similar idea to that of Nussbaum, Gregory Vlastos comments that regarding the *Phaedrus* (250e), as well as the *Symposium*, we ‘are to love the persons so far, and only insofar, as they are good and beautiful.’<sup>10</sup> Vlastos continues that,

since all too few human beings are masterworks of excellence, and not even the best of those we have the chance to love are wholly free of streaks of the ugly, the mean, the commonplace, the ridiculous, if our love for them is to be only for their virtue and beauty, the individual, in the uniqueness and integrity of his or her individuality, will never be the object of our love. This seems to me the cardinal flaw in Plato’s theory.<sup>11</sup>

It is not the person at all that we are concerned about in Plato and the concept of love, we love only ‘that abstract version of persons which consists of the complex of their best qualities.’<sup>12</sup> Even in the *Republic*, for Vlastos, Plato fails to see the love that fellowship requires in his utopia, a society which is built upon tolerance, respect, forgiveness, tenderness, validity, etc.. Plato’s view, according to Vlastos, would stand against making ‘flesh-and-blood men and women terminal objects of our affection’ as that,

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<sup>5</sup> Kerr, *Immortal Longings*, 3.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>7</sup> Nussbaum in Kerr’s *Immortal Longings*, 3.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Vlastos, ‘Love in Plato’ in *Platonic Studies*, 31.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

‘would be folly or worse, idolatry, diversion to images of what is due only to their divine original.’<sup>13</sup> Such an error would be ‘because of our carnal condition burdened with incompleteness... were we free of mortal deficiency we would have no reason to love anyone or anything except the Idea: seen face to face, it would absorb all our love.’<sup>14</sup> The Forms are at one end of an extreme, while the temporal individual is at the other, and, as Vlastos explains, ‘in between, the individuals’ immanent characters, projections of eternity on the flickering screen of becoming.’<sup>15</sup> As the Forms are *the* objects of knowledge in Plato’s epistemology, the order of Plato’s cosmology, and the highest grade of reality in Plato’s ontology, so also in the relational aspects of love, Vlastos writes, ‘the individual cannot be as lovable as the Idea; the Idea, and it alone, is to be loved for its own sake; the individual only so far as in him and by him ideal perfection is copied fugitively in the flux.’<sup>16</sup> Within this, for Vlastos, a great contrast is represented between Plato and the Hebrew and Christian traditions which forms a ‘polar opposite’ ideal. The Hebrew and Christian ideal is one of a ‘Being whose perfection empowers it to love the imperfect; of a Father who cares for each of his children as they are, does not proportion affection to merit, gives it no more to the righteous than to the perverse and deformed.’<sup>17</sup> For Vlastos, Plato does not have such a notion, though Plato’s God ‘is impelled by love for Beauty to create and thereby to share his own goodness with his creatures.’<sup>18</sup> To Vlastos, what is not present in Plato is the overtly personal aspect of God which is an essential part of Christian theology.

The points which both Nussbaum and Vlastos make in their consideration that the Idea means the negation of the personal for the impersonal does not do Plato justice as it misinterprets the nature of the Forms in Plato’s philosophical theology. For Plato, the knowledge of the Idea does not lessen or diminish the value of existence but, as Plato clearly indicates, *augments* and enhances life in general. In the case of the *Symposium*, to which Vlastos refers and Nussbaum alludes, the point of Socrates is that the

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 32-33.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 33-34.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

understanding of love itself is accentuated by the Form, not lessened. In the vision of the Beautiful, as according to the *Phaedrus*, the love that is shared between two individuals is enhanced not depersonalised. The Form of Beauty is the catalyst through which, and in which, true love is realised as it leads the lovers

to follow the assigned regimen of philosophy, their life here below is one of bliss and shared understanding.... There is no greater good than this that either human self-control or divine madness can offer a man. (256bff)

As Stephen L. Clark puts it, the Forms' objective 'is to perfect love, not to despise it.'<sup>19</sup> Along with this understanding, in contrast especially to Nussbaum and also to Vlastos, is the perspective of Iris Murdoch who, as Fergus Kerr comments,

Far from fearing Diotima's ascent of love on the grounds that it requires gradual abandonment of our human particularity (Nussbaum's fear), Murdoch regards it as a paradigm or anyway a parable, of the only way of moral growth that will bring us to full humanity.<sup>20</sup>

However, going further than that love is augmented and enhanced, Murdoch insists that it is the loss of the supremacy of the individual in light of that which is transcendent that is the valuable point in Plato's words. She writes that the vision of beauty brings on an 'unselfish attachment' which brings about 'spiritual change.'

'Falling in love', a violent process which Plato more than once vividly describes (love is abnegation, abjection, slavery) is for many people the most extraordinary and revealing experience of their lives, whereby the centre of significance is suddenly ripped out of the self, and the dreamy ego is shocked into awareness of an entirely separate reality.<sup>21</sup>

It is this accentuation of love which Plato describes in the *Phaedrus* (256bff).

Plato's philosophical vision of the transcendent is a striving for the 'enhancement' of life, and not its diminishing. The philosophical vision does not negate existence into an impersonal ideal, but leads to the transformation of the self and the self in relationship to others. Though Plato never speaks of distinguishing between the concepts of the 'personal' or 'impersonal' as in more modern thought, he certainly has a concept of the individual being involved with the divine. In Plato, it is this individual life when involved with the divine that is enhanced, as even in Murdoch's commentary,

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<sup>19</sup> Stephen R. L. Clark, 'Platonism and the Gods of Place', 28.

<sup>20</sup> Kerr, *Immortal Longings*, 72.

the self remains intact, but follows a practice of not being self-centred. The self, or the personal individual, is not lost in the philosophical vision as Nussbaum fears and which Vlastos echoes, but follows a path of true existence where one's soul is caught up into the philosophical vision and learns what true existence entails – an envisioning of the Forms, the divine, as a way of salvation that draws one away, even above the 'fray' of life, to behold that which is transcendent so that in turn one returns to live out a greater existence.

### The Philosopher's Relationship to 'God'

As the question of the philosopher's life is enhanced through the personal aspect of his or her relationship to the divine Forms, there is a further and related aspect addressed by Plato in his philosophical theology in the question of the philosopher's devotion and relationship to a personal God. When considering the perspective of philosophy in its religious dimension in Plato, the question of a 'personal' divine becomes important in that it addresses the nature of that divine to which the philosopher ascribes. Regarding Plato, this is important in two ways: first is that it is important for a practical understanding of the nature of philosophy and the philosophical experience itself, and secondly, in terms of a metaphysical understanding of the conception of divine as related to human existence.

In Plato's understanding of philosophy, the philosopher is one who is in relation with a personal 'God.' As a lover of wisdom, the philosopher is blessed by this God because, for Plato, living the life of philosophy and living one's life in devotion and obedience to God are equated. For Plato, God is involved in the cause of philosophy, not only as a model (*Theaetetus* 176b; *Republic* 379aff; *Republic* 500c-d) but also, as Echecrates confesses his belief that Socrates would be under the 'providence of God' (θείας μοίρας) and go safely to the 'other world' (*Phaedo* 69d), provides for those who follow the philosophical life (*Phaedo* 58e). In the *Republic* as well, it is through providence that the philosopher is saved from the influences of society (492e) and only

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<sup>21</sup> Murdoch, *Fire and the Sun*, quoted by Fergus Kerr in *Immortal Longings*, 72.

providence saves anything good in the ‘present condition of society and government.’(493a)<sup>22</sup> In the vivid case of the *Apology*, the link between God and philosophy is based upon a concept of a God who provides the blessing of philosophy to humanity. In his defence, Socrates says that his calling to philosophy is a command of God and an example of this divine providence:

This duty I have accepted, as I said, in obedience to God’s commands given in oracles and dreams and in every other way that any other divine dispensation (θεῖα μοῖρα) has ever impressed a duty upon man. (*Apology* 33c)

Later, declaring his philosophy to be a blessing he says, ‘This, I do assure you, is what my God commands, and it is my belief that no greater good has ever befallen you in this city than my service to my God.’ (30a) Socrates goes on to say that such a gift is legitimised by his life: ‘If you doubt whether I am really the sort of person who would have been sent to this city as a gift from God, you can convince yourselves by looking at it in this way... my poverty.’ (31b) For Socrates, his philosophy is a matter of being obedient to God and recognising the blessing and providence of God in philosophy as he says in his classic statement:

Gentlemen, I am your very grateful and devoted servant, but I owe a greater obedience to God than to you, and so long as I draw breath and have my faculties, I shall never stop practicing philosophy and exhorting you and elucidating the truth for everyone that I meet. (29d)

Socrates establishes that philosophy is a providential blessing of God, one that involves a way of existence that is blessed of God and that shows the way of God to humanity.

Through these words we derive a basic understanding of Plato’s perception of the philosophical experience and life is one of serving the Divine. Mark McPherran in his work, *The Religion of Socrates*<sup>23</sup> bases his case upon the idea that Socrates is a philosopher who is deeply affected by his religious conviction to do philosophy. As in regarding the *Apology*, McPherran argues that, ‘we have many good reasons for holding that Socrates sincerely believed himself to have a unique, *divinely* ordained mission to

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<sup>22</sup> The vision of the Form of Beauty itself comes by ‘grace’ (θεῖα μοῖρα: *Symposium*).

<sup>23</sup> Mark McPherran, *The Religion of Socrates* (The Pennsylvania State University Press: University Park, Pennsylvania, 1996).



do philosophy.’<sup>24</sup> We have in Plato’s account a deep contrast between an ancient definition of philosophy and more modern conception, in that for Plato philosophy is a way of life and devotion to this God as Paul Gooch writes,

What Socrates must carry on isn’t the sort of philosophizing done by teachers and scholars these days, part of a large academic enterprise in which students are graded and articles published... It’s the search for an excellence of life and mind that cannot be taken for granted, that is lost as soon as one stops being mindful of the manner of one’s living... not to live this way would be *disobedience* to the god.<sup>25</sup>

Philosophy for Plato is a personal endeavour of a life of devotion to a God and divine which gives philosophy, forming the focus of the philosophical life as well.

In this personal relationship with the divine, it is philosophy that is Plato’s religion, and the philosophical life the pattern of a life devoted to the divine. In this way, Plato is a religious reformer who seeks to transform the perception of the divine and the life lived in the light of that divine. In the *Apology*, and even throughout the *Dialogues*, Socrates is to be seen not as a simple rationalist removed from religious devotion, but is one who, in McPherran’s words, is a ‘profoundly religious figure.’<sup>26</sup> His is a life which is ‘a moral idealism based on religious fervour’, a model for the life which proves to be the ‘hallmark’ of Plato’s own thought.<sup>27</sup> As Watson points out, ‘one can hardly read Plato’s *Apology*, Socrates’ defence when on trial for his life, and not come away with the impression of Socrates as a deeply religious man, however difficult it may be to give the right meaning to what he refers to as ‘the god’ or ‘God’.<sup>28</sup>

In Plato, we witness a depth of religious understanding coupled with the conception of, and a devotion to a divine which, for the most part, remains beyond a simple definition or set of terms. As Watson’s words raise, in Plato we are hard pressed to define fully what, or whom, this ‘God’ is that Socrates devotes his life to. The simple answer is that Socrates refers to the god Apollo, through whose oracle he received his calling to philosophy. But such an answer is an all too hasty answer to the problem of

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>25</sup> Paul Gooch, *Reflection on Jesus and Socrates*, 171-172.

<sup>26</sup> McPherran, *Religion of Socrates*, 2.

<sup>27</sup> Watson, *Greek Philosophy*, 16.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

Plato's 'God' as Apollo himself is 'in a special way the spokesman of Zeus', god of the great oracle at Delphi, the god 'who declares the divine order in the world', and who with his associates, the Muses, inspires *mousikē* which covers the whole of human culture including philosophy.<sup>29</sup> Thus, Socrates through the oracle, hears the voice of the divine itself, literally of the 'God'. J. B. Skemp expresses that he purposely translates *toi theoi* as 'God' rather than 'the god Apollo,'<sup>30</sup> explaining,

Socrates was not alive to the issue of monotheism, but his way of believing in the gods rose above that of his fellow Athenians. He had achieved (or had by natural gift) a faith in a divine reality outside good persons but giving them support and underpinning their moral existence. To such a divine reality one can commit oneself and one's deeds.<sup>31</sup>

What must be gathered from this are two important ideas in that Plato's philosophy builds itself upon a communication with the divine, as in the case of Socrates, but a divine which in Plato allows for some speculation as to what is meant.

The understanding that can be gleaned from a consideration of Plato is that his is a perspective which is *both* monotheistic and polytheistic, centring itself upon a conception of a unified divine reality, mysterious in its essence which underlies all things, while employing a way of knowing and experiencing this divine by using varied myths and symbols, integrating and interrelating monotheism and polytheism together. Yet, what is given through Plato's perspective is that which provides a deeper philosophical and theological understanding as it is an interrelationship of these two ideas rather than a holding of these two concepts in parallel. Grube describes Plato as holding together two aspects of the divine, which, to Grube, feed into our own concept of God: one is the static aspect of the divine seen as ultimate reality, the highest form of being, the eternal absolute, seen in Plato in the Forms, and the dynamic aspect which is a

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<sup>29</sup> A. H. Armstrong, 'The Ancient and Continuing Pieties of the Greek World', *Classical Mediterranean Spirituality*, 84. As Armstrong notes, poets and philosophers feel themselves to be inspired by Apollo. Even Pythagoras was, it is thought, very closely associated with Apollo. (84-85) Also, J. M. Dillon notes that Plutarch, the second-century Platonist, saw Apollo as the supreme 'God of Platonism, the Good of the Republic', the one who is to be etymologized as 'Not-Many', the Unitary and Simple. (See Dillon, 'Plutarch and Second Century Platonism', *Classical Mediterranean Spirituality*, 215.)

<sup>30</sup> As evidence of this same translation problem compare Hugh Tredennick's translation of the *Apology* in Hamilton and Cairns, *The Collected Dialogues of Plato* with G. M. A. Grube's translation in Cooper, *Plato: Complete Works*.

<sup>31</sup> J.B.Skemp, 'Socrates and Plato' in *Classical Mediterranean Spirituality*, 109.

concept of an active force causing movement and life.<sup>32</sup> In Plato the divine reality of the Forms, and of this God who gives and calls philosophy, is one which is above all things, the source of all wisdom. However, the other aspect of the divine present in Plato as well is the relational, the mythical, the interactive divine known through the myths, a divine known in the world as alive and moving within it.

Plato's is a philosophical theology devoted to a 'God' which is an all-inclusive divine reality and unity that underlies, as James Mackey has put it, the 'bewildering multiplicity of the reality we experience.'<sup>33</sup> For certain, Plato employs the word 'god' within his philosophy – the word ὁ θεός is used over 130 times throughout the *Dialogues*,<sup>34</sup> and established even in crucial places in which philosophical issues are addressed (e.g. in the *Apology* and the calling to philosophy, the *Republic* (book II); *Theaetetus* (176b); *Laws* (book 10); etc.) which shows the significance of the concept. Yet, admittedly, it is unclear what Plato means by the term, 'God.' Werner Jaeger describes Plato's 'utterances' about God as 'solemn and mysterious',<sup>35</sup> and Gerard Watson writes simply that it is 'notoriously difficult to ascertain what Plato's conception of *theos* is.'<sup>36</sup> As James Mackey writes,

Not that Plato pretended to know who/what God is. He not only inherited a reverent agnosticism on the subject, a humble sense of the severe limitations of human powers of knowing, but many of the passages he wrote became source texts for the great apophatic theology which is common to pagan Greek and Christian theology in succeeding centuries.<sup>37</sup>

What can be said is that offered by Grube, as he writes that θεός and its plural indicates whatever there is beyond and above humanity; the existence of this higher force, or forces, and the belief of its working for good is never doubted, and is Plato's belief throughout his dialogues.<sup>38</sup>

However, even though the concept of a one God is an important aspect of the philosophical experience in Plato, some dismiss the notion of God altogether in Plato by

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<sup>32</sup> Grube, *Plato's Thought*, 151.

<sup>33</sup> Mackey, *God as Trinity*, 107.

<sup>34</sup> Source: *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae*, Silver Mountain Software Company, 1997.

<sup>35</sup> Jaeger, *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture*, Vol. 2 (Basil Blackwell: Oxford, 1939), 415.

<sup>36</sup> Gerard Watson, *Plato's Unwritten Teaching* (Talbot Press: Dublin 1973), 73.

<sup>37</sup> Mackey, *God as Trinity*, 108.

seeing it as unneeded in a true conception of his philosophy. Paul Shorey attempts to arrest any theological thought being attributed to Plato at all by understanding Plato's use of the word 'God' as being an over-embellished concept of a minor term. Shorey writes that Plato's conception is simply one taken from the popular national religion only 'purified and elevated' by Plato's own rejection of anthropomorphism.<sup>39</sup> However, says Shorey,

Plato does not attempt to work the idea of God into a complete metaphysical system or adjust it to one, and the endeavors of the later Platonists to do this for him and to foist such a system upon him are among the chief causes of the misinterpretation of his writings. For Plato, God is a supreme category of the moral ideal and a word of edification, and that is all there is to it. He does not identify God with the Idea of Good, the idea of unity, the idea of pure being, the mythical Demiourgos of the *Timaeus*, or any other abstraction, principle, or symbol of his philosophy.<sup>40</sup>

In short, for Shorey, Plato's conception of God, if any at all, is not *vital* to any understanding of his philosophy.

Even with all of Shorey's dismissal, however, we cannot simply cast aside the references to God in Plato as embellishments. As pointed out above, the points at which 'God' is mentioned are too crucial to be waved away. Gerard Watson notes the opinions of those like Shorey by responding to history, writing that no one,

reading the literature on Plato might be justified in thinking that theology was a relatively unimportant part of his (Plato's) thought. This was not the way in which his followers in Middle and Neoplatonism read him for many centuries after his death....<sup>41</sup>

In another place, Watson points out, 'that later Platonism drew up a kind of anthology of favourite texts to illustrate Plato's theology.'<sup>42</sup> Watson's points raises the issue that it is not so easy to cast aside the opinions of early thinkers much closer to Plato chronologically and in fact, as for some, breathing the same philosophical 'air', to be labelled as mistaken.

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<sup>38</sup> Grube, *Plato's Thought*, 156.

<sup>39</sup> Paul Shorey, *Platonism: Ancient and Modern* (University of California Press: Berkeley, California, 1938), 30.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> Watson, *Greek Philosophy*, 8.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

Still, even as a concept of a God as a unified being is important to Plato's philosophical theology, so also is the concept of the divine multiplicily conveyed through the myths. As Michael Morgan writes, the 'mention of gods, festivals, beliefs, and rites' pervades Plato's dialogues.<sup>43</sup> Like the theology which makes up Greek religious understanding,<sup>44</sup> Plato is a thinker in whom religion, 'as rite, conception, motif, and vocabulary' integrates.<sup>45</sup> Yet, Plato's use of the myth is governed by philosophy which, for him, comprises the true devotion to the divine. Thus, even though the myths describe different facets of what that divine means, there is one true divine reality which is illumined only by philosophy. As in the *Apology*, Socrates is one who stands true to his calling of philosophy and at the same time speaks from the place of one who is seeking to reform that which takes place. As Socrates declares in the *Apology*, because of his practice of philosophy, he has a truer belief, one that is 'more sincere' than those around him. (*Apology* 35d) The charge that is levelled against Socrates in his trial that he believes in gods of his own invention (*Apology* 24bff) becomes true insofar as he practices a true conception of the divine which is different from the type of life practised around him by his fellow citizens. It is a case of 'not believing in the gods in whom the city believes.'<sup>46</sup>

Plato's view of any myth is that it must convey a right conception of the divine. As did his philosophical predecessors before him, such as Xenophanes, Plato's philosophy aims at removing the anthropomorphic understanding of the divine: a point against which Greek philosophy had directed its attacks from the beginning.<sup>47</sup> In Plato, this rejection of any anthropomorphic references is done through specifically casting aside any reference to the divine that portrays God or the gods as unvirtuous as Plato rejects any conception of God which sees God as deceptive or evil. As Socrates says in the classic passage of the *Republic*: 'the true quality of God we must always surely

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<sup>43</sup> Michael L. Morgan, 'Plato and Greek Religion', in the *Cambridge Companion to Plato*, Richard Kraut, ed. (Cambridge University Press, 1992), 227.

<sup>44</sup> A comprehensive analysis of Greek religion is offered by Walter Burkert in his *Greek Religion*, translated by John Raffin (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985).

<sup>45</sup> Michael L. Morgan, *Cambridge Companion to Plato*, 227.

<sup>46</sup> Skemp, *Classical Mediterranean Spirituality*, 108.

<sup>47</sup> Jaeger, *Early Christianity and Greek Paideia*, 48.



attribute to him whether we compose in epic, melic, or tragic verse... and is not God of course good in reality and always to be spoken of as such?' (379a-b) Instead of being cast aside, the myths in Plato are cleansed and brought into use by philosophy as conveying within them the deeper truths of philosophical ideas. As Grube points out Plato did not believe in the Olympians as persons, but,

once the more objectionable myths were removed, he probably thought it an unprofitable task to destroy the old god (even if such a task had been possible) when these old moulds might still be used as effectively as any other to express new ideas, new conceptions of divinity....<sup>48</sup>

Part of the cleansing and transformation of the myths in Plato is to use the myths allegorically. As John Macquarrie points out, 'the attempts to treat myth allegorically, as the bearer of metaphysical truths for which no precise literal language would be adequate', is a method that Plato employs.<sup>49</sup> Though, such a perspective is a great tool in Plato's overall mission in his philosophy, some myths cannot be redeemed at all and must be cast aside. As Socrates says, such myths as

Hera's fetherings by her son and the hurling out of heaven of Hephaestus by his father when he was trying to save his mother from a beating, and the battles of the gods in Homer's verse are things that we must not admit... either wrought in allegory or without allegory. (*Republic* 378d)

Though Plato did not believe in the Olympian myth, he did, as Grube attempts to point out, believe in something divine. As Grube writes,

Eros and Aphrodite do represent for him the love of truth and beauty which makes a man a lover of wisdom, a philosopher. They are real forces, real deities if you will, and Plato believed in them in that sense. If he refrained from any criticism of the Olympians themselves (as distinct from the stories told about them), it was probably because to him they stood for something very real, and because he thought them still capable of meaning the same to others.<sup>50</sup>

The meaning is that which goes beyond the surface levels of thought to that which is more allegorical and even more philosophical. Grube continues, 'If we insist on finding a connexion between them [the Ideas and the gods] we have to say that the gods appear to be the mythical representation of that eternal world which the Ideas describe in a

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<sup>48</sup> G. M. A. Grube, *Plato's Thought* (Methuen and Company Ltd.: London, 1935), 155.

<sup>49</sup> John Macquarrie, *Existentialism* (Hutchinson and Co.: London, 1972), 19.

<sup>50</sup> Grube, *Plato's Thought*, 156.

different manner.’<sup>51</sup> Plato’s is a philosophical faith as one which is the filter through which the conception of the divine as a whole is understood. G. Lowes Dickson sees in Plato a looking away from traditional religion as a religious reformer, one who as the ‘deepest thinker of the Greeks’ is the farthest removed from the popular faith<sup>52</sup> but one who ‘traced the root of the evil to the decay of religious belief.’<sup>53</sup> His reconstruction of religion drove him ‘back upon metaphysics.’<sup>54</sup>

What can be seen is that Plato displays a certain ambiguity in his final understanding of the divine. The interrelationship between a unified reality and the mythological means that he incorporates two different theological nuances into one. Yet, such an ambiguity, for Gerard Watson, is actually part of Plato’s plan. As Watson writes,

Plato deliberately avoided the construction of a neat closed system so that he might stimulate people to think for themselves. We have to impose some system on his thought in order to discuss it at all, but it is important to remember that Plato is deliberately flexible.<sup>55</sup>

As Watson makes clear, it is not that Plato does not employ a conception of ‘god’ as much as that Plato may have chosen to avoid the issue of a tightly conceived theology altogether as Watson explains that,

It is not that Plato does not use the word; but there is much else to be considered besides the passages where the word, singular or plural, occurs. And there are certainly differences of emphasis between the early and late works. It is almost as if Plato did not want to tell us what he really thought. And while there is in such a statement the danger of seeming merely to want to avoid the issue, I think the possibility of such an intention should be kept in mind. The remark in *Timaeus 28c* cannot be simply dismissed....<sup>56</sup>

Such an ambiguity, writes Constantin Ritter, is part of the philosophical process in Plato:

Just as it is impossible for our calculating understanding to grasp the totality of reality, the universe, it is also impossible for us to apprehend the spiritual power (God) which pervades the universe. ... Therefore, we must not look for a non-contradictory description of God’s nature and his relation to the world and

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<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

<sup>52</sup> G. Lowes Dickson, *The Greek View of Life* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1941), 62.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>55</sup> Watson, *Greek Philosophy*, 9.

<sup>56</sup> Watson, *Unwritten Teaching*, 73.

the things in it, to man and his interests. We must not reproach him if, upon examining all his statements, we find that they cannot be brought into full and clear agreement.<sup>57</sup>

Yet, such ambiguity plays a part in the role of philosophy within the soul by being an integral part of the philosophical endeavour altogether. For Plato, philosophy is the search and love for the divine, and it is the vagueness of what the divine, even God, is that initiates the philosophical search. As Watson writes,

Is it wrong to ask: 'What is Plato's final answer to the God-problem?' There are more questions than answers in Plato on the matter. But the questions always imply that an answer is to be found...<sup>58</sup>

Watson writes, that when we talk of attempting to understand the conception of 'God' in Plato, 'we pay perhaps more lip service than attention to this difficulty.' The fault may lie with us, for, as Watson writes, most philosophical and theological endeavour to understand the conception of God in Plato is clouded by the fact that, 'we tend to shy away from this aspect (the question of God) of Plato... partly because of the difficulty of giving any satisfactory meaning to the word 'God' for us.'<sup>59</sup> What can certainly be said is that the meaning of 'God' for Plato, as well as the mythological ideas he describes are indelibly tied to a theology of the experience of a relationship with the divine through philosophy which is his greatest concern.

#### The Experience of God and the Forms: A God of Many Names

As Plato's philosophical theology is built upon the philosophical experience of the relationship with the divine, it conceives of the relationship of God to the Forms. It is an experience which conceives the concept of God and the Forms as ontologically occupying the same reality, but through further interpretation, is one which in which the Forms and God are expressions of one divine reality.<sup>60</sup> In regard to this perspective,

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<sup>57</sup> Ritter, *Essence*, 370-371.

<sup>58</sup> Watson, *Greek Philosophy*, 79.

<sup>59</sup> Watson, *Plato's Unwritten Teaching*, 73.

<sup>60</sup> Such a perspective was taken by the ancient thinkers in their interpretation of Plato as Aristotle's comment shows when he writes that Plato sought a unity, a One which is, 'the cause of the essence in the Forms.' (*Metaphysics* I.6.9) An existentialist meaning of such a quest for unity is given by Iris Murdoch who comments that there is a general longing in humanity to unify all things into singular ideas, or into one idea and it is only such a unified reality that provides a meaning to existence: 'The idea of a

John Kenney suggests that as the Forms are multiple, there are also several ways in which they evince a higher unity.<sup>61</sup> Seen in the descriptions of Beauty and the Good, both are spoken of in identical terms: as ultimate reality, inexpressible in their essence, envisioned by the philosopher.(cf. *Symposium* 211a ff. and *Republic* 508e ff.) In the particular example of the Good, the Good is described as an inconceivable ‘beauty’ (*Republic* 509b), and Plato conceives beauty and goodness to be of the same reality. (*Republic* 507b) As Plato indicates, the philosopher is to attach himself or herself to the divine, to the reality of the Beautiful, or the Good, or the One, etc. and does not envision the Beautiful *over* the Good, not as separate realities vying for position, but contemplates each of these Forms as part of one vision of the Divine. An example of such thinking is in Werner Beierwaltes who in his treatment of what he terms as the ‘spiritual’ nature of Plato’s philosophy, unites the love of beauty, the love of the Good, and the love for God all within one idea. Beierwaltes writes that the, ‘Love of the beautiful is a manifestation of the Good and the divine itself; or again, love of God is the essence of beauty, is the absolute cause of the beautiful as idea or as individual beautiful object.’<sup>62</sup> ‘In the beautiful’ writes Beierwaltes, ‘the *divinity of the Good* imparts itself to the thinking and striving directed by eros.’<sup>63</sup> He continues that, ‘Beauty of the beautiful is the truth of the Good, that is, the Good unconcealed and open; thus beauty is also the first manifestation of the divine.’<sup>64</sup> The tie between all of these is that the philosopher beholds one reality through a multiplicit array of Forms – one eternal and experiential reality. As Kenney writes, although each Form has a distinct, definitional nature, each Form calls into play several others, ‘so that there is a rich nexus of connectivity within being (*Sophist* 248-51A, 259E).’<sup>65</sup> The richness of this thought is found in the idea that the philosopher beholds one reality seen in an array of forms. The Forms through their divine unity elicit a conception of a unified divine transcendence and ontological

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self-contained unity or limited whole is a fundamental instinctive concept.’ – the plurality and fragmentation presents only chaos, only unity and oneness provides meaning. (Murdoch, *Metaphysics*, 1)

<sup>61</sup> John Kenney, ‘Hellenic Monotheism’, *Classical Mediterranean Spirituality*, 281.

<sup>62</sup> Werner Beierwaltes, ‘The Love of Beauty and the Love of God’, *Classical Mediterranean Spirituality*, 293.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 298.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 299.

dependence.<sup>66</sup>

Moving from this recognition of one divine reality multiplicity conveyed, Gerard Watson writes that many have perceived, as in ancient times, Plato's Forms to be expressions of God,<sup>67</sup> an interpretation that is still evocative today. Watson even suggests that Plato himself,

would always have welcomed Heraclitus' conception of a *Logos* which was at once the unseen plan of things and a God of many names who ruled the universe and harmonised all the apparent discordancies in it.<sup>68</sup>

As they possess a 'quasi-personal appeal'<sup>69</sup> the Forms, as Watson reminds, could easily be adopted by Augustine in his *Confessions* for his vision of God, or terms which the Pseudo-Dionysius can use in his *Divine Names*.<sup>70</sup> Even today, such a conception can warrant a philosophical experience that elicits a theology which gives rise to a God of many names as the vision of the Forms may be seen as various names and aspects of one God. Critically, however, one may say that such an interpretation arises not from a straight reading of Plato but from, admittedly, drawing a theological perspective from him. However, contemporary thinkers, religious and non-religious alike, regard Plato as certainly expressing through the vision of the Forms a picture of the divine, but disagree on how that divine may be expressed. For some, Plato speaks of one reality in various ways through the Forms, while others, though seeing Plato as establishing a concept of God, disagree as to whether the Forms are expressions of God or not, and yet still others see Plato as one who speaks of the divine, but a divine that is impersonal, multi-faceted, and above the traditional conception of God altogether.

The ancient question of God in relation to the Forms is one which is still illuminating in Plato's philosophical theology, giving insight today, and one which is especially illumined by the question of the relation between the Good and God.<sup>71</sup> The

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<sup>65</sup> John Kenney, 'Hellenic Monotheism', *Classical Mediterranean Spirituality*, 281.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> Watson, *Greek Philosophy*, 25.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> The classic article of Kevin Doherty, 'God and the Good in Plato' (*New Scholasticism*, vol. 30, 1956) is a helpful overview of this whole debate in which, though the article is now dated, the arguments that he explains are still in vogue.



classic statement of the Good in the *Republic* shows that the Good is more than a simple philosophical construct, but is the supreme Idea, surpassing all in reality, conveying a philosophically religious vision.

This reality, then, that gives their truth to the object of knowledge and the power of knowing to the knower, you must say is the idea of good, and you must conceive it as being the cause [αὐτίαν] of knowledge, and of truth in so far as known. Yet fair as they both are, knowledge and truth, in supposing it to be something fairer still than these you will think rightly of it. But as for knowledge and truth... to think that either of them is the good is not right. Still higher honor belongs to the possession and habit of the good... the objects of knowledge not only receive from the presence [παρέχει] of the good their being known, but their very existence and essence is derived to them from it, though the good itself is not essence but still transcends essence (ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας) in dignity and surpassing power. (*Republic* 509a b)

These words and concepts convey a religious vision – the Good is that which is the source of all knowledge and truth, fairer than all things, even an ‘inconceivable beauty’ (ἀμήχανον κάλλος), which by its ‘presence’ is even the source of all existence and essence, transcending all things in its glory.<sup>72</sup> As Stephen R. L. Clark comments, no one can really turn away from the reality of the Good: ‘The divine oneness, the Good, irradiates the world: the world, in all its manifold types, is the expression of that Good, not some other real thing from which we turn away.’<sup>73</sup> As Jaeger adequately puts it, we cannot appraise his central doctrine of the Idea of Good except against a religious background.<sup>74</sup>

For Plato, the Good is such a religious philosophical vision that it describes the essence of the divine. The Good permeates the divine reality to the point that God and the ideal of goodness coincide in that the ‘true quality’ of God (*Republic* 379a) is one who is good in reality: ‘And is not God of course good in reality (τῷ ὄντι) and always to be spoken of as such?’ (*Republic* 379a) Such goodness is part of the divine essence for Plato, an understanding that is even within Homer, as Friedrich Solmsen comments,

‘God is good’ is the basic proposition laid down at the beginning of the discourse

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<sup>72</sup> For a treatment of the Good as a philosophical vision see Catherine Pickstock, *After Writing: The Consummation of Philosophy* (Blackwell: 1998), 11ff.

<sup>73</sup> Stephen R. L. Clark, ‘Platonism and the Gods of Place’, 30.

<sup>74</sup> Jaeger, *Paideia*, Vol. 2, 285.

(Plato's). No attempt is made to prove it. The two concepts simply belong together. It is unlikely that anyone in Greece would have questioned this. The conviction that God is good had been expressed before Plato and had been essential in Greek thought about the gods ever since the poet of the *Odyessy*....<sup>75</sup>

With such a statement of equation between God and goodness, Werner Beierwaltes goes so far as to say that such an idea suggests that, 'the expressions are interchangeable.'<sup>76</sup> To see this idea of Good is to see the divine in Plato in one of its highest expressions. In the *Republic*, the Good is set above all being in its mystical, and spiritual prominence, as the experience and ideal of the philosopher. Until this point, writes Jaeger, it has been simply called 'the greatest subject'<sup>77</sup> but it is in this part of the dialogue that the Good achieves the status for which it is remembered. Goodness is seen in various examples, but it is Plato's objective to describe what is that universal goodness that links all of these examples of good together, for all of these examples, 'have some share in the Idea of Good'.<sup>78</sup> With this understanding, the idea of the Good becomes then, as Jaeger puts it, a 'universal goodness (as the word Idea signifies), the unity of all goodness in contrast to the various objects which we call 'good',<sup>79</sup> for all good things participate in this one eternal idea. The Good is elevated to the highest idea in which all goodness participates, and reduced to be a *summum bonum*,<sup>80</sup> a one true Good. With this one idea in place, Plato directs the philosophical soul to behold and comprehend this eternal Good.

For some, the religious meaning of the Good is so profound that it implicates a conception of God. Reflecting upon the ancient tradition and interpretation, Gerard Watson writes that in ancient times many see the Good as God,<sup>81</sup> and L. P. Gerson echoing this statement writes that, 'It is commonplace in antiquity that when Plato speaks of the Form of the Good he is speaking of God.'<sup>82</sup> In a contemporary interpretation, Ritter, Beierwaltes, and Jaeger see in the Good a concept of God. For

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<sup>75</sup> Solmsen, *Plato's Theology*, 68.

<sup>76</sup> Werner Beierwaltes, 'Love of Beauty and Love of God', in *Classical Mediterranean Spirituality*, 297.

<sup>77</sup> Jaeger, *Paideia*, Vol. 2, 281.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> Watson, *Greek Philosophy*, 24.

<sup>82</sup> L. P. Gerson, *God and Greek Philosophy: Studies in the Early History of Natural Theology* (Routledge: London, 1994), 62.

Ritter the Good is the comprehensive source of all things and is ultimate Being. As it is occupies this ultimate status, there is no more fitting way of regarding the Good, for Ritter, than to establish its divine status and its equation with God, as he writes, ‘...the highest Idea, the Idea of the good, is nothing else but God.’<sup>83</sup> Ritter reasons that,

We say that all powers, and with these everything in the universe, are ultimately grounded in God or in the highest Idea. For all practical purposes this means the same thing; only for our point of view it is not altogether indifferent.<sup>84</sup>

To Ritter, it does not matter what term may be given to this ultimate reality, the concept is still to be perceived as God:

if it can be shown that the good (as something actually existing, as Idea) consists in complete agreement of all segments or characteristics of reality; that there can be no reality apart from the totality of active powers, which in their activity are conditioning and in turn are conditioned by every individual being; that therefore the world, which embraces every real being, is in its nature a living and animated organism; in addition that a uniform co-operation and interaction can be produced only by a spiritual power which rules the world, and can be assured only by the rule of his power; then the conceptual explanations of the variously sounding words such as Being, world, God, and good can be reduced to one and the same formula, and the concepts which they designate are identical in content.<sup>85</sup>

For Ritter, whatever the ultimate reality is named, ‘Being’, ‘Good’, or ‘God’, the reality is identical. The Good and even God, represents the collective whole of all reality, the place in which all that *is* finds being. All reality, for Ritter is interrelated and is part of the whole and all encompassing God. Thus, as the Good encompasses all of reality, and is the source of that reality, it is to be understood as none other than God. Beierwaltes agrees with Ritter when he writes,

If we wished... to ask explicitly who the *Platonic God* is or what simply the (absolute) divine in Plato’s sense is, then the idea of the Good or the Good itself as Plato develops it, particularly in the three analogies of the *Republic*, might seem to be a fairly adequate response. Plato, to be sure, never directly equates the ‘idea of the Good’ with ‘God’... Let it merely be said that essential predicates, which Plato also attributes to the ‘gods’ or the ‘divine’, appertain to the idea of the Good as the universal principle (*Republic* 511b), so that the Good

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<sup>83</sup> Ritter, *Essence*, 374.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 375.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

– on the basis of its priority to all things – must also be good in the highest or absolute degree and consequently ‘most divine.’<sup>86</sup>

Beierwaltes continues his argument that in Plato the degrees of reality show that which is most divine. Hence, as the Good occupies ultimate reality, it is ultimate divinity, and thus the conceptions of the Good and God converge:

what exists to the highest and most intense degree would also be what is most divine, and vice versa. Because god is perfect being, he is self-sufficient (*Philebus* 20a; 60c). The Good, however, is the self-sufficient, because it is the foundation of all hypotheses yet requires no hypothesis or condition itself (= *anhypotheton*; *Republic* 510b; 511b). In this respect, the definitions of God and the Good converge in absolute unconditionality. They also converge in blessedness; the divine is the most blessed (*Theaetetus* 176e; *Phaedrus* 247a). Similarly, the *agathon* (good) is the ‘most blessed of being’ (*Republic* 526e)... Furthermore, it must be remembered that the idea of the Good, as it is developed in the context of the Platonic concept of *paideia*, is considered just as much a measure of individual and public (political) activity as God is assumed to be in the *Laws* (716c), which specify, in contrast to a subjective relativism in the manner of Protagoras....<sup>87</sup>

Following a similar line of interpretation, Jaeger remarks that Greek philosophers before Plato, ‘usually described the highest principle in the universe – whether it was the material substratum which bestows life, or the spirit which controls everything – simply as God, or ‘the divine’.<sup>88</sup> It follows then, for Jaeger, that we do not need to read the word ‘God’ to understand Plato’s true meaning:

According to Greek ideas, Plato, by making the Idea of Good monarch of the intelligible world, like the sun in the world of sight, gives it the same divinity as the God of other thinkers, even though he does not actually call it God. It looks as if he had purposely avoided doing that, because it was so obvious that the reader could fill it in without help, and also because it was important to distinguish his supreme being from the gods of everyday religion... nothing deserves the name of God better than the Idea of the Good....<sup>89</sup>

As H. D. F. Kitto simply concludes, ‘although Plato does not formally identify the Good with God, he speaks of its divine nature in such a way that formal identification would make but little difference.’<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Beierwaltes, ‘Love of Beauty and Love of God’, *Classical Mediterranean Spirituality*, 297.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 298.

<sup>88</sup> Jaeger, *The Ideals of Greek Culture*, Vol. 2, 285.

<sup>89</sup> Jaeger, *Paideia*, 285-6.

<sup>90</sup> Kitto, *The Greeks*, 194.

Yet, for some, there is a deep problem that exists with the concept of the Good being equated to God. The Good cannot be considered as a ‘god’ because it is not ‘personal’ in its nature. Etienne Gilson writes that the Good can never be considered as a god at all, personal or otherwise, as it is the lack of personality which discredits such an equation of God and the Good altogether, as Gilson comments:

And why, after all, should an Idea be considered as a god? An Idea is no person; it is not even a soul; at best it is an intelligible cause, much less a person than a thing.<sup>91</sup>

For Ritter, a negation of the Idea on this charge misunderstands the nature of Plato’s theology:

From certain quarters objections have been raised against this identification. We are told that, according to Plato, God as personal spirit is a soul, the highest soul, but not an Idea; for the Idea is impersonal. I regard this position as erroneous.<sup>92</sup>

For Ritter, as being is included within the Good, so also is personality, as he writes, ‘...there is nothing in the general concept of the Idea (of the Good) which would exclude personality.’<sup>93</sup> Ritter argues that all reality depends upon the Idea, including the reality of personality and as it is,

the Idea is nothing more than the designation of the objective basis of a conception; this objective basis assures validity to the conception and gives certitude to it. Everything then depends on whether that which gives security to the good in this world – so that consequently the conception of the good is no idle dream – is a personal Being or not.<sup>94</sup>

However, a further argument is offered by A. E. Taylor and others that although it can be admitted that the Good is a supreme metaphysical reality and deeply significant to Plato’s philosophical theology, it is not the Good but only the conception of the Soul, as seen in the *Phaedrus*, *Timaeus*, and especially the *Laws*, that can be rightly understood as Plato’s God. Taylor writes that Platonic theology is explicit in that ‘God is a soul, not a form.’<sup>95</sup> Taylor writes:

The language used in the *Republic* of the ‘Form of Good,’ ...at once raises the question whether or not this form can be identified with God ...is the Form of

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<sup>91</sup> Étienne Gilson, *God and Philosophy* (Yale University Press: New Haven, 1941), 26.

<sup>92</sup> Ritter, *Essence*, 374.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 375.

<sup>95</sup> Taylor, *Plato*, 492.



Good another name for *the God recognized in the Platonic philosophy?* the answer must be definitely No, for the reason given by Burnet, that the good is a form, whereas God is not a form but a 'soul,' the supremely good soul. ...It is just because his God is not a form that God can play the part the Platonic philosophy assigns to him.<sup>96</sup>

For a true understanding of Plato's theology, Taylor argues, we must centre our thoughts upon the tenth book of the *Laws* as the prime dialogue of Plato's theology. Friedrich Solmsen, echoing this position, even calls the dialogue a forgotten treatise in the issue of Platonic theology.<sup>97</sup> This appeal of the *Laws* for Taylor and Solmsen centres itself upon the origin and design of the universe. Written late in Plato's life, the *Laws* is an apologetic dialogue in its nature as it philosophises upon a teleological proof of the existence of the gods against the sceptics. According to the dialogue the design and cause of the world originates from 'the supremely good soul' (*psukhe*), 'that takes forethought for the universe and guides it along its path.' (*Laws* 897c) The nature of this World Soul is that 'which can move itself'<sup>98</sup>, and is 'the cause of good and evil, fair and foul, right and wrong – in fact all contraries', it is the *universal* cause of all subsequent movement of the universe, and the controller of heaven itself (896d-e).<sup>99</sup> Considering such statements, Taylor offers the comment that, 'God (or the gods) is quite definitely declared to be a ψυχή, and we are told that this means that the universe is a result of τέχνη, design...The movement which can move itself is the highest type of agent known to Plato...' <sup>100</sup> As John Burnet writes as well, preceding Taylor, the highest theological statement for Plato is found in this concept of the self-moved Soul.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 288.

<sup>97</sup> In the Preface to *Plato's Theology* Solmsen describes the *Laws* as having, 'long been unduly neglected.'

<sup>98</sup> *Laws* 894d.

<sup>99</sup> *Laws* 896 d-e.

<sup>100</sup> Taylor, *Plato*, 492.

<sup>101</sup> One may question the strong alignment with the being of God to the concept of soul due to the Athenian's statement in the *Laws* of the possibility of more than one soul present within the world. Such a thought, of course, jeopardises the monotheism that Plato indicates as his persuasion, and more strikingly, if soul is equated with God, such a multiplicity introduces a conflicting nature within God, or dualism between varying natures of gods. The more convincing view may then be to see soul as not only God, but also that which governs the universe, as a force, and as that which all being participates in. Such a thought would not erase the convincing argument that both Taylor and even Ritter give, but would introduce a new factor in determining the full meaning of soul for Plato. Perhaps again, the conception of soul implies both a divine being and a force infused throughout creation, as is the concept of The Good. Soul may be considered as a philosophical concept or entity which lies at the centre of the universe and governs, as do

Alongside such considerations, the debate is carried further by Friedrich Solmsen who cautions that there must be a difference maintained between the Forms and God. The difficulty that arises is one of identification in Being, which Ritter and others would champion, but as Solmsen writes,

To think of God as the apex of this realm has become so customary that even modern interpreters of Plato tend to treat his God as identical with his highest idea, and to overlook or misunderstand the peculiar situation out of which Plato's theology developed. Plato conceived of the Deity as mediating between two worlds and as imparting to the visible world the qualities which connect it with the intelligible world....<sup>102</sup>

Solmsen raises a valid point that the understanding of God in Plato is one which is connected to the infinite worth of philosophy. However, for Solmsen, the concept of God is a mediating concept and not able to stand equal to the Forms, nor can ever be seen as ontologically tied to the Forms' realm of being. This mediating role, as in Taylor's and Burnet's argument is one known through the World Soul:

Plato by identifying true being with the 'Forms' had made it difficult, if not impossible, for himself to determine God's plan in the realm of Being. He would not of course deny, nay, as we have seen, he would emphatically assert, the reality of the imperishable Cosmos permeated by the divine World-Soul. But for him God is an essence different from the Forms, and his function is to impart to the physical world essential characteristics of the Forms.<sup>103</sup>

In criticism of these arguments, the bias to protect a traditional God or to impose this concept on Plato wears the argument thin in terms of its applicability to a valid and creative interpretation of Plato's philosophical theology. The merit of the argument is that it sees the Soul as an expression of a God who saturates the cosmos with his presence. However, the fault in such an argument as Taylor's is that it begins with a traditional Judeo-Christian concept of God and imposes that upon the Platonic text. Solmsen, though keeping within this line of thought, does go a bit farther in seeing beyond this idea to understanding the relationship of God to the Forms in a mediating role, but also fails to see a more creative side to the theology which Plato presents. One cannot deny that the picture of the World Soul is one of the divine, as Ritter even writes

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the philosophical concepts of Empedocles' Love and Strife, or Heraclitus' flux, which is both the governing philosophical factor of the universe and is equated with God.

<sup>102</sup> Solmsen, *Plato's Theology*, 192.

that, 'the more we consider this world soul, whose thought processes regulate the details of the creations, the less we can differentiate it from the soul of the creative god or from God himself.'<sup>104</sup> Yet, the arguments of the kind offered by Taylor and Solmsen is that they limit the concept of the divine to be that which only fits with an already conceived notion.<sup>105</sup> In the question of the Good in relation to God, we are presented with a conception that does not in any way present anything contradictory to a traditional understanding of God, but one that does present a more creative theology of the concept of the Divine.

What must be considered in the Good and its place in Plato's philosophy as a religious experience is that it is an experience of the soul. As Socrates describes it, the Good is an object of the philosophical vision, a religious experience for the philosopher of divine reality. A. E. Taylor who, although disagreeing with the equation of the Good with God, writes in consideration of Christian theology and the experience of this ultimate reality in the Good:

is the Good spoken of in the *Republic* identical with what Christian divines and philosophers have meant by God?... In one most important respect it is. The distinguishing characteristic of the 'Form of Good' is that it is the transcendent source of all the reality and intelligibility of every thing other than itself. Thus it is exactly what is meant in Christian philosophy by the *ens realissimum*, and is rightly regarded as distinct from and transcendent of the whole system of its effects or manifestations... It is the supreme value and the source of all other value, and at the same time it is, though 'beyond being,' the source of all existence. This explains why, when a man at last comes in sight of it at the culmination of his studies in 'dialectic', it is supposed to be grasped by direct vision, and for that reason is strictly 'ineffable.' Neither Plato nor anyone else could tell another man what the good is, because it can only be apprehended by the most incommunicable and intimate personal insight. Thus, as it seems to me,

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<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.

<sup>104</sup> Ritter, *Essence*, 371.

<sup>105</sup> One of the deepest questions surrounding this question of the Good and God is the question of the personal and impersonal aspects of the divine. Throughout the arguments against the Good as an expression of God, and the arguments for the concept of the World Soul is the aspect of personality. Yet, the interpretation to see beyond a common argument of whether or not the Good is personal or impersonal presents the most evocative theological perspective as it suggests that the Idea as ultimate being includes all reality includes personality within it. The crux of the issue is that the Idea of the Good as Plato presents it is one in which personality and impersonality meet.

metaphysically the Form of Good is what Christian philosophy has meant by God, and nothing else.<sup>106</sup>

As the Good is a central and philosophical idea, it is an ideal to which all humanity is called to understand and subscribe. It is thus not only the greatest object of contemplation, but also the greatest subject as model and ideal. In the *Republic*, the dialogue centres upon the idea of goodness as given within a just society, and it is in this context here that the Good is described as the highest philosophical reality.

If we see, then, the Good in its rightful place, it is part of the religious experience of philosophy, and in that, part of the question of human existence. The question of the Good in this context, lies beyond the technical argumentation to be that which Plato intends as to transform humanity.

In the work of Martin Buber the personal aspect of the Divine is not only important for a true conception of God and in human existence, it is for Buber one that is found in Plato through the concept of the Good. For Buber, the predicament of human existence is the ‘relativizing of all values’ and it is through Plato’s doctrine of the Ideas that such a relativisation is abated.<sup>107</sup> Plato’s Ideas represent the attempt to connect and unify the ethical with the Absolute, the metaphysical with the moral, and thus, the human with the divine. The philosophical theology of the Forms achieves a unity within the discordant reality of the ancient world, a world split from a ‘harmonious cosmos’ into a ‘discordant bios’, a world which ‘could no longer serve man as a model and pattern.’<sup>108</sup> Such a world is an ‘It’, confronted by ‘an inviolable, archetypal world of pure Forms,’<sup>109</sup> – a world with which mankind even today must deal. This higher world of Plato, according to Buber, has its own construction in the idea of the Good, equated with the idea of God, forming the highest summit of the eternal. For Buber, as we engage with the Good we become that which we should be, for in the Good, ‘The eternal

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<sup>106</sup> Taylor, *Plato*, 288-9. Taylor sees a contrasting element in the equation of God with The Good between Plato’s own thought and the concept of Christian philosophical theology. One may say that there is a Neoplatonic element influencing Christian theology, but that would negate Ritter’s valid points and see a difference between Neoplatonism and Platonic thought which was not recognised by the Neoplatonists themselves.

<sup>107</sup> Martin Buber, *Eclipse of God* (Harper and Row: New York, 1957), 101.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.* .

Ethos itself, the ground of being of that universal human function that sets the yes against the no and pushes to a decision, becomes the highest 'form' of the Absolute.<sup>110</sup> For Buber, we interact with this highest Idea, personalising it, engaging and becoming involved with it. For Buber, the rich philosophical and ethical engagement that is possible between humanity and the Good, establishes a 'clarity of thought never before attained' as,

man is given here the task of realizing the unconditionality of Right through his person. The objective 'imitation' of Ideas by things becomes transformed in and through the subjectivity into the spiritual act of becoming just.<sup>111</sup>

Thus, the objectivity of the divine seen in the notion of 'imitation' is made subjective and personal as the individual imitates the Forms in his or her existence. In this imitation, humanity finds its fulfilment for which it searches.

The glory of Plato's Good for Buber is the experience of its remarkability in towering above 'being in dignity and power' as the 'primal cause of all that is just and beautiful.'<sup>112</sup> The Good not only brings each individual thing into existence and being, but is the cause so that each individual thing may 'perfectly become that which it is meant to be.'<sup>113</sup> The Good is the cause and the destiny of all that exists, the point at which all things find their existence, their reason for being, even their fulfilment. To Buber, such an idea is possible because in the Good's 'innermost depths, one nears the mystery of God, for not Being, but only perfect Being, may be called God.'<sup>114</sup> 'If one does not cease', as Buber continues, quoting Plato, 'until one has reached the Good itself through knowledge itself, then one reaches the end of the knowable.'<sup>115</sup> But, as to how to know this Good, Buber writes, is not specifically answered by Plato, however,

we remain close to him (Plato) if we say that the Good is recognized there where it reveals itself to the individual who decides with his whole being to become that which he is meant to be. And in fact, whether it takes place in the soul or in the world, nothing is so mysterious as the appearance of the Good. In its light all secret teachings appear as learnable conventions; the essential relation of the

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<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*



human person to that which ‘towers above being’ cannot be learned, it can only be awakened.<sup>116</sup>

To experience the philosophical vision of the Good is to be illumined in one’s perception of ultimate reality. But it is a reality with which one is in relationship through one’s life imitating the glory of the Forms in one’s own existence. As Buber writes, to catch a vision of the Good is to understand ultimate Being, but also to connect that to one’s own life as well, and for Buber, to see the Good is to understand its relationship to God, and one in relationship to it. Yet, further, the interpretation of the religious philosophical experience of the relationship between the Forms and God, and the soul’s own relationship to the Forms and God, gives rise to a philosophical theology which interprets the concept of God as known through doctrine of the Forms.

When the philosophical experience in Plato is considered, two understandings of God in relation to the Forms are elicited: one, exemplified by Karl Jaspers, is that the Forms express a Divine, even a God, of many names, and the other, that of Iris Murdoch, is that what Plato expresses is a theology of the Forms, especially that of the Good which goes beyond traditional concepts of a personal God. Both positions, though occupying different emphases, represent a unified approach that goes beyond the positions listed above as they attempt to interpret an aspect of the philosophical theology of the Forms within a contemporary context. We must be cautious, however, as both of these perspectives would warn us, of implying too little as Jaspers warns, or too much as Murdoch warns, upon an interpretation of Plato in regard to the relationship of God to the Forms.

On one hand, Jaspers sees Plato as expressing through the Forms a God of many names in that all facets and expressions are of this one divine reality. What Plato conveys through his Ideas, for Jaspers, is one God, one divine reality, known by the various names and in varying ways. Jaspers writes,

Plato speaks of God. The good, which in the *Republic* is compared to the sun, the life-giving Idea that transcends being, what in *Parmenides* is touched upon in the dialectic of the One, what in *Timaeus* is represented as the Demiurge, who, looking upon the Ideas, brings forth the world from the nothingness of space or

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<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 102-103.

matter – all these, one may say, refer to the same thing. But if we combine these statements into a Platonic theology, the thought is lost. For in each case his thinking approaches the limit in a different way, in metaphoric intuition, in a rising dialectic of concepts, in the myth of creation. In each case the thought is meaningful only in connection with the conditions of its thinking. If the thoughts are combined into an objective knowledge of God, their meaning, which lies in thinking as inner action, is engulfed in a supposed knowing of something. Plato's dynamic theology is turned into a dogmatic theology.<sup>117</sup>

However, though there is a multiple array of names for this one God, all of these expressions are bound by the limit of never fully expressing the completeness of that divine reality which they name. The ideas of Beauty, One, or Good are different manifestations of the one ideal reality of God. Thus, Plato represents a 'dynamic theology' which makes possible various expressions of the same reality, but a theology which is never 'objective', or that which is never fully expressed.

Through this understanding, Plato's philosophical theology is one that is dynamic. In fact, Jaspers cautions, in making Plato's theology into a dogmatic system we cast away Plato's true theology, or one that is a dynamic, or a philosophical theology which attempts to express one divine reality. An objective theology, or one that limits and objectifies is against Plato's dynamic and philosophical God of many names. In fact, Jaspers writes, the transformation of Plato's dynamic theology into a dogmatic one is historically what happened:

The word 'theology' occurs in Plato. He created the discipline and was founder of Western theology. Aristotle made the world into a technical term. This creation of philosophy was adopted by the Christian churches and by Islam. But often the Platonic thought is scarcely recognizable in these definite, dogmatic systems.<sup>118</sup>

Plato's multi-expressible theology stems from the recognition of that which is, 'enduringly true, which fundamentally and essentially evades object knowledge, direct statement, or adequate formulation.'<sup>119</sup> All the Ideas are divine, various names and representations of this divine (the One, the Beautiful, the Good, the Just, etc.) but not

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<sup>117</sup> Jaspers, *Great Philosophers*, 156.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 149.

exhaustive of it, nor housing it completely. Every Form is true and divine in itself, but never fully descriptive of the whole of the divine of which it is an expression

Turning from Jaspers to Murdoch, we are given another option in Plato's thought. If Jasper's view of Plato's theology is one that is known by a multi-expressed God, then the question is not whether this God is personal or not, but is a God known by both expressions, and even those names that are still not yet developed. However, for Iris Murdoch we must look beyond a notion of a personal God altogether in order to gain a true understanding of Plato, and to understand where the religious life that Plato teaches can be applied to a contemporary setting. She writes that, 'Plato, who treated the Olympians with such a careful detachment, was of course well aware of the ambiguous nature of a busy personified 'God' or gods except as either necessary cult or explanatory myth in a philosophical context.'<sup>120</sup> 'Any seriously envisaged "God", Murdoch continues, 'once liberated from Zeus, has to recede, since anything said about him is likely to mislead us...'<sup>121</sup> For Murdoch, the way of true understanding for Plato and existence as a whole is to move beyond a conception of a personal God to one that is espoused by Plato himself. For Murdoch, the philosophical religious ideal represented in Plato is one which moves beyond a personal God in favour of the spiritual reality of the Good.

For Murdoch, it is the Good that provides the loftiest vision of the divine, but it is a vision with no association to God. In fact, for Murdoch, no relation exists at all in Plato's mind between the Good and the conception of God, personal or otherwise as the Good exceeds the conception of God altogether. She writes,

Plato does not set up the Form of the Good as God, this would be absolutely un-Platonic, nor does he anywhere give a sign of missing or needing a real God to assist his explanations. On the contrary, the Good is above the level of gods or God.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Murdoch, *Existentialists*, 442.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>122</sup> Murdoch, *Metaphysics*, 475.

Murdoch writes of the Good that it is a 'a transcendent magnetic centre' providing the most realistic and least corruptible use for the moral and religious life which is for her in no way identified with God.<sup>123</sup> She writes,

Plato's *image* (metaphor) for the Form of Good is another separate spherical object, the sun: an ideal unity, a transcendent source of light. Good is above being non-personal, non-contingent, not a particular thing among other things. Plato illumines it with stories which are deliberately cast as explanatory myths and must not be mistaken for anything else. Plato's 'sun' is separate and perfect, yet also immanent in the world as the life-giving magnetic genesis of all our struggles for truth and virtue. Plato never identified his Form of the Good with God (the use of *theos* at *Republic* 597B is a *façon de parler*), and this separation is for him an essential one. Religion is above the level of the 'gods'. There are no gods and no God either.<sup>124</sup>

For Murdoch the vision of the Good is not the vision of a god, but is an 'impersonal object of love, a transcendent idea, *pictured* as a magnetic centre of vitality....',<sup>125</sup> it is a 'mythical religious vision, which in Plato's mind has nothing to do with a personal God or gods.'<sup>126</sup> Yet, for Murdoch, though the Good is abstract and impersonal, it still maintains an active and mystical role within the world. In fact, it is because the Good is abstract and impersonal that humanity enjoys a relationship to the Good which is 'distant and apart', yet is 'a source of energy', 'an active principle of truthful cognition and moral understanding in the soul' as 'the inspiration and love-object of Eros.'<sup>127</sup> The Good, writes Murdoch,

is not a logical universal, or a Person, it is *sui generis*. It is a 'reality principle' whereby we find our way about the world. Plato's philosophy offers a *metaphysical picture* of that essential presence, together with (throughout the dialogues) many and various instances and examples of our relations to it. So there is, we may say, a rainbow bridge – but no covenant.<sup>128</sup>

When seen as a whole as new interpretations of Plato's philosophical theology, the ideas of Jaspers and Murdoch are not contrasting options but complementary. Jaspers speaks of a 'dynamic' theology which sees in Plato a multi-faceted divine

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<sup>123</sup> *Existentialists and Mystics*, 361.

<sup>124</sup> Murdoch, *Metaphysics* 37-8.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.* 344.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, 399.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 474.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*.

exhibiting itself in the differing visions of the various Forms all representative of one God. For Murdoch this same idea is taken from a different perspective in that the Forms offer a far more compelling theology than a personal God of traditional theology. Where these two perspectives come together is that they perceive Plato as presenting a theology which is not bound by the expression of a personal God. The point at which these two perspectives draw apart is that Jaspers sees a God of many names, whereas in Murdoch, it is Plato's Good that is the central object of his philosophical theology in which all things display a *Good* of many names, images which the world 'is full of.'<sup>129</sup> Both see a divine Unity which lies beyond full expression in Plato (for Jaspers, a God pictured in the differing Forms and for Murdoch, a Good which is the central focus of Plato's theology) but Murdoch conceives also of a multi-faceted divine in the Forms, the Demiurge, and the World Soul whereas Jaspers strives to see the one overall God. For Jaspers and Murdoch collectively, we see in Plato a much more fluid theology. The interpretation of Plato's philosophical theology is enriched by the tension of both views which sees Plato as speaking of a God known in the Forms as well as the Form of Good being placed even to a prominence beyond a traditional expression of God. Both Jaspers and Murdoch wish to move beyond dogmatism in Plato, Jaspers beyond the ideas of expression and Murdoch beyond a conception that the Good cannot stand on its own without a conception of God to compare it to. However, both preserve religious viewpoints within Plato. Held in tension, they point to a multi-faceted but unified experience of the divine, but a divine which lies beyond traditional conceptions of God and that make the debates of the relationship of God to the Ideas more profound. Still, and in the end, Jaspers and Murdoch point us on by this tension to the culminating experience in Plato's philosophical theology that is ultimately expressed as a religious experience.

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<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 455.



## Conclusion

In conclusion, we may say that Plato speaks of a divine with which the philosopher is personally involved. As we have seen, Plato speaks of the Forms and the divine, even God, as 'personally' appealing to the philosopher and as that with which the philosopher is in relationship. Yet, further, Plato's philosophical theology offers a perspective in which the Forms and God are seen in relationship to one another which provides a perspective for the soul's own relationship to, and the experience of the Divine. The debates as to whether the Forms are or are not expressions of God is inapplicable for contemporary thought as long as applied to preserving a traditional concept of God, but when seen imaginatively as in a philosophical theology of the Good, or in the Forms being expressions of one divine reality, even a God of many names, such considerations become a source of a profound philosophical theology. The depth of this philosophical theology is especially seen when it is applied in the light of the religious philosophical experience, upon which Plato's philosophical theology is based, and to which it ultimately strives.

## CHAPTER FIVE: INEXPRESSIBILITY AND THE INEXPRESSIBLE EXPERIENCE

Philosophy as a religious experience in Plato ultimately expresses itself in an inexpressible experience. It is this experience that characterises both the vision of the divine and the philosophical experience itself. Such an experience is shown in Plato's treatment of writing in the *Phaedrus*, the vision of the Forms in the *Symposium* and the *Republic*, the concept of God in the *Timaeus*, and culminates in the philosophical experience itself of the *Seventh Letter*. What these show is that this inexpressible experience is the goal of Plato's philosophy and is one of the most poignant aspects of Plato's philosophy as a religious endeavour.

Plato is a writer,<sup>1</sup> yet, as Socrates makes clear in the *Phaedrus*, it is the philosophical experience of the divine that one should strive for, the encounter of the divine in the soul. When considered in light of the usefulness of the experience of philosophy, words and writing only serve as reminders of other words, paling in comparison to the actual experience of philosophy in the living discourse. In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates says that one must be wary of any ultimate power of the written word for it is only a simple reminder, only marks on a page, and is only an imitation of that first-hand knowledge of the divine that gives wisdom. Socrates recounts the Egyptian myth of the god Theuth coming to the lord of the gods, Thamus/Ammon, to show him the gift of writing which Ammon refuses. (*Phaedrus* 274d ff) Ammon says,

If men learn this (writing), it will implant forgetfulness in their souls; they will cease to exercise memory because they rely on that which is written, calling things to remembrance no longer from within themselves, but by means of external marks. What you have discovered is a recipe not for memory, but for reminder. And it is not true wisdom that you offer your disciples, but only its semblance, for by telling them many things without teaching them you will make them seem to know much, while for the most part they know nothing, and as men filled, not with wisdom, but with the conceit of wisdom, they will be a burden to their fellows. (275a-b)

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<sup>1</sup> Erik Davis, *Techgnosis: myth, magic, and mysticism in the age of information* (Harmony Books: New York, 1998), 24. Eric Havelock argues that the realm of the Forms may have revealed itself to Plato through the alphabet, as the Forms are analogies to visible forms, they are also forms of the alphabet.

For Socrates, the problem of writing is that it does not teach the wisdom that is known in the soul, but is simply an exercise of dealing with words. To rely upon writing is to forego the internal realisation of wisdom and truth spawned within the soul, for one that simply conjures memory by an external mark. Writing does not promote a knowing of oneself, nor anything eternal, and,

anyone who leaves behind him a written manual, and likewise anyone who takes it over from him on the supposition that such writing will provide something reliable and permanent, must be exceedingly simple-minded; he must really be ignorant of Ammon's utterance, if he imagines that written words can do anything more than remind one who knows that which the writing is concerned with. (275d)

However, beyond the written word is a word and discourse that is eternal, written in the soul, not on paper as lifeless marks on a page, but living:

But now tell me, is there another sort of discourse, that is brother to the written speech, but of unquestioned legitimacy? Can we see how it originates, and how much better and more effective it is than the other? ...the sort that goes together with knowledge, and is written in the soul of the learner, that can defend itself, and knows to whom it should speak and to whom it should say nothing. (276a)

Phaedrus describes the answer to Socrates' question: 'You mean the living and breathing word (λόγον λέγεις ζῶντα καὶ ἔμψυχον) of him who knows, of which the written word may justly be called an image [εἶδωλον, a 'ghost']'.<sup>2</sup> The word of wisdom is one that is alive and not simply an image or a spectre that only appears. For Plato wisdom is that which is embodied and made alive in the philosophical experience.

Iris Murdoch gives a poignant commentary in her, *The Fire and the Sun*:

Since truth (relation to the timeless) exists for incarnate being only in immediate consciousness, in live dialectic, writing is precisely a way of absenting oneself from truth and reality... What is really important in philosophy cannot be put into written words and scarcely indeed into words. (Language itself may be a barrier.)<sup>3</sup>

This is a composite of Plato's notion. As Murdoch writes, the important part of philosophy cannot be described for the nature of the *Dialogues* is that they lead to the *experience* of philosophy. Murdoch comments,

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<sup>2</sup> Harold North Fowler's translation in *Loeb* edition, volume 1 (1982), 567.

<sup>3</sup> Murdoch, *Existentialists*, 405.

Writing can easily become a kind of lying, something frivolously pursued for its own sake, in fact an art form. True understanding comes suddenly to trained thinkers after sustained and persistent discussion; and there is little danger of a man forgetting the truth once he has grasped it since it lies within a small compass.<sup>4</sup>

The 'truer heir' of Plato's argument is found within philosophy that is an,

attack upon system, jargon, grandeur, and the development of wordy theories which prevents a simple lively relationship with truth. (The dialogue form itself is of course a slight precaution against monolithic system.)<sup>5</sup>

The importance of this non-reliance upon writing and words for Plato is that true wisdom is found in the personal philosophical experience of the dialogue. As Murdoch comments, there is in Plato, 'a deeper concern about the independent creative thinking remembering person.'<sup>6</sup> Plato's objections to writing set forth in the *Phaedrus* can be summarised in that, 'written works can only be inert reminders of real communications which take place orally in particular contexts between one person and another.'<sup>7</sup>

Murdoch continues that, 'the problem about writing is a problem about 'live remembrance': not the dead written text prompting second-hand reactions, but the deep called-up truth of the individual mind.'<sup>8</sup> We find echoes of Plato, writes Murdoch, in modern thoughts as in Wittgenstein,<sup>9</sup> who by his direct method, 'scared' off disciples, writing with reluctance 'because he feared that his books would fall into the hands of fools.'<sup>10</sup> Wittgenstein, Murdoch writes,

thought that there was little danger of forgetting what had once been properly understood. Criticising some of his own work he is reported as saying in conversation: 'No. If this were philosophy you could learn it by heart.' What has been clearly seen is appropriated and cannot be lost.<sup>11</sup>

The natural apprehension of philosophy is necessary to the would-be philosopher for Plato. It becomes the notion and element of the experiential of that which cannot be

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 406.

<sup>6</sup> Murdoch, *Metaphysics*, 18.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>9</sup> See also Frederick Sontag's, *Wittgenstein and the Mystical: philosophy as an ascetic practice* (The American Academy of Religion, Scholar's Press: Atlanta, Georgia, 1995).

<sup>10</sup> Murdoch, *Existentialists*, 406.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

written, or even described. To Plato, philosophy is not about texts but about the individual soul. Philosophy is not textual analysis to Plato, it is found beyond the words, in the personal experience of the divine in the philosophical soul.

As with the striving in Plato to go beyond writing to the philosophical experience which those words convey, the nature of Plato's Forms is that they are founded upon an inexpressible experience as much as they are a point of doctrine. In Plato the Forms are more than a doctrinal statement but are involved in the philosopher's own existence. They represent a coinciding of philosophical doctrine and experience as they are that upon which the philosopher bases his or her perception of wisdom, but are depicted in Plato to be also that which the philosopher experiences. Exemplified in the vision of Beauty, the Good, the One, the Forms are described as being an experience of the inexpressible and the ineffable inexpressible vision and experience. In the *Symposium*, Socrates recalls Diotima's words on love (*eros*) for Beauty that as the lover progresses in the 'mysteries of Love', viewing all the aspects of the beautiful in succession, when 'suddenly' (ἐξαίφνης) there comes to him the 'final revelation' of,

that wondrous vision which is the very soul of the beauty he has toiled so long for. It is an everlasting loveliness which neither comes nor goes, which neither flowers nor fades, for such beauty is the same on every hand, the same then as now, here as there, this way as that way, the same to every worshiper as it is to every other. (211a)

The soul progresses to the eternal Beauty, where the vision of the Beautiful is seen not to, 'take the form of a face, or of hands, or of anything that is of the flesh', and,

will be neither words, nor knowledge, nor a something that exists in something else, such as a living creature, or the earth, or the heavens, or anything that is – but subsisting of itself and by itself in an eternal oneness, while every lovely thing partakes of it in such sort that, however much the parts may wax and wane, it will be neither more nor less, but still the same inviolable whole. (211b)

The Beauty that is longed for in the soul is one which is beyond expression, beyond the tangible, neither touched nor handled in other beings, but one of which all beautiful things partake. Like the true reality that it is, it is changeless, independent, and is an utter unity. For Plato, to express such a vision in its essence is an impossibility as words falter.



Diotima's words about the vision of the Beautiful in the *Symposium* express an experience of the divine that is the goal of the philosophical life. It is not only a concept of the divine but one which is to be experienced as Diotima says,

Whoever has been initiated so far in the mysteries of Love has viewed all these aspects of beautiful in due succession, is at last drawing near the final revelation. And now, Socrates, there bursts upon him that wondrous vision which is the very soul of the beauty he has toiled so long for. (211a)

The vision of the beautiful appears to the philosopher-lover suddenly (ἐξαίφνης) as one who has been initiated into the mysteries of Love.<sup>12</sup> Festugière writes that such a vision, according to Diotima's words, is the experience of that which is beyond expression. In his commentary, Festugière asks, 'how do we apprehend this primary object (the Form)?'<sup>13</sup> It comes by a purification of the subject: a detachment with the world, the 'contemplative mood, the turning of the soul upon itself,' and a purification of the object: the contemplation of a beautiful boy to the Form itself.<sup>14</sup> As Festugière writes, once such a stage is arrived at, 'it is no longer a question of an abstraction, but of a leap into the unknown' – an initiation into the *great mysteries*, 'the perfect initiation.'<sup>15</sup>

Festugière writes,

Up to this point the object was *noeton* in the true sense of the word; it was an object which could be understood, the essence of which could be entirely mastered. Now, one must advance to the Beautiful in itself, an object admitting neither of definition nor of name. The *Symposium* is positive on this point, and the text, in my opinion, leaves no room for doubt.<sup>16</sup>

Festugière argues that essence (*ousia*), definition (*logos*), and denomination (*onoma*) as in *Laws* (895d) are interchangeable. But it is here in the *Symposium* that we come to the 'Ocean of the Beautiful' which is above *onoma* and above *logos*.<sup>17</sup> 'Thence', says

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<sup>12</sup> Though the mystery religions of the Greeks involved silence and secrecy as to the rites of initiation and ritual, according to Grace Jantzen, scholars such as Louis Boyer clarify that 'it was not an esoteric doctrine that was secret, nor was there at this stage any question of a specialised means to religious knowledge not available to normal human perception....' Jantzen, *Power, Gender, and Christian Mysticism*, 27.

<sup>13</sup> Festugière, *Personal Religion*, 43.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 43, citing *Symposium* 211a.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

Festugière, 'it is no more an *ousia*, it is above *ousia*.'<sup>18</sup> Such is the 'mystical' contact says Festugière with the Form for there is, writes Festugière, 'merely a touching (ἐφαπτομένῳ *Symposium* 212a), the touching of which the mystics speak to designate the ineffable contact by which they attain the supreme object.'<sup>19</sup>

Similarly, the same experiential inexpressibility is given by Socrates in the description of the Good in the *Republic* (509ff). The Good is the cause of knowledge and truth, 'yet fair as they both are', says Socrates, it surpasses them both. (508e) They are indeed like the Good, but, says Socrates, 'still higher honor belongs to the possession and habit of the good.' (509a) In Glaucon's words, Socrates speaks of an 'inconceivable beauty' (ἀμήχανον κάλλος – 509a) for even as it is the cause of knowledge and truth, even the object of knowledge itself (*Republic* 508e), the Good is beyond being, ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας, existing by itself beyond that which it gives and causes:

In like manner, then, you are to say that the objects of knowledge not only receive from the presence of the good their being known, but their very existence and essence is derived to them from it, though the good itself is not essence but still transcends essence (*epekeina tes ousias*), in dignity and surpassing power. (*Republic* 509b)

The experience of the vision of the Forms, especially the Good is one that transforms the soul. Eric Voegelin enquires in his commentary on the Good,

What is the Idea of the Agathon? The briefest answer to the question will best bring out the decisive point: Concerning the content of the Agathon nothing can be said at all. That is the fundamental insight of Platonic ethics. The transcendence of the Agathon makes immanent propositions concerning its content possible. The vision of the Agathon does not render a material rule of conduct, but forms the soul through an experience of transcendence.<sup>20</sup>

It is the *experience* that is key to understanding the description of the Good – it is a vision where the philosopher sees the ineffable source of all things. A. E. Taylor writes lucidly of the philosophical experience of the Good that:

The last question whether the philosophy of the *Republic* and the dialogues generally is 'rationalism' or not is briefly this. If we could fully comprehend 'the good' we should see directly that it is through and through intelligible, and the

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>20</sup> Voegelin, *Plato and Aristotle*, 112.

only object which is wholly and perfectly intelligible; as we never can comprehend it completely, there is, in fact, always something mysterious, not yet understood, about it. It is free from all self-contradiction, but it always contains 'surprises' for us. We can 'see into it' to some extent, and it is the philosopher's duty to see further and further into it; but you will never 'see through it.'<sup>21</sup>

It is indescribability that is also a characteristic of Parmenides' exposition of the One.<sup>22</sup> The One, says Parmenides, 'is not named or spoken of, not an object of opinion or of knowledge, not perceived by any creature.' (*Parmenides* 142a) The One is known through what it is not; it is beyond descriptions of wholeness, beginning and ending, shape, place, motion, likeness and relationship, age and time, and even that which *is*. (137ff) The dialogue even ends in the philosophical and mystical conclusion:

To this we may add the conclusion. It seems that, whether there is or is not a one, both that one and the others alike are and are not, and appear and do not appear to be, all manner of things in all manner of ways, with respect to themselves and to one another. (166b)

The point of the *Parmenides* is that the One is not simply an exposition, but is one which, as with every dialogue, the seeker experiences transformation. John Cooper writes that the effect of the entire scene of the dialogue is twofold: 'to emphasize the extraordinary philosophical value of this conversation and to put us hearers at a great intellectual distance from it...'<sup>23</sup> In reflection of Cooper's commentary, we are drawn near to the One in our experience but we are part of the philosophical experience of the dialogue and of attempting to conceptualise the One, however we are also aware of the extreme distance of our never fully realising what the One is. Throughout the dialogue Plato emphasises the philosophical experience of the One – an experience beyond description.

Like the Forms, God is one who is inexpressible. The famous statement by Timaeus is that, 'the father and maker of this universe is past finding out, and even if we found him, to tell of him to all men would be impossible.' (*Timaeus* 28e) The cosmic order is experienced, the philosopher experiences the divine and eternal pattern, but for Plato we are at a loss when it comes to describing this God who ordered it. For Gerard

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<sup>21</sup> A. E. Taylor, *Plato*, 288.

<sup>22</sup> Parmenides' own writing proves the point as well. See Katherine Freeman's *Ancilla*.

<sup>23</sup> *Plato: Complete Works*, John M. Cooper, ed., 360.

Watson, it is the notion of *mystery* that is essential to Plato as for Plato there is a, ‘mystery in being’, a mystery in ‘knowing, in using language and in acting morally,’<sup>24</sup> To miss this point in Plato, writes Watson, is to misinterpret him altogether.

Plato believes that there is some sort of ideal reality which is a mystery. Man, his knowledge and actions are set against this ideal and measured by it: to this extent at least Plato is a theologian.<sup>25</sup>

Festugière comments that ultimately Plato’s words are a description of the ‘cognition of the supreme object’<sup>26</sup> of which the encounter with the inexpressibility of the philosophical experience is in,

the final degree of our metaphysical investigations, the term on which all the rest depends, is an object which defies definition, and hence cannot be named. It is the Unknown God.<sup>27</sup>

To experience this inexpressible God in Plato is to face the power of mystery as a theological idea. Applicable to Plato’s position and the philosophical experience as a whole is Gabriel Marcel’s comment that, ‘Reflection shows, however, that in a genuine mystery the distinction between subject and object, between what is in me and what is before me, breaks down.’<sup>28</sup> Marcel’s point is one that is exhibited in Plato in that the encounter with the divine, as that which is inexpressible, is an experience of the soul in which the separation between subject and object breaks down as the person becomes involved within the divine itself. As Marcel continues, ‘A mystery is something in which I am myself involved, and it can therefore only be thought of as a sphere where the distinction between what is in me and what is before me loses its meaning and its initial validity.’<sup>29</sup> If such mystery takes the form of a question, say in the meaning of life, or of God, then, Keen comments, there is no objective standpoint which I can adopt to answer such questions as I am involved in, and inseparable from, that about which I am asking.<sup>30</sup> B. P. Jouve illumines this point when he writes, ‘Mysteries are not truths

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<sup>24</sup> Watson, *Unwritten*, 5.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>26</sup> Festugière, *Personal Religion among the Greeks*, 44.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Sam Keen, *Gabriel Marcel*, 20.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

that lie beyond us; they are truths that comprehend us.’<sup>31</sup> Keen continues that within Marcel’s opinion, ‘In contrast to the world of the problematic where truth may be determined by objective means, wherever one is involved in mystery, one is involved as a total person in an intimate set of relations which can ever be grasped as something apart from one’s self and held up as an object of knowledge.’<sup>32</sup> Plato agrees with Marcel that mystery is not to be equated with that which is totally unknowable or the unknown. Thought penetrates all aspects of human experience and it is a search for the ‘ideal reality’ that is of the essential nature of Plato. Yet, it is a search that culminates in an experience of the divine through philosophy that is ultimately mysterious that words cannot describe. For Plato, philosophy is a search for a reality that is eternal – a reality which provides the impetus to philosophy and which is found in the philosophical concepts, the Forms, and the Divine, immanently witnessed by the philosophical soul – but as written by Plato himself, one that remains mysterious, and ultimately inexpressible.

As it is an inexpressible experience that involves humanity within it, the divine reality is also capable of being known by many names. As Guthrie writes upon the philosophical experience itself,

Since it cannot be described literally, no single account can do it justice. The effect is cumulative. The dialogue form, and Plato’s own imaginative powers, made it possible for him to present it from different angles, using different metaphors and parallels.<sup>33</sup>

The connection of this with the concept of the divine is made by Iris Murdoch who writes, ‘We still live in the old familiar mysterious world and explain and clarify and celebrate it in the old endlessly fertile and inventive modes of speech.’<sup>34</sup> ‘We enjoy the freedom of imagination.’<sup>35</sup> Further, as there are many modes of speech, one experiences the divine entering all part of existence. As Murdoch continues in her own understanding of the Good:

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>33</sup> Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, 507; A. E. Taylor, *Plato: The Man and His Work*, 231.

<sup>34</sup> Murdoch, *Metaphysics*, 455.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*



The idea of ‘the world as full of images of God and hierarchies pointing to God’ is... fundamental in religion and (*mutatis mutandis*) in morality. I think this is what (if we put Good for God) the world is full of! The affirmative way, which can find the divine everywhere in all the desire-driven burrowings of cognition, relates spirituality to the whole of our being.<sup>36</sup>

Murdoch’s positive view about the world enlightens our thinking on a conception of God that is much more fluid than static, dynamic rather than staid, seeing the divine in various ways.

The ineffability of the divine as an experience of the soul is that which provides theological insight, as it is the highest expression of the Divine and the ultimate experience of the philosophical life. The one who experiences such a vision is that one who is truly a philosopher for Plato, one who truly knows the Divine. Iris Murdoch quoting Weil, ‘that admirable Platonist’,<sup>37</sup> writes that a poem, ‘is beautiful in so far as the poet’s thought is fixed upon the ineffable.’<sup>38</sup> The same is true for Plato in the inexpressible experience of the Forms and God – only after this vision does one attempt theology, or at least does so with such a vision in mind. But, it is the *experience* of transcendence for Plato that is important, the description will always fall short of the actual reality but it is the experience that is the beginning of philosophy itself as the *Seventh Letter* proves.

Lastly, it is within the *Seventh Letter*<sup>39</sup> that one of the greatest expression of the religious experience of philosophy as an inexpressible experience is given as it is one in which the inexpressibility of the philosophical vision and philosophy as an experience are united. Plato describes philosophy as an indescribable experience of the soul:

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<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> Murdoch, *Existentialists*, 460-1.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> On the authenticity of the *Seventh Letter*: Gerard Watson’s discussion on this in the Appendix of his, *Plato’s Unwritten Teaching*, is helpful as well as A. E. Taylor’s, *Philosophical Studies* (Macmillan and Co.: London, 1934). The full discussion of whether this is or not the actual letter of Plato is one which I have not chosen to pursue here due to the importance of other issues related to the discussion. The point of philosophy as an experience is sufficiently grounded in other dialogues, though, admittedly, without the unique symbolism of the *Letter*. For some, the legitimacy is unquestioned, though there is no truly conclusive answer to the question. My own thoughts are that the letter is legitimate on the fact that nothing in the letter directly opposes anything else within the undisputed corpus of Plato. It is either by Plato himself, or one completely familiar with Plato’s own thought to provide valuable thought for the Platonic perspective.

I certainly have composed no work in regard to it (philosophy), nor shall I ever do so in future, for there is no way of putting it in words like other studies. Acquaintance with it must come rather after a long period of attendance on instruction in the subject itself and of close companionship, when suddenly, like a blaze kindled by a leaping spark, it is generated in the soul and at once becomes self-sustaining. (*Letter VII*, 341d)

In this classic statement of the inexpressibility of the philosophical experience, Plato describes philosophy as an experience of the soul as a 'spark', a fire, that is ignited in the soul, passing from philosopher to philosopher. Unlike other studies, philosophy is one that is an experience beyond description, (341b) even to the place that even Plato himself would not attempt to describe it. It is an experience which comes from an 'acquaintance' the subject after a 'long period,' in the communion (συζή) with philosophy itself, and in close companionship (συνουσία) with it and with those who are lovers of wisdom themselves. In that company, as in the vision of Beauty (*Symposium* 210e), philosophy is 'suddenly' (ἐξαίφνης)<sup>40</sup> born in the soul, as a blaze of fire, and a 'leaping' spark as it passes from one to the other. As in the *Symposium* (210e) where the vision of Beauty is beheld in a 'suddenness of the mystic vision of the Idea,<sup>41</sup> so too philosophy is born in the soul through a sudden insight given to the soul. As Guthrie comments, quoting A. E. Taylor, philosophy's 'mode of apprehension, though attainable only *after* a long and arduous process, is by 'direct acquaintance', a sudden revelation, and not through a discursive 'knowledge about' it.<sup>42</sup> Once generated, it becomes a self-sustaining burning. Philosophy is an indescribable, even mystical experience that is ignited in the soul from the communion with the divine and companionship with those who have the same philosophical love. Humanity in such an experience moves beyond the description and word, even beyond the concept to encounter that which is indescribable. The description of philosophy as an indescribable

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<sup>40</sup> Amihud Gilead, in his 'Plato's Eros, Camus' Sisyphus, and the Impossibility of Philosophical Satisfaction,' *Clio* 17 (Summer 1988), 323-44, writes that the philosophical experience of a sudden vision ties directly with an impossibility of philosophical satisfaction in that the philosopher is on a constant search for that which fulfils the soul.

<sup>41</sup> See the Loeb edition of the Rev. R. G. Bury's translation of Plato's *Epistles* (1929), 530 note 2.

<sup>42</sup> Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, 507; A. E. Taylor, *Plato: The Man and His Work*, 231.

experience that comes from a communion with it and suddenly sparks in the soul betrays the religious nature of philosophy an experience that cannot be placed in words.

The attempt to formulate such an intimacy in the form of words or doctrine with motives other than the love of wisdom and the knowledge of the divine, writes Eric Voegelin, 'is worse than futile' for it becomes the, 'desecration of a mystery.'<sup>43</sup> Historically, the attempts to do so are in the case of Dionysius as Plato describes it, (340bff) who brings reproach to the very nature of philosophy itself as a love of wisdom, and brings it to serve the ends of political ambition. For Plato, philosophy is an experience that is directly implicated in a rule of life and behaviour. The philosophical life cannot be taken lightly but one which should cause each individual to count the cost of knowing it. (340bff) The true lover of wisdom possesses a 'divine quality' that makes him or her 'worthy' to accept such a life. (340c) For Plato, philosophy is a 'marvellous quest' one to be entered with all earnestness, or it is not even worth the living. (340c) The value of such a life is so great to the philosopher that there is a hatred for the opposite way of the unphilosophical. (340c) The true lover of wisdom is one who is a 'genuine convert to philosophy' (340d), one on fire with philosophy (340b), and not simply as one with a coat of tan that people get in the sun (340d), but one who is penetrated to the soul by this love for wisdom. Festugière comments that in order for one to apprehend the eternal, there must be a 'purification of the subject', a 'detachment from the world, and a turning of the soul upon itself.'<sup>44</sup> The coming to philosophy is for Plato part of a long process that cannot be taken lightly. As Karl Jaspers writes, when we finally reach the end of philosophical endeavour we lose the sense of words to describe it. The presence of God, writes Jaspers, 'at the end of philosophical endeavour' ceases speech (inexpressibility), has no other gods but finds its fulfilment in the 'unfathomable idea', and bows down before it.<sup>45</sup> 'Trust in this basic attitude makes possible an all-encompassing sense of thankfulness, a wordless, impersonal love.'<sup>46</sup> This is Plato's piety: found within inexpressibility.

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<sup>43</sup> Voegelin, *Order and History*, 19.

<sup>44</sup> Festugière, *Personal Religion*, 42.

<sup>45</sup> Jaspers, *Way of Wisdom*, 49.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

## Conclusion

The inexpressible experience represents the culmination for Plato of philosophy as it joins the most profound expression of the divine with the deepest of experience. It represents the union of the most important aspects of philosophy for Plato in that it is a vision of the divine which the philosopher experiences. As the *Seventh Letter* indicates, this experience of the inexpressibility of the divine is the hallmark of the philosophical life to which all philosophy strives, and the benchmark by which the true philosopher is measured. It may even be said that the experience of that which is inexpressible is that to which Plato's philosophical theology strives and upon which it builds. All in all, it is the experience of the divine through philosophy to which Plato's philosophical theology is given and upon which Plato bases all of his philosophical and theological teaching.

## CONCLUSION

The idea of Plato's philosophy as a religious experience forms a basis for a vibrant and insightful philosophical theology for today. What Plato offers through his philosophy is a religious way of life, an interrelationship of philosophical and religious thought, which sees the pursuit and practice of philosophy as a means through which humanity experiences and encounters the divine. Yet, one of the most theologically evocative ideas that is raised from such a perspective is that the religious experience of philosophy in Plato presents itself as a religious way of life today. From such a perspective, an issue is raised which involves a theological understanding of the human experience of philosophy itself in Plato. In particular, two theological ideas come to the forefront when such an experience is considered in regard to Plato's philosophy as a religious way of life: namely, a theological perspective which sees the quest of philosophy as a religious way of life as establishing a *theology of philosophy*, especially in terms of seeing the religious experience of philosophy as one that is perennial, even atemporal, making the way for the experience of Plato's philosophy as a religious way of life to be recognised today. Secondly, because it is based upon the human experience of the divine, the practice of Plato's philosophy as a religious way of life leads to the experience of a concept of the divine which is open and dynamic, going beyond traditional theological constructs. What is seen is that the religious experience of philosophy in Plato is based upon a synonymous interrelationship between philosophical and religious thought in which the idea of philosophy is so theologically charged, and the quest for a theology in Plato so intertwined with philosophy, that the two are inseparable and lead to the same religious way of life.

Yet, what can also be stated is that even with the idea of the synonymous nature of philosophical and religious thought in Plato leading to a religious way of life, the theological ideas that surround this way of life being lived today are neglected. Contemporary theology suffers from not only a lack in what such an understanding holds for theological thought, but is detained within a particular attitude that the religious way of life that is presented by Plato is inapplicable to today's understanding.



Although there is a plethora of reasons offered why this is so, two particular ideas come to the forefront through a view of Christian theology which attempt to establish that there is no commonality between the religious experience which Plato conveys and that which may be known today, and secondly, that thinkers can do no better than take the perspective of traditional Christian thought in constructing philosophical theology in establishing a relevant and engaging theological perspective for the world today. As in one particular perspective known as ‘radical orthodoxy’, the implications of what such a position means within philosophical theology is given in a definition, in a collection of essays, of what ‘radical orthodoxy’ hopes to accomplish:

Radical Orthodoxy reclaims the world by situating its concerns and activities within a theological framework. Not simply returning in nostalgia to the premodern world these essays visit sites in which secularism has invested heavily – aesthetics, politics, sex, the body, personhood, visibility, space – and resituates them from a Christian standpoint; that is, in terms of the Trinity, Christology, the Church and the Eucharist. What emerges is a contemporary theological project made possible by the superficiality of today’s secularism.<sup>1</sup>

The bottom line approach of such a position is that it simply and solely looks to a doctrine of God as revealed in the Christian ‘story’, capitalising upon Christian theology as the central point and best conception of the divine. Yet, to take such a position is not a way forward, as the definition hopes to indicate, but a call back to a holding within tradition away from any theological creativity and speculation because it is found within an established truth, away from a building of theological thought from the human experience. Through such eyes, the world is imposed upon by the Christian revelation implicating that the world is neither engaged nor dialogued with, and the human experience, as the point from which theology creatively arises, disregarded in favour of a concept and knowledge of the divine which is imported as revelation to humanity. Such a position, of course, limits severely the creative expression of philosophical theology by limiting and not recognising the role of human experience in forming theological concepts, and in limiting the idea of the divine to a Christian theology.

However, such a position is challenged through the idea of Plato’s philosophy as

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<sup>1</sup> *Radical Orthodoxy*, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward, eds. (Routledge: London, 1999), 1.

a religious way of life in that what is given in Plato is built upon a much wider theological basis, a philosophical spirituality which, by blending the practice of philosophy with religious thought, engages in a much more dynamic philosophical theology which arises from, and counts as central, the human experience of the divine which comes through the endeavour of philosophy as a religious experience, and not an imposed doctrine. Beyond simply an acknowledgement of the religious dimension of Plato's philosophy, as one begins to understand Plato's philosophy as a religious way of life today, what is elicited is an understanding of the human experience itself as well as a conception of the divine giving insights for theological thought today.

One of the most poignant theological perspectives offered in Plato is a theology of philosophy. As has been established throughout this thesis, the important aspect of Plato's philosophical theology begins with the fact that the practice of philosophy for Plato is characterised as a way of transformation within humanity. This experience of transformation informs one of the central ideas, if not *the* central idea upon which Plato's entire philosophical theology is built, even how the divine is both conceived and experienced in Plato. However, for Plato, even though philosophy arises from its source in the divine, the transformational aspect of philosophy does not involve the divine being conceived as an outside source importing philosophy, or any form of revelation, to humanity from outside the soul, but involves a transformation which is realised through that already present within the soul: namely, the knowledge and memory of the divine that is awakened through philosophy. Because philosophy involves this memory of the divine, as Iris Murdoch points out, philosophy, for Plato, is more than simply a mental exercise but is a spiritual discipline,<sup>2</sup> and throughout the whole of his work, 'Plato understands intellectual activity as something spiritual.'<sup>3</sup> As Pierre Hadot further points out, to see philosophy in this way is to see that,

we are not just dealing with a code of good moral conduct, but with a *way of being*, in the strongest sense of the term. In the last analysis, then, the term

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<sup>2</sup> Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 404.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 437.

‘spiritual exercises’ is the best one, because it leaves no doubt that we are dealing with exercises which engage the totality of spirit.<sup>4</sup>

In fact, we are given in Plato a vision of the world which, in Hadot’s understanding, involves a metamorphosis of one’s entire being.<sup>5</sup>

What can be understood is that philosophy as a divine way of life is already present within the human experience and is given within the understanding that there is a correspondence between the human experience and the divine – an interaction which Plato’s philosophy realises and makes known. For Plato’s philosophical theology, philosophy is a way of salvation that fulfils a need on the part of humanity to know the divine above the flux of the world, to be, in the words of Karl Jaspers, ‘in contact with what is most essential.’<sup>6</sup> The transformation that Plato’s philosophical theology presents is not a turning away from existence, but represents an enhanced way of existence in that one’s entire way of life as a philosopher is given to constantly encountering the divine. Interestingly enough, this particular aspect is emphasised further by Jaspers when he writes that through philosophy we are ‘reborn’, and when reborn see that the ‘value of all finite things, though always limited’ is ‘enhanced....’<sup>7</sup> When seen in the context of Plato’s philosophy as a religious way of life today, philosophy is a way of transformation through which humanity encounters the divine, but even further, it is this experience that is the governing factor in the way that humanity conceptualises the divine as well.

The theological perspective that philosophy is a means of transformation, and even salvation, in Plato betrays a philosophical theology that conceptualises the divine as directly involved within, and arising out of, human existence and experience. The insight of Plato’s philosophical theology is that it is a philosophical theology of humanity *and* the divine in interaction which is, particularly for our concern, seen in a philosophical theology that is based upon the human experience of philosophy as a religious experience. For Plato, the philosophical contemplation of the divine is

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<sup>4</sup> Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 127.

<sup>5</sup> Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 127.

<sup>6</sup> Karl Jaspers, *Way to Wisdom*, 122.

<sup>7</sup> Jaspers, *Way to Wisdom*, 38.

intertwined with, and never removed from, human experience, and the ramifications of Plato's philosophical theology are such that they always correspond back to a type of life and existence lived out in society and the world, establishing a philosophical theology in which the contemplation of the divine affects the way that life is lived. Offered through Plato is a philosophical theology of what the human experience entails: not only a doctrine of the soul reflecting the divine, but also the ways that philosophy as a religious way of life involves itself within existence. In one way, the theological ideas surrounding Plato's philosophy as a religious way of life are constructed from, and involved within the forces which affect humanity at its deepest level. In other words, the various ideas which make up the human experience as a whole become the bases for the various theological motifs that Plato employs within the religious implications of his philosophy. Considering the aspect of the theological implications of Plato's philosophy as a religious way of life today, and due to the interrelationship between philosophical and religious in his thought, the ideas that govern human existence such as life, love, death, etc. are seen in Plato as theological ideas, concepts through which the divine is known and encountered *via* philosophy. Proven by the particular case of philosophy as a way of death, that which is very much part of the human experience becomes in Plato that which conveys the divine life of philosophy and builds through this common idea of human existence a religious way of life. Eric Voegelin raises this important aspect when he writes that what we encounter in Plato, at least in the early work, is that the soul is ordered by the forces of Thanatos (death), Eros (desirous love), and Dike (justice), or philosophy as the practise of dying, the erotic reaching out of the soul in love toward the Agathon, the Good, and the right ordering of the soul through participation in the Idea.<sup>8</sup>

In Plato, therefore, theology can never be separated from human experience, and in fact, it is the religious experience of philosophy that determines and defines the divine. A modern commentary upon this idea is offered by Karl Jaspers who writes,

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<sup>8</sup> Eric Voegelin, *Plato and Aristotle*, 272.

for us the Deity, if it exists, is only as it appears to us in the world, as it speaks to us in the language of man and the world... Only in ways that man can grasp does the Deity appear.<sup>9</sup>

In Plato, the intermixing of the two ideas of the human experience with the divine promotes a theological perspective where the two become inseparable. In fact, the ideas of the divine and human experience are reflective of each other in that as one draws in toward an understanding of the divine, humanity is immediate within the purview, and likewise as the idea of human experience is considered, a conception of the divine is automatically drawn. As Jaspers goes on to say,

Thus it is seen that it is wrong to play off against each other the question about man and the question about the Deity. Although in the world only man is reality for us that does not preclude that precisely the quest for man leads to Transcendence. That the Deity alone is truly reality does not preclude that this reality is accessible to us only in the world; as it were, as an image in the mirror of man, because something of the Deity must be in him for him to be able to respond to the Deity. Thus the theme of philosophy is oriented, in polar alternation, in two directions: *deum et animam scire supio* [I desire knowledge of God and the soul].<sup>10</sup>

Thus, Plato's theology is one of the religious experience of philosophy: that which is an analysis of what takes place in the human soul, in the human experience of the philosophical life, and a divine formed from such an interaction.

In seeing Plato's philosophical theology as deeply human in its application, one then begins to open to the possibility that Plato's philosophy as a religious way of life is applicable today. For certain, to seek Plato as a source of religious thought or devotion is to adopt a position which recognises a sense of atemporality of the philosophical and theological enterprise that Plato undertakes because it is so involved within the human experience – an experience which is common to all because of their humanity. What is raised through such an idea is that Plato's philosophical theology is able to be lived out and understood even in a contemporary context in that it participates within and addresses a common approach to the human question which is beyond the limits of the accidents of time, place or culture. As in the *Seventh Letter*, it is emphasised that

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<sup>9</sup> Jaspers in *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, ed. by Walter Kaufmann (Meridian, 1989), 169.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*



philosophy is an experience of the human soul, that for which the philosopher strives in the pursuit of wisdom. What Plato describes is that which is, as he indicates, a general experience that all who seek philosophy will undertake and experience for themselves, no matter the time and place which they occupy. This experience of which Plato speaks is one that is based upon an ancient definition of philosophy, a seeking of Wisdom, and as one adopts this same position seeking the same philosophical ideal, she or he experiences the one idea of philosophy and encounter with the divine. Taken from this, such an experience bears upon contemporary understanding in that what is given in the *Seventh Letter*, and indeed the *Dialogues* as a whole, is a philosophical religious experience that is, at the very least, similar to that which is known by Plato himself which he encourages in his readers. Further, such an understanding and experience is possible through Plato because of the theological position that is taken in regard to philosophy – an atemporal quest, need, and experience that is able to transform every individual through an encounter with the divine in the soul, which all possess and which is fulfilled equally by an encounter with the divine, which remains changeless in its essence throughout time.

In our own time, such a thought is challenged by a perspective that influences both theological and philosophical thought in that all are bound by the hermeneutics of one's own age, to the point that no one has the same experience and that all of our experiences are conditioned by our own particular situation. Even as Protagoras said which Plato quotes himself, 'man is the measure of all things,' (*Cratylus* 386a) no one can claim an experience which unites them to a group or individual beyond their own first-hand experience. Of course, no one will safely deny that there is some hermeneutical distance between our own historical and cultural situation and others of other time periods, and cannot deny that we all possess our own unique, individual experiences which are ours alone, unable to be linked to anyone else. However, what is experienced through a reading of Plato by those who seek Plato as a religious thinker is that there is a commonality of human experience, based upon a common understanding of humanity itself, which is addressed by Plato through his philosophy and through which humanity is transformed. In our own time, Karl Jaspers illumines such an

understanding in his work, *The Perennial Scope of Philosophy*, by alluding to the consideration that there is a universal religious experience of philosophy in which all those who desire wisdom desire the same thing. Jaspers writes that, 'Philosophical truth is the *philosophia perennis* to which no one can lay claim, but with which everyone engaged in philosophical thought is concerned, and which is present wherever there are true philosophers.'<sup>11</sup> Jaspers sees philosophy as a great tradition which would 'beckon us' in that,

Despite the wide variety of philosophical thought, despite all the contradictions and mutually exclusive claims to truth, there is in all philosophy a One, which no man possesses but about which all serious efforts have at all times gravitated: the one eternal philosophy, the *philosophia perennis*. We must seek this historical foundation of our thinking if we would think clearly and meaningfully.<sup>12</sup>

The 'true philosophers' in this case are those who engage in an atemporal quest through philosophy for a one eternal reality, and it is those philosophers, like Plato, who are able through their work to cast our minds, even our souls, toward this eternal reality. As Jaspers writes, it is only by contemplating the eternal that we are able to 'become ourselves,'<sup>13</sup> and the great philosophers, though people in the world, 'help us to by contemplating that which is eternal.'<sup>14</sup> Through Plato's philosophical theology, contemporary theological and philosophical thought is given an idea of a common human experience which is above time and place.

Yet, where the consideration of Plato's philosophy as a religious way of life today leads us, is to an encounter with the divine. The subjects which have been covered in this thesis involve a concept of the divine as occupying a place very much involved with humanity, manifest in the world and the memory of the soul, but also a transcendent realm that the philosophical soul strives to encounter and become united with in order to live the best possible life. The idea of the divine in Plato constantly occupies a *both-and* position, in the human experience both in the soul *and* in the world, immanent as well as transcendent in relation to humanity. Through the influential

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<sup>11</sup> Jaspers, *Perennial*, 77

<sup>12</sup> Jaspers, *Way to Wisdom*, 16.

<sup>13</sup> Jaspers, *The Great Philosophers*, xiv.

doctrine of the Forms, Plato presents a philosophical theology that expresses this transcendent but very immanent idea of the divine, but one which, through Plato, establishes a way of philosophical spirituality for today.

Through the view of Plato's philosophy as a religious way of life, the concept of the Forms is one that prompts devotion in the philosopher, but it is a divine that is dynamic as the Ideas (e.g. the Good, Beauty, the One, etc.) are each, in and of themselves, divine realities but known in the religious philosophical experience as the centres of the philosophical quest – in dramatic terminology, as the divinities, the true gods, of Plato's philosophy. What is emphasised through this high regard of the philosophical Ideas is that in Plato the concept of the Ideas is the compelling notion in philosopher's religious devotion, and not so much a simple devotion to a personal God. One particular expression of this notion in a contemporary context is seen in the work of Iris Murdoch who manifests a theological perspective that is not only based in Plato, but one that seeks to show that the conception of the divine that is offered by Plato through the experience of his philosophy in the encounter with the Ideas is one that is much more religious, as well as insightful, for contemporary thought than the traditional concepts of the divine altogether.

It is an indisputable fact for Murdoch that one who reads Plato experiences that which is of both a philosophical and religious nature that is applicable for today, for as Fergus Kerr writes, to Murdoch, Plato is indeed a deeply religious thinker<sup>15</sup> to whom 'we must turn'.<sup>16</sup> Yet, the experience that is given through Plato is one that defines, for Murdoch, what a true religious experience is to be, as Kerr continues that for Murdoch, 'Religion is inescapable... and Platonist metaphysics is the only viable form it can now take.'<sup>17</sup> The crucial aspect of Murdoch's position is that we are presented through Plato with the reality of the divine, a divine that is experienced beyond a traditional understanding: one that is beyond a simple description of one or many, or even in terms of being 'personal' or 'impersonal', but one that is religiously moving at the same time.

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Fergus Kerr, *Immortal Longings*, 86.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

For Murdoch, Plato presents a philosophical spirituality that finds its religious devotion in the philosophical quest, a quest that takes one beyond a simple understanding of ‘God’ or ‘gods’ to a quest for a divine that is above traditional conceptions, as Murdoch writes, ‘Plato of course did not believe in a personal God or gods...’,<sup>18</sup> but is one who sees religion or ‘concern with “the ultimate”, above the picturesque or figurative level of “the gods,”’ altogether.<sup>19</sup> As Kerr notes, for Murdoch, this unbelief in a personal god or gods is precisely why Plato ‘speaks to our age.’<sup>20</sup> However, as Murdoch indicates, it is not an unbelief in the divine, nor the lack of a religious experience in his philosophy which makes Plato applicable to the contemporary age, but a negating of a belief in a personal God. The type of experience that Plato portrays through his philosophy makes him relevant to our time, an experience which does not simply rely upon traditional understandings of the divine, but is one made up within the spiritual reality, power, and human experience of the Forms.

In considering the human experience of Plato’s philosophy as a religious way of life, we are presented through Murdoch’s commentary with a perspective for a religious way of life that is built upon the Forms as a basis for a philosophical spirituality. For Murdoch, Plato presents a much more vibrant spirituality through his conception of the Forms than what is offered in a traditional picture of God as she writes:

The eternal separate inviolate Forms seem to me a more profound image of moral and spiritual reality than the picture of a personal Father, however good.

The Forms represent the absolute and gratuitous nature of the moral demand....<sup>21</sup>

Counteracting against the traditional Christian concept, Murdoch’s words indicate that which is part of the human experience. Echoing the thoughts of Simone Weil in her *Intimations of Christianity*,<sup>22</sup> Murdoch even writes that Plato establishes a ‘trinity’ of his own in the concept of the Forms, Demiurge, and World Soul, which, ‘may be seen reflected (surely not by accident) in the Christian Trinity as God the Father (Form of the

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<sup>18</sup> Murdoch, *Metaphysics*, 181.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 145.

<sup>20</sup> Kerr, *Immortal Longings*, 86.

<sup>21</sup> Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 431.

<sup>22</sup> Weil, *Intimations*, chapter 8: ‘Divine Love in Creation’, 89-105. In a significant quote, Weil writes that the Soul of the World in Plato’s *Timaeus* is the ‘unique Son of God’ (92) and that the ‘essential idea of the *Timaeus* is that the foundation, the substance of the universe wherein we live, is love.’ (102)

Good), Holy Spirit (Demiurge) and Christ (*Anima Mundi*).<sup>23</sup> However, Plato's trinity is that which is, for Murdoch, more spiritually enlivening than any traditional concept: 'If one may here respond simply and naively to something so complex, I confess that I find Plato's Trinity more morally radiant than that of the Church.'<sup>24</sup>

The actual question of 'why' the Forms are able to be such compelling religious ideas for Murdoch may be answered in the fact that through the philosophical theology of Plato's Forms we are given a religious philosophical concept which is present within human experience. Through the Forms being involved within and affecting human existence (i.e. in the memory of the soul the philosophical life that is lived), they become far more applicable to human existence as a whole, more intertwined with humanity, than even a concept of a personal God or gods will allow. The Forms are an interrelation of philosophy and spirituality presenting a philosophical theology that is based upon the philosophical concepts which are involved within and experienced by humanity. Setting aside the plethora of arguments that may be offered for or against Murdoch's idea of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, Murdoch sees that by looking beyond the traditional view of God to Plato's approach, one finds not an absence of the divine but a full and rich presence of the divine in the world, known especially in the idea of Plato's Good. She writes,

The idea of 'the world as full of images of God and hierarchies pointing to God' is, as I see it, fundamental in religion and (*mutatis mutandis*) in morality. I think this is what (if we put Good for God) the world *is* full of! The affirmative way, which can find the divine everywhere in all the desire-driven burrowings of cognition, relates spirituality to the whole of our being.<sup>25</sup>

Through Murdoch's commentary we are able to see, through Plato's philosophy as a religious experience, a concept of the divine that goes beyond the Christian tradition, and secondly, one that is known within the philosophical experience.

Murdoch's perspective gives a fresh conception of the divine, one that attempts to understand the spirituality of Plato's philosophical theology on its own terms (which

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<sup>23</sup> Murdoch, *Metaphysics*, 145. A correction, however, must be made of Murdoch's associations, as historically Christian theologians have seen the Holy Spirit as the *Anima Mundi*, and Christ as the Demiurge.

<sup>24</sup> Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, 431.

<sup>25</sup> Murdoch, *Metaphysics*, 455.



is where a contemporary understanding of Plato's philosophy as a religious way of life must be considered). A value of Murdoch's perspective is that it offers, for lack of better terms, a philosophical polytheism: meaning that the Ideas form a multiple array of divine concepts which interact with human experience and are witnessed within the world forming through this a much more dynamic theology as well as a theology very much involved within the human experience itself. In this manner, it is the contemplation of the Forms, that provides a spiritually and philosophically enlightening way of life. Such an example as Murdoch's is characterised by its attempt to reconstruct an aspect of Plato's philosophical theology for contemporary thought while not overtly drawing upon established conceptions of God and the divine and making Plato's philosophical theology conform to them. For Plato, the divine is described in a multiplicity of expressions but remains ultimately inexpressible, one that is always being known acutely through the religious experience of philosophy. Though being variously expressed and indefinable, the divine is not absent in Plato, but is one that is known and defined through the philosophical experience itself. The definition that Plato offers of the divine is one which is varied and ultimately indefinable, expressed best in terms of concepts, or better, the Ideas rather than a person, yet at the same time is one that is just as real and personally involving for humanity as any traditional concept of a personal God alone. It can also be said, however, along with this, that Murdoch is too quick to rid Plato's philosophical theology of a personal God altogether. Given the evidence in the *Dialogues* of the use of the word, 'God' alone, there is indeed some conception of 'God' in Plato, even though the question of what is meant by the term may be an open one. What is interesting, however, beyond this, is the insight that Murdoch attempts, though dealing primarily with Plato's philosophical theology from an ethical question as her work on the Good manifests,<sup>26</sup> to understand Plato's theological perspective as outside of traditional theological mandates but still aware of the divine as well. It is here that we are given a contemporary direction that springs from philosophy as a religious experience and in the process illumines the face of the conception of the divine through

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<sup>26</sup> See *On 'God' and the 'Good' and The Sovereignty Good Over Other Concepts*, in *Existentialists and Mystics*, pages 337 and 363 respectively.

that experience of the divine itself. Even Stephen R. L. Clark's words convey the reluctance to lump Plato's philosophical theology with a traditional Judeo-Christian conception but to still capture the presence of the divine within Platonic philosophical theology. As he seems to indicate, for Clark, to fit Plato's words into a traditional conception actually promotes a misunderstanding altogether of the 'God' that the Platonists seek,

But as a general rule... nothing I say is peculiar to the forms of theism identifiable as Abrahamic. More often than not (as often in my books before) I am speaking of "God" as pagan Platonists did, and often in ways that I could fairly easily translate into less theological modes.<sup>27</sup>

What is offered through Plato's philosophical theology in the consideration of philosophy as a religious way of life is that the concept of the divine is not termed in less theological modes, but simply in terms less *traditional* and more fluid. What can be said is Plato emphasises the experience of philosophy as a religious way of life, and when seen in a contemporary context, this experience is the basis for a divine multiplicately expressed, but unitedly experienced by the philosophical soul.

We may say that the human experience of philosophy as a religious way of life through Plato exhibits a playfulness toward the conception of the divine, a speculative nature that does not strive for a hard, doctrinal approach, but incorporates through that play and speculation, a deeper devotion than any hard doctrinal position. In the idea of Plato's philosophy as a religious way of life is an idea of the divine that is experienced, and this experience can never be placed in a tight category which states conclusively one idea of the divine. Just as the experience is multiplicit, so are the expressions of the divine that come to be known through this experience. Yet, such a playfulness does not negotiate the meaning of the divine within the life of the one who seeks the philosophical experience. As J. B. Skemp adequately puts it, '[in Plato] is a playfulness which can be mistaken for disbelief but which expresses a deeper faith than "orthodoxy."' <sup>28</sup> What is sought for and known in this experience is that which is more profound than religious ritual, even a purer and more meaningful concept as it is born

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<sup>27</sup> Stephen R. L. Clark, *How To Think About the Earth* (Mowbray: London, 1993), 4.

within human experience itself. It is in its playfulness that the life followed through Plato's philosophy become truly religious – or to use Murdoch's definition, truly concerned with 'the ultimate' – because it is that which begins within human experience.

A main conclusion that can be drawn, therefore, is that theological thought, if it is to be effective to the world, must move beyond the strictures of traditional theological concepts to that which is more speculative and creative as it arises out of the human experience. The way that this can be done is to analyse that which is meaningful to human experience itself, even a conception of the divine from that which is known already in the soul and from the encounter with the divine through the quest for Wisdom in the ancient conception of philosophy. It is just such a reason why Plato's philosophical theology applies today, forming a model of a religious way of life.

The main aspect of the overall value of Plato's philosophical theology for today is found in that it recaptures a sense of philosophy as a religious endeavour and upon this idea forms a philosophical theology that is insightful to contemporary thought. Plato's is a way that celebrates the philosophical endeavour as that through which humanity experiences the divine, all along being a philosophical theology that is deeply intertwined with the human experience. It is these two ideas that not only govern the overall characteristic of Plato's philosophical theology as a whole, but are the points at which Plato's philosophical informs theological thought today. If any sort of call can be given as to what may be further investigated, it is that what must be undertaken is a theological understanding of the human experience and endeavour of ancient philosophy as a religious exercise and allow for the ancient philosophical vision to inform our own. This is not to say that all philosophical movements are essentially intertwined with religious thought, or even capable of being seen in this way, but to see that the ancient endeavour of philosophy benefits theological thought remarkably by examining the enterprise of philosophy itself in light of being a way of human transformation and a vision of the divine which is mystical and dynamic and present within the world. To

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<sup>28</sup> J. B. Skemp, 'The Spirituality of Socrates and Plato', *Classical Mediterranean Spirituality*, A. H. Armstrong, ed. (Routledge and Kegan Paul: London, 1986), 109.

examine (even re-examine) the religious nature of the ancient philosophical visions in a contemporary light yields a much needed mixture between philosophy and spirituality, intellect and soul, and a way of life that sees the practice of philosophy as a religious way of life. As Peter Kingsley has conveyed in his book *In the Dark Places of Wisdom*,<sup>29</sup> there is a even a need to bring the depth of the religious vision of the ancient philosophical tradition to today, in his own particular argument, through the work of Parmenides, to a contemporary world that is thirsty for a blending that embraces philosophical depth with religious ideas that go beyond the traditional, and sometimes worn, doctrines of theological establishment. Yet, as has been suggested in this thesis, it is through Plato that such an endeavour can be most profitably done within contemporary thought as Plato presents a theology that arises from human experience. Through Plato's philosophy an array of theological ideas are given which are insightful to theological thought today – even pressing the mark toward a theological understanding that is at once open but also directly experienced and relevant for human existence. Such a way, of course, is found in Plato who, though even having been exhaustively treated for centuries regarding textual considerations and commentaries, nonetheless is given a reviewing through this thesis that his philosophy poses a religious experience which is relevant and insightful for today. As a religious thinker, even in some ways a reformer, his philosophical theology seeks to transform humanity through its theological ideas, and within this one idea of philosophy as a religious experience, provides a basis for a contemporarily relevant philosophical theology to be built.

What is seen in the consideration of the theological ideas that are implicit in Plato's philosophy as a religious way of life today is that Plato's philosophy represents a call back to seeing philosophy as a way of spirituality. In this calling back to philosophy as a religious way of life, Plato's philosophical represents a looking forward to once again no longer joining philosophical and religious thought seeking a place wherein both of these become interrelated. Indeed, that Plato leads us to a 'new' theological perspective is a far-reaching thought. To establish a contemporary rendering of Plato's philosophical theology is to begin to see the act of pursuing philosophy in the Platonic

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<sup>29</sup> Peter Kingsley, *In the Dark Places of Wisdom* (Element Books Limited: Dorset, 1999).

sense of the term as uniting the divine and humanity through a perspective which interrelates and unites philosophical and religious thought. Yet, Plato teaches how to philosophise and theologise rather than necessarily what to think. All of Plato's philosophical-theological ideas are beginnings within which, and through which, we may delve into a more profound theology and a deeper understanding of humanity, as even the very nature of Plato's dialogues proves by leaving us with as many questions as it does answers. It is through Plato's philosophy as a religious experience that we come to encounter and experience the divine and understand Plato's philosophical theology as a true philosophical theology – a place where philosophy and religious thought interrelate, and philosophy is seen as a profoundly religious experience.



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