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Plato. Spider-Man and the Meaning of Life

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Comics as
PHILOSOPHY

Edited by Jeff McLaughlin

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Plato, Spider-Man and the Meaning of Life[1]

—JEREMY BARRIS

To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour

—WILLIAM BLAKE, "Auguries of Innocence"

"Is there a form, itself by itself, of just, and beautiful, and good, and everything of that sort?"
"Yes," he said.
. . .
"And what about these, Socrates? Things that might seem absurd, like hair and mud and dirt, or anything else totally undignified and worthless? Are you doubtful whether or not you should say that a form is separate for each of these too . . . ?"

—PLATO, *Parmenides*

"Who *was* that masked man?"

—*THE LONE RANGER*

Some versions of mysticism have taught that the ordinary world around us is sacred and wonderful, that the meaning of life is to be found not through some extraordinary knowledge or awareness, but in appreciating what already surrounds us. I believe that both *Spider-Man* comics and Plato's dialogues offer exactly this deep vision, and that they introduce us to it in

some remarkably similar ways. I cannot do any kind of justice here to the richness of either set of works, or to the variations of style and meaning within each of them. Instead I shall focus only on four interconnected themes they share. Both sets of works foreground sexual aspects of life. They both emphasize the inadequate, shadowy dimensions of our lives and a need to get beyond those limitations. Both prominently include a great deal of self-trivialising humour. In Plato this humour is typically ironic, in *Spider-Man* it is typically flippant, and both connect with more serious ironies. And they both present their themes centrally and incompletely through sensory images.

I shall try to show that these themes illustrate the meaning of life through their very close interconnections. Human insight is limited by our dependence on our bodily senses, our particular perspectives, our biasing and blinding desires. These dependencies also seriously limit our ability to see what is right and fair, to see the need to follow it, and to behave rightly even when we see the need. But we only *have* a need for truth and rightness because we are flawed and limited. As Plato puts it in his *Symposium*, "none of the gods loves wisdom or wants to become wise—for they are wise" (204A). Without our inadequacies, following truth and rightness would be automatic, already accomplished before we started needing anything. In fact, both Spider-Man's and Plato's characters' heroism emerges exactly in their working *with* their limitations—their senses, their desires, their biases, their flaws—to get beyond them. And, as their self-trivialising ironic humour shows, they love flaws and bodies as well as ideals. They both pursue the ideals they love *for the sake of* the faulty human persons and societies they are and live with. Spider-Man seeks justice for the sake of the citizens of New York, and for the sake of his family, friends and lovers, with all their notable faults and eccentricities. Socrates, Plato's hero, seeks truth for the good of his particular city-state, Athens, for the good of the boys and men he loves, and for the good of his own soul.

In other words, both heroes struggle to get beyond their flaws precisely by means of and for the sake of what is loveable about human flaws. And in the end, as I shall try to show, the irony that is their means of dealing with life describes the nature of life itself. The shadowy inadequacies of life are the source of striving for fully adequate light beyond them, and, since the shadows are therefore, in the end, the source of the light's presence, light turns out to be part of what the shadows already embodied in the first place.

Marvellously, our own experience as readers of *Spider-Man* comics and Plato's dialogues illustrates exactly the same wonder of the ordinary. We are fascinated by these images, these characters, drawn to them by their flaws and humour, inspired to their ideals by their human accessibility and their struggle with their human limitations. And this fascination, this inspiration, this wonder of the limited adequacies of our world, is exactly what the comics and dialogues are about. They show us the wonder of who we are, just as we are, even as we read them.

1. SEX, SHADOWS, AND WISDOM IN PLATO

I shall devote this first section mainly to Plato, since his direct and elaborate focus on philosophy makes it easier to develop a philosophical framework to approach *Spider-Man* as well as Plato. Sexuality plays a large role in each set of works, both in its unsettling and confusing dimensions and its inspiring, eye-opening sides. Peter Parker has many erotic loves, and most of them are structured by the conflict between his obvious athletic attractiveness and personal appeal, and the unappealing false appearances that result from the hidden truths of his life. Even Spider-Man is often preoccupied with trying to figure out how he should feel about himself, and what kind of person he truly is beyond how he appears. Is he really perhaps an uncaring person, a bad nephew, a bad friend, just another kind of criminal? As I shall try to show, this very commonplace tension between beauty and worthwhileness on the one hand, and inadequacy and falsehood on the other, in fact contains the meaning of lust, love, and our relation to truth. To say this more accurately: beauty, genuineness and meaning *are* one kind of tension and even mixture with their opposites. If this is true, then our very ordinary emotional engagement with Peter Parker's love life, and with his person and body, is itself already an expression of the meaningful structure of life and our relation to truth.

But first: Plato.

Plato has traditionally been understood as rejecting the body and its senses, seeing them as obstacles to finding truth, the real goal of life. Hence, of course, the expression "Platonic love," love separate from physical desire. There is an important element of truth in this view of Plato. Plato's *Phaedo*,

for example, shows Socrates describing the body with its desires and senses as a prison for the soul, "chained hand and foot in the body, compelled to view reality not directly but only through its prison bars" (82E).[2] Our senses and desires, says Socrates, blind us to truth. "So long as we keep to the body and our soul is contaminated with this imperfection, there is no chance of our ever attaining satisfactorily to . . . truth" (66B). Observation "by means of . . . the senses is entirely deceptive" (83A). "Pleasures and desires and griefs" mislead us, since "when anyone's soul feels a keen pleasure or pain it cannot help supposing that whatever causes the most violent emotion is the plainest and truest reality, which it is not" (83B–C). The soul should trust "nothing but its own independent judgment upon objects considered in themselves, and attributing no truth to anything which it views indirectly [i.e., through the senses] as being subject to variation, because such objects are sensible and visible but what the soul itself sees is intelligible and invisible" (83A–B, insertion added).

In the *Republic* the philosopher is described as loving pure truth, which, again, cannot be seen. "The lovers of sounds and sights" are "incapable of apprehending and taking delight in the nature of the beautiful itself" (476B). The pure truth of a thing is always one and the same, but each thing we experience through our senses is seen in many different ways. The "just and the unjust, the good and the bad . . . in itself each is one," but "by virtue of their communion with actions and bodies and with one another they present themselves . . . as a multiplicity of aspects" (476A). Justice itself is one "thing," but there are many different just actions, which are just in many different ways. And each of these will be more or less just depending on differences in context and on what they are compared to, just as an object is heavy in comparison with a lighter object and light in comparison with a heavier one. "Is there any one of these many fair and honorable things that will not sometimes appear ugly and base? And of the just things, that will not seem unjust? . . . And likewise of the great and small things, the light and the heavy things . . ." (479A–B). Unlike the single truth of each thing, each of these multiple sensory things "*is not*" as much as it "*is . . .* that which one affirms it to be" (479B, translator's emphasis). The nature and truth of movement, for example, does not lie in this moving thing or that moving thing, in which that "truth" would change depending on context, but in movement itself, independently of any of the examples we might see.

Similarly for the nature and truth of beauty, or goodness, or of "being-one-thing," or "being-a-horse." What is generally true about horses is, clearly, true independently of any particular horse. These separated, unified, consistent truths are what Plato calls the Ideas or Forms.

But then, how do we understand how truth works, when the truth *of* the things we experience through our bodily senses is independent of, separate from *those same things*? Differently put, how does the secret identity relate to the mask, if the private identity is the identity *of that public mask*? As Plato understands it, the bridge across this strange gap between sensory experience and its own truth happens to be sexual desire. In other words, it is *also* true that Plato regards bodily experience as *essential* for truth.

His *Symposium*, for example, insists that the road to seeing truth begins with the love of bodies: first a single young man, then all young men, and from there to non-bodily things like social laws and the principles of truth. "A lover who goes about this matter correctly must begin in his youth to devote himself to beautiful bodies" (210A). Through "loving boys correctly" and "starting out from beautiful things and using them as rising stairs" (211B–C), one comes to see "the divine Beauty itself in its one form." And "only then will it become possible for him to give birth not to images of virtue . . . but to true virtue (because he's in touch with the true Beauty)" (211E–12A). And Plato's *Phaedrus* explains that the only reason we get moving along the road to truth is that beauty inspires us to explore the thing that has it, and it does so by first inflaming us with physical lust for particular sensual bodies. Of all the true realities, "beauty alone" is "most manifest to sense" and draws us to recognise truth (250D). When one sees "the person of the beloved" (253E), the lust in one's soul "leaps and dashes" to "the delights of love's commerce." Restraint, and the driver or "charioteer of the soul," struggle against lust but "at last . . . yield" to "him": "and so he draws them on, and now they are quite close and behold the spectacle of the beloved flashing upon them. At that sight" the driver is filled with "awe and reverence" (254A–B), and lust takes a back seat. But it is only because lust struggles successfully that one gets close enough to "the person of the beloved" for the truth of beauty itself to dawn on one, and only then to put lust back in its place.[3]

Let me remind the reader here that part of the appeal of Spider-Man is his muscular and beautifully proportioned body. The villains, by contrast,

are usually physically much cruder or just unalluring: the Rhino, the Green Goblin, the Kingpin. Part of what we (or many of us) as readers are attracted to and/or identify with in Spider-Man is his physical grace and beauty. What Plato and, with his help, our thinking about *Spider-Man* should help us appreciate is that this ordinary, shallow pleasure is in fact already our participating in the depths of the meaning of life, and that we only need to recognise and value it in the right way.

Now, the conflict between this emphasis on the essential role of our senses and desires in approaching truth, and on their forming an obstacle to achieving that same goal, is not simply a contradiction. In fact the key is to see how these two opposed views go together. We can approach this most easily and helpfully through Plato's discussions of goodness. In his *Charmides*, for example, he shows Socrates interviewing a beautiful young man, Charmides, on the topic of self-control. As Socrates begins to talk to the boy he is momentarily overwhelmed by lust, almost losing his own self-control. "I caught sight of the inwards of his garment, and took the flame. Then I could no longer contain myself . . . " (155D–E). Plato is surely telling us something by placing this obvious irony here: perhaps, that lust must be taken into account in considering self-control. Clearly, there would be no need for self-control without the desires and irrationalities that oppose it. The very idea of self-control would have no meaning without that struggle. In other words, self-control is both opposed to irrational desire and partly *composed of* it. Self-control *is* the struggle, or rather a successful version of it.

We can find the same insight that good qualities work together with their opposites in *Spider-Man*. For example, "Spider-Man versus Doctor Octopus" begins with Spider-Man's thinking, "It's almost *too* easy! . . . I'm too powerful for *any* foe! I almost *wish* for an opponent who'd give me a run for my money!" (Lee, et al., *Amazing Spider-Man* No. 3:2). (More on this episode later, loyal fans!) Without a struggle, there is no virtue, no achievement in doing good. The effects of the good actions are good, but the actions themselves, requiring very little, do not count for much as a moral achievement.

Generally, then, being a good person is both opposed to being a bad person *and* partly composed of *being* a bad person. Plato's famous allegory of the cave makes this generalisation. The allegory describes human life as imprisonment in a cave, where all one sees are shadows of the truth, cast by

firelight behind one. Even the light is only a poor relation of sunlight. In order to see the truth, one has to turn one's soul so as to leave the cave and its shadows, and see the true world in true sunlight (*Republic* 518C). This is an allegory: the true world is the world as "seen" without the senses, and the cave and its shadows are the world as experienced through our bodies. "The ascent . . . is the soul's ascension to the intelligible region" (517B). But, the allegory continues, one has to return to the cave: "down you must go then. . . . So our city will be governed by us and you with waking minds, and not . . . ruled darkly as in a dream by men who fight one another for shadows." This necessity is "imposing just commands on men who are just" (520C–E). Turning one's soul away from the world of bodily experience is not enough. Being a good person requires both turning away from the world of the body so that one can see what is good with a "waking mind," *and* turning back to the world of the body so that one can make use of what one sees, as goodness by its nature requires one to do.

More precisely, goodness requires a turning back to the bodily world *because of* the turn away from that world: once the turn away from the bodily world allows us to see the nature of goodness clearly, part of what can then be seen is that goodness itself requires its being put to use in the world. And, vice-versa, goodness requires a turning away from the bodily world in the first place *because of* the commitment to that world: it is the failings of the bodily world that make goodness necessary, make it an issue at all. So these two opposed movements in fact go together by requiring each other.

Now, already implicit in all this is that what is good is closely connected to what is true, our real topic here. For a start, we need to see the truth in order to know what is good. More directly, we need to see the truth *of* goodness if we are to be good. In fact, for Plato, it is really the other way round: what is good is the basis of what is true. "The idea of good" is what we must come to see as "giving birth in the sensible world to light, and . . . being the authentic source of truth and reason" (*Republic* 517B–C). The *Republic* insists that the very truth of reality, the source or ultimate truth of truth itself, *is* what is good. If this is really so (and we shall return to why it may be), then truth requires the same things that goodness requires. That is, commitment to the truth would require, like goodness, bodily experience *as well as* a turning away from it. More exactly, again, as with goodness, commitment to truth would require both bodily experience and the turn away from it each *because of* the other.

The essential role of the senses in finding truth, and the conflicting obstacle they form to finding truth, would go together by requiring each other.

In fact, even if goodness and truth were not connected, Plato still shows that truth requires the body. Some "reports of our perceptions . . . provoke thought to reconsideration . . . when the perception no more manifests one thing than its contrary" (*Republic* 523B–C). For example, as we have already seen, the same thing is big in relation to a smaller thing but small in relation to a bigger thing. So, to the senses, size is contradictory, being opposites at once. This provokes our intellect to consider the nature of largeness and smallness themselves, independently of the sensed things. Sight sees

> the great and the small . . . not separated but confounded. . . . And for the clarification of this, the intelligence is compelled to contemplate the great and the small . . . as distinct entities, in the opposite way from sensation. . . . And is it not in some such experience as this that the question first occurs to us, What in the world, then, is the great and the small? . . . And this is the origin of the designation *intelligible* for the one, and *visible* for the other. (524C)

It is only because of a conflict experienced through our senses that our intellect is first made to consider the truth independently of our senses. Just as it is only the force of bodily lust that motivates us to start making the effort of pursuing truth beyond bodily experience.

But, returning to the relation between goodness and truth, why is what is good not merely connected to, but the source of and even the *same* as the truth of reality? Let me suggest a tentative answer. A life in which nothing is either good or bad is a life in which nothing makes a difference. No goal is worth pursuing over any other. There is no point to anything. In such a life, there is no point in searching for truth itself, either: the search for truth, and truth itself, are meaningless. They play no role. The *words* might have a meaning; but even that kind of meaning loses its sense. That is, at a certain point "meaning" in the sense of "what we understand" coincides with "meaning" in the sense of "value" or "significance for life." What meaning can the word "truth" have if it refers to something that makes no difference whatsoever? As we said earlier, we only need truth *because* we are inadequate, because it makes a difference. Further, what meaning can *any* word have if even the *concern for* meaning has no point? Consequently, if there is

truth at all, then something in life matters, something makes a difference. And if that is the case, then there is good and bad. In other words, the very nature of truth itself already involves the difference between good and bad, between what is worthwhile and what should be avoided. And while this difference involves both the good and the bad, the good is nonetheless what is worth aiming for, and the bad is nonetheless what should be avoided.

The truth of reality, then, is already built up out of, as its most basic building blocks, an establishing of what is good and its difference from what is bad. And let us not forget the ironic other side of this nature of truth, given that it really involves the bad as well as the good. As I argued previously, what is good is partly composed of what is bad, what should be avoided, so that in establishing what is good, the truth of reality also establishes, and so is also partly built of, what is bad.

In short, for Plato, bodily lust and what our senses show are essential to draw us to what is worthwhile, the good and the true. More than this, lust and what our bodily senses show are *part* of truth all along, and so must be returned to as well as moved beyond. But it also remains true that lust and our bodily experience, the very things that draw us to truth and are part of truth, must be overcome in order to get truth, since they are *also* limited and blinding. In other words, the movement is away from ourselves, but in order to find ourselves where we have already been all along.

As Plato's *Apology* expresses it, we must be concerned with human truth, truth as it includes and joins with the truth of who we limited beings are, not truth as we might imagine it to be in unlimited beings like gods. In the *Apology* Socrates insists that he is wise only in the "limited sense" of "human wisdom," which is built exactly on the recognition that it is wisdom only *because* of its limits (20D). Beyond those limits it does not become greater, but stops being wisdom at all. "These . . . experts . . . claimed a perfect understanding . . . I would rather be . . . neither wise with their wisdom nor stupid with their stupidity . . . real wisdom is the property of God" (22D–23A).

2. SEX AND SHADOWS IN PLATO AND SPIDER-MAN

In *Spider-Man*, sexual love is present both as a theme of the comics and as a reaction invited from the reader/viewer to Spider-Man himself. Peter

Parker is obsessed with beautiful girls, like Betty Brant, Gwen Stacy and Mary Jane Watson. He is also handsome, and as Spider-Man is typically shown in a way that emphasises his beautiful muscularity. And in addition to his physical appeal he has a variety of other sexy qualities. As both Peter Parker and Spider-Man he is intriguingly mysterious. As Spider-Man he is brave, witty, and dashingly rescues one at great personal risk, when almost no one else could or would, and asks for nothing in return. And he is troubled in hidden ways, so that many of the people he appeals to want to be the special person who can share the deep things he keeps so private. The interested reader, of course, is already in that special position, and already feels with Peter Parker against the hard facts of life. We are already his "significant other," and already enjoy the privileges of that position.

While Spider-Man's sexual attractiveness is a pleasure in its own right, it ties in to the comic books' significance as a whole. Spider-Man struggles to live out certain ideals, principally goodness—most obviously in the form of justice—and love or nurturing. His major commitments are stopping criminals, protecting innocent people, and taking care of those he loves, like Aunt May. Now, his personal attractiveness is central in that it draws us to sympathise with those ideals—in exactly the way Plato says beauty draws us to seek truth and goodness. As I have mentioned, the villains, by contrast, are generally ugly: Doctor Octopus, for example, or the Rhino or the Green Goblin. We usually do not experience their commitments as worthwhile, but rather as something to avoid.

There is an interesting difference here between *Spider-Man* and Plato's dialogues. Where the hero of *Spider-Man* is beautiful, Plato's usual hero, Socrates, is famously ugly. In the *Meno*, for example, he is said to look "exactly like the flat sting ray" (80A). The beauties in Plato are those the hero tries to help. Like Spider-Man himself, these are adolescent young men, that is, importantly for philosophical concerns, people at the point of coming to grips with life and their place in it. But, in fact, Spider-Man and Plato's young men are not simply beautiful, and Socrates is not simply ugly. As I have mentioned, sexuality in Plato is generally linked with the shadows of human bodily limitation and inadequacy. And we find the same thing in *Spider-Man*. The hero is, after all, *Spider-Man*: an ugly, eerie and frightening comparison. And his movements are typically both graceful *and* awkward, inelegant. His legs get splayed in all sorts of undignified postures as

he swings. He often pauses in a flattened, eerie crouch. And sometimes his body hangs comically upside down, absurdly suspended by a finger from a single thread, as he peers coyly at his opponents from the shadows.

But, conversely, in Plato bodily limitation is also linked with the light of truth and goodness. And we find just this in Socrates: although he is ugly— as I shall suggest, partly *because* he is ugly— the boys are mad about him. The source for the story of the *Symposium*, for example, "was obsessed with Socrates ['*Sōkratous erastēs*': 'a lover of Socrates']—one of the worst cases at that time" (173B). But, again, the maddening, blinding physical desires are not just an obstacle to seeking truth. Socrates claims that the "the only thing I say I understand is the art of love" (*Symposium* 177D–E). That is, love *is* what he has to teach, if anything; it *is* his wisdom. And it is desire for his wisdom that is expressed in the lust of these boys. As Alcibiades, Socrates' beloved, explains, "I thought . . . all I had to do was to let him have his way with me, and he would teach me everything he knew" (*Symposium* 217A).

In both *Spider-Man* and Plato the bodily limitations and inadequacies of human existence, most especially our most mindless drive, lust, are exactly what lead us to true beauty and goodness. But, more than this, beauty and goodness *are* those limitations and inadequacies, properly appreciated, done justice to, and nurtured. Desire, born of need and limitation, is what Socrates has to teach, and it is what he has to teach as *fulfilling* our needs and transcending our limitations. Socrates' homely presence, too, is *part* of his charm. Similarly, part of what makes Spider-Man attractive *is*, for example, his frequent awkwardness.

The list of Spider-Man's sexy qualities I gave earlier in fact already included inadequacies and limitations: for instance, that he is troubled, and that the truth about him is inaccessible. In fact, he is troubled partly because he himself is unsure about the truth of who he is. But this ignorance of the truth is already part of the truth about him. Further, it is also part of what equips him to seek truth (one cannot seek truth without recognising one's ignorance of it), and part of what makes him appealing. These inadequacies, then, are part of these heroes' adequacies. And these inadequacies, including the vulnerability that causes Spider-Man to keep his truths inaccessible, are also part of what makes these heroes accessible, makes their splendid qualities human-sized. In other words, their inadequacies are part of what allows us to appreciate them. But, as we have discussed, what is to be appreciated,

what is worthwhile, *is* what is good and true. The awkwardness and homeliness that give us the experience of appreciation are therefore part of the very truth of what is good and true themselves. Our heroes' particular attractiveness and beauty *is* in part their contrasting limitations, and not simply lessened by them.

By way of analogy, and more generally, the presence of shadows is part of what makes light, light. Light that cast no shadows could not be part of any world we could understand. And as we have argued, truth is ultimately the truth *of* and therefore *in* the inadequate world from which we seek it, and true goodness and true beauty are also the goodness and beauty *of* the world around us, *in* all its variations from the ideal.

Presented together with the theme of sexuality as the medium of goodness and wisdom, then, is another theme common to Plato and *Spider-Man*: that human life is filled with inescapable shadows and imbalances, and that its meaning lies partly in wrestling with those shadows, but in order to find the grace and light that is already in them.

3. IRONY

The theme of shadows as the source of light echoes another theme present in both sets of works: the theme of irony. Things unexpectedly tend to involve their opposites. Even the idea that the shadows turn out to have contained the light all along has its reverse, that light also inevitably casts shadows.

Central to *Spider-Man*, in contrast with most comics, are such ironies as, for example, that the hero is often undignified at his most heroic moments, or, more seriously, that his moments of victory are often also moments of another kind of defeat. A typically undignified moment takes place in "Doc. Ock Wins!" When Doctor Octopus asks, "How can your feeble *spider powers* possibly compare with the shattering *impact* of my hydraulic *tentacles*?," Spider-Man, reeling from the impact of those tentacles, says, "I—was hoping—you wouldn't *ask*!" (Lee, et al., *Marvel Tales* No. 40:16). On the more serious level, in "Spidey Saves the Day!" Spider-Man defeats the Green Goblin permanently, but he has to stay away from home so long to do it that his newly fragile Aunt May collapses from worry. "Why must I *hurt* everything

I touch?" he asks (Lee, et al., *Amazing Spider-Man* No. 40:19). Again, he makes great personal sacrifices for the sake of New York, but he is vilified by powerful social forces, often exactly *because* of his heroic efforts. As Spider-Man himself comments in "Enter: Doctor Octopus!," the *Daily Bugle* editor J. Jonah Jameson "writes the story as if *he's* the hero and *I'm* the heavy!" (Lee, et al., *Marvel Tales* No. 38:1). In "How Green Was My Goblin!" one of the victims Spider-Man is busy rescuing from thugs says, " 'cordin' to what I read in the *Bugle*, he's as bad as *any* of them!" (Lee, et al., *Amazing Spider-Man* No. 39:8). And Spider-Man thinks to himself that, if a bystander got hurt, "No matter *how* it happened, *I'd* be sure to get the *blame*!" (9). Again, in "The Tentacles and the Trap!" a bystander watching him fight criminals exclaims, "Anyone who can fight like *Spider-Man* should be *locked up*! He's a *menace*!" (Lee, et al., *Marvel Tales* No. 39:15).

As Peter Parker he is a kind of social outcast both as a result of his secret heroism and in contrast with heroic figures. "Spider-Man versus Doctor Octopus" ends with a schoolmate saying to him about the Human Torch and Spider-Man himself, "Why don'tcha . . . see what a *real* man is like, bookworm?" (21). His friend Harry Osborn turns cold to him since "he acts like he's in his own private *world*—and everyone else better keep *out*!" (Lee, et al., *Marvel Tales* No. 38:5). And "puny Parker" is described by his fellow students as "the original *cold shoulder kid*." (Lee, *Amazing Spider-Man* No. 39:5). Of course it is because he is trying to do good as Spider-Man that he is preoccupied and unavailable as Peter Parker. He constantly gives the girls he likes the impression that he is not interested or that he is in some way lacking, again because he needs to rush off to save situations as Spider-Man. In "Vengeance from Vietnam!" Gwen Stacy exclaims, "Whenever there's *danger*—whenever there's *trouble*—you always *leave* and run off! Ever since I can remember—Flash, and the others, have called you—a *coward*! I've tried to *ignore* it . . . but . . ." (Lee, et al., *Amazing Spider-Man* No. 108:21).

Another variety of this irony consists in Spider-Man's, and his opponents', setting themselves up or being set up for falls and reversals. The issue which begins with his wishing for a real opponent ("it's almost *too* easy!") introduces Doctor Octopus—who badly shakes his confidence by easily defeating him (Lee, et al., *Spider-Man vs Dr. Octopus*). He moves from "I can do almost *anything*!" (6) to "I—I never had a *chance*!" (10). But Doctor

Octopus is also overweening, in fact in a largely parallel way. Doctor Octopus boasts, "Though others fear radiation, I alone am able to make it my *servant*!" (3), just before being damaged by the radiation run wild. He is also impressed that he can "do anything" (10), and of course he is ultimately defeated by Spider-Man. Again, in "The Tentacles and the Trap!" Spider-Man gives up trying to find Doctor Octopus—"Wherever he *is* . . . I guess he's *safe* for now! So I might as well head *home* and grab some *shut-eye*!" (3)—only to find that the villain has taken lodgings in Spider-Man's own home, with his Aunt May. And in "How Green Was My Goblin!," just as Aunt May's health takes a turn for the worse and needs protection from shocks, the Green Goblin succeeds in unmasking Spider-Man.

In Plato's dialogues, Socrates, "of all those whom we knew in our time, the bravest and also the wisest and most upright man" (*Phaedo* 118), is put to death by the city of Athens for corrupting its youth. The charge is that he taught the very kind of knowledge he in fact devoted his life to disclaiming, and which he disclaimed precisely for the sake of justice, so as not to mislead people or allow people to mislead themselves and one another (*Apology* 20Dff.). Like Spider-Man, he has always been suspected of being the menace he in fact opposes. "I have . . . been accused . . . by a great many people for a great many years, though without a word of truth" (18B). Both heroes, though they embody a fight for the light of justice and truth, are subjected to varieties of deep injustice and falsehood. And this is all the more poignant in that it is often their very struggle against injustice that contributes to bringing about the injustice towards themselves.

Like Spider-Man and his opponents, Socrates and his conversational partners also often set themselves up for a fall. Socrates frequently finds that he has overlooked something which brings all his efforts to nothing. At the end of the *Protagoras*, Socrates says, "the present outcome of our talk is pointing at us . . . the finger of . . . scorn," since Socrates, "having said at the beginning that virtue is not teachable, now is bent upon contradicting himself by trying to demonstrate that . . . virtue *is* teachable" (361A–B).[4] And his partners in discussion often boast about what they know but end up having to admit that they are lost. "I have spoken about virtue hundreds of times, . . . and very well too, or so I thought. Now I can't even say what it is," says Meno (*Meno* 80A–B). Euthyphro considers himself "far advanced" in wisdom, but when, at the end of the discussion, he sees that "we must go

back again, and start from the beginning," he runs away. "Another time, then, Socrates, for I am in a hurry, and must be off this minute."[5]

On the other hand, both heroes also deliberately approach their lives by ironically undercutting their achievements. The attitude with which Spider-Man and his authors deal with his life is often an ironically flippant, self-trivialising humour. In "Spider-Man versus Doctor Octopus," for example, when Doctor Octopus recognises Spider-Man, calling out his name, he replies, "Well, I sure ain't Albert Schweitzer!" (7). In "Enter: Doctor Octopus!," when the versatile villain takes him by surprise, Spider-Man makes wry mid-fight comments like "*No fair* raising yourself up to *my* height!" (10). Again, in "Spidey Saves the Day!," Spider-Man describes his spider speed as "so *sublime*, I'm surprised no one's written a *sonnet* about it!" (16). In another issue, Spider-Man (and his ironically self-celebrating authors!) thinks to himself, while battling the Rhino, "I wonder if I *really* do this to preserve justice and to safeguard the human race—or, is it just that I love to hear the crazy *sound effects*?!" (Lee, et al., *Amazing Spider-Man* No. 41:17).

Similarly, in Plato's *Republic*, Socrates consistently presents his arguments for the necessity of pure, absolute knowledge as themselves limited, inadequate opinions: surely a means of *not* persuading an attentive audience. "If I could, I would show you . . . the very truth, as it appears to me—though whether rightly or not I may not properly affirm" (*Republic* 533A). When he describes the Idea of the Good, which, as we have seen, "gives their truth to the objects of knowledge and the power of knowing to the knower" (508D–E), Socrates is asked for his own view of it. He answers, "do you think it right to speak as having knowledge about things one does not know? . . . opinions divorced from knowledge . . . are blind" (506B–C). Again, although he condemns drama that imitates bad and uncontrolled characters (394Dff.), this kind of imitation is a frequent practice of his own and of his author's, even in this very dialogue. For example, the *Republic* begins with Socrates' report of a conversation he had with the intemperate and rude Thrasymachus: "Tell me Socrates, have you got a nurse? . . . Because she lets her little snotty run about driveling . . ." (343A). And while Plato's dialogues insist that we must seek to know, many if not all of them end in puzzlement, leaving the issues under discussion even more mysterious than when the dialogue began.

Plato starts the *Symposium* with characters who insist that philosophers are mad and so not worth listening to. We are told right at the beginning that Apollodorus, our narrator and a follower of Socrates, is known as "the maniac," and he himself says, "Of course . . . it's perfectly obvious why I have these views . . . it's simply because I'm a maniac, and I'm raving!" (173D–E). Socrates himself typically trivialises his own abilities and comments. In the *Protagoras*, for example, "There is just one small thing holding me back, which Protagoras I know will easily explain. . . ." (*Protagoras*, 328E) And in the *Cratylus*, if Socrates had "heard the fifty-drachma course of the great Prodicus . . . I should have been at once able to answer your question. . . . But, indeed, I have only heard the single-drachma course, and therefore I do not know the truth about such matters." [6] Alcibiades, who as Socrates' beloved has spent a great deal of time with him, insists that Socrates' "whole life is one big game—a game of irony" (*Symposium* 216E).

The message in both sets of works, I suggest, is twofold. On the one hand, the way to deal with reality truthfully and justly is by approaching it ironically, going towards it by heading in a different direction from it. And the reason for this is that reality itself is ironically organised, being itself by being different from itself. We have already encountered several examples of this ironic organisation. One is that our inadequacies are what make it meaningful to seek adequacy, so that goodness itself is not only opposed to but also partly composed of badness. Another is that the truth of particular things is separate from them *in being* the truth *of* them. An example we have met of the need to approach truth and justice ironically is that our desires and bodily senses are what motivate and allow us to move beyond our desires and bodily senses. And, more, that the way to adequacy and light is by grasping the worth *of* the inadequacies and shadows.

This is exactly what both Socrates and Spider-Man do: they embrace their limitations, and in the very act of doing so—*as* the very act of doing so—transcend them. This irony is so thorough that at bottom it undercuts even itself. We land up with both characters being utterly sincere in their ironic self-presentation. They really are limited by their inadequacies, just as they say. *And* they do successfully transcend them. *And* they transcend them *by*, ironically, being limited by them.

What is more, we, the reader/viewers, are drawn into the appeal of their ideals by the very ironies of their obvious limitations and absurdities. The

erotic theme we have discussed is also a dimension of these ironies, just as the ironies are a dimension of the erotic theme.

There is another shared stylistic theme, which also ties the experience of the reader/viewer into the content of the two sets of works, and is also connected to sensual appeal as well as to the theme of human inadequacy: the theme of both works' central and incomplete reliance on sensory images.

4. IMAGES: WHAT WE SEE

In *Spider-Man* sensory images are of course the medium in which the comics are presented. But these images are inadequate, in at least two ways. First, they need the verbal language in the balloons and captions to achieve their specific messages, since otherwise they are too ambiguous and approximate. Second, they are obviously unreal: they are cartoon images. The authors even draw explicit attention to this invented unreality. "The Horns of the Rhino!," for example, contains captions like, "After struggling through the last panels, you can be sure . . . our story can't possibly move any *slower* from now on!" (2), and "Notice the sneaky way we change our scenes? Using Pete's last thought as a springboard, let's visit . . ." (10).

But the unreal, homely pictures in *Spider-Man*, partly *because* of their obvious lack of real correspondence to reality, are part of the attraction the work offers. And this attraction, as we have seen, is what allows us to appreciate what is worthwhile about the ideals the work presents. As Geoffrey O'Brien puts it, the "boxy little frames . . . have a quirky vigor and caricatural grace that let us know a live hand is tracing them, and when those scrawny miniature figures are forced to contend with moral dilemmas they acquire a quixotic stature. Such is the odd intimacy that comics can command" (O'Brien, 8). The unreal pictures, then, are part of the erotic appeal we have discussed. Their unreality gives us experience of the worth of the ideals that world presents.

We are drawn in to what is worthwhile partly by the continuing evidence of the unreality of the presentation: the cartoon pictures, the written-in sound effects, even the smell of the ink and the smudgy paper, all of which continuously connect our thoroughly human reality with the ideals which organise the story. Readers/viewers of the comics can testify that these sensory

experiences really are part of the delight in reading them. And Plato can tes-
tify that delight, like anything else, only happens for a reason. Even if we are
reacting to an illusion or to something which is really not delightful, that reac-
tion can only happen because we grasp *what it is to be* delightful. Without that
grasp, we could not even react with delight by mistake. Delight happens, then,
because we grasp the idea of delight itself: the idea of goodness itself.

In reading the comics we take it for granted that what our senses are
reacting to is not the truth, but also that there is something worth reacting
to that the unreal images represent. In fact, the images are *so* unreal that we
cannot take them seriously at all, and consequently we really react, in a
sense, completely independently of them and their crudeness. We do not
even begin to believe that Spider-Man is really battling Doctor Octopus:
what we are reacting to is the presentation of struggle in a way abstracted
from what the pictures show. *Because* the pictures are clearly unreal, we
react to very pure "abstractions" separate from the pictures: victory itself,
justice itself, suspense itself. In Plato's language, we react to the separate
truth itself, ironically in and through our love for the sensuous and varying
appearances we experience *as untrue appearances*. And while it is true that
the reader/viewer is interested in no especially deep way in the suspense,
battles, satisfying violence, and is perhaps just entertained by them, *what it
is that* just entertains the reader is in fact all the deep "essences" of these
things, not any immediately experienced particular examples of them.

Less obviously than in *Spider-Man*, images are also central to Plato's dia-
logues. For one thing, Plato uses images to express his points extensively
throughout the dialogues. The allegory of the cave is one example, and the
charioteer of the soul another. But more strikingly, the dialogues them-
selves *are* images: they are presentations of various characters in imaginary
conversation. So, in fact, images are also the medium in which Plato's works
are presented. And these images are also inadequate, in two ways.

First, they are explicitly said to be inadequate to deliver the truth, in con-
trast with "lasting and unalterable" words (*Timaeus*, 29B). Socrates says, for
example, that "if I could, I would show you, no longer an image and symbol
of my meaning, but the very truth" (*Republic* 533A). The *Timaeus* explains
that images arise from the changing, becoming world of our senses, and so
will only allow "probabilities as likely as any others," not truth (29C–D). For
"that which is conceived by opinion with the help of sensation . . . is always

in a process of becoming and perishing and never really is" (27D–28A). In fact, the very world we experience through our senses "has been framed in the likeness of that which is apprehended by . . . mind and is unchangeable, and must therefore . . . be a copy of something"(29A–B). The natural world itself is only an image that "never really is," an inadequate image of the truth, so that what our senses experience, and words and ideas tailored to our senses—that is, images—are also inadequate.

Second, the images in which the dialogues consist, like those of the comic books, are unreal fictions. The dialogues themselves, again like the comics, also typically draw attention to their own unreality and unreliability. Their events may be reported, for example, through a chain of people who told people, or they may contain details from impossible combinations of dates. The "maniac" who narrates the *Symposium*, for instance, tells us he heard it from someone else who witnessed it about twenty years before (173B). And the characters in that dialogue refer to things which only occurred after their deaths, like the existence of a Theban army of lovers (178E). Even Socrates' own arguments, at the very time he makes them, are frequently a tale he heard, or perhaps a dream. In the *Theaetetus*, for example, he introduces an argument by saying, "Listen then to a dream. . . . In my dream . . . I thought I was listening to people saying . . ." (201D–E).[7]

For Plato, the true reality to which images, including everything we immediately experience, are inadequate, is found in the eternal, unified, self-consistent "separate forms." This is the famous Platonic ideal reality. But, as we have discussed, love of the ideal, of truth and justice, is love of the truth *of the temporal and sensual*, for the sake of the temporal and sensual. It is love truly of this person here, this city here. The truth of which we experience images through our senses is the truth *of those images*, of what we immediately experience. And both sides of this contradiction are true. The images are *also* still inadequate images: they are not the whole story of themselves at any given time. The side of the tree that we see is not the whole tree. In fact, *as* just the side we see it does not present *itself* accurately either: it is not really a two-dimensional surface. But—it also *is*, in fact, *the tree* that we are seeing as this side of it. The whole tree really *is* the truth of the side as which we are seeing it.

Putting these opposite things together, truth itself *is* in the particular things that do not fully coincide with it. Truth is divided from *itself*, separate

from itself, at a distance from what it itself is. If one wants to express truth and reality with full accuracy, then, one has to do so by pointing partly away from it, by not capturing it fully. And this is exactly what images do. Images, in being *only* images, express the truth while not coinciding with it, while specifically *not* being it. And in that way they express truth *exactly*, down to its nature of not coinciding with itself. Ironically, images and sensory experience present truth and reality directly by noticeably not presenting it directly. Their inadequacy is in fact their perfect splendour.

In the end, then, it is *Spider-Man* that gives us the framework in which to read Plato and the meaning of life. The obvious unreality of the comics expresses what we easily miss in reading the "serious" philosophical dialogues, but which, I suggest, is really the central part of their message about truth and the sense that life makes.

Intuitively, it seems right to say that the reality and truth of the world around us is never complete, is at a distance from its complete version. There are always more possibilities of how things can be, and of what things there can be, always more in any particular thing to understand, always more aspects of things to take an interest in. But this "incompleteness" is not added on to reality as an extra piece. It is precisely the way the world we live in always is: reality *is what it is* partly *with* the always present possibility of more and new aspects and things. This "incompleteness" *is* a dimension of reality. It is, then, part of how reality is when it is fully itself, when it is in fact "complete."

Another intuitively clear example of the "separation" in reality itself lies in our sense of ourselves. When we reflect on ourselves, we take a distance from ourselves: and then we are what we are reflecting on, *and* what is doing the reflecting, *and* the distance between them. But this is not simply an activity we perform: as self-conscious creatures it is something we *are*. It is the reality of our consciousness. We can describe consciousness itself as that kind of awareness of itself, distance from itself.

Since reality does not simply coincide with itself, our relating to the unreality of images and of immediate experience *is* our fully experiencing the truth of reality. And not as what is beyond those images and that experience, but *as* their combination of reality and unreality itself. Differently expressed, recognising the separation of truth from itself, and struggling with that separation (since that struggle is what it requires, as a separation

from the truth that we want to get to), and accepting and delighting in it (since as part of truth it *is* the truth we want to get to): all of this is our fully experiencing the sense of the world.

The evident unreality of Plato's dialogues and *Spider-Man* comics, then, their presence as made up here and now, is part of the sense of reality we need if we are to relate to the truth of reality. In a sense, *that* we react *as* we react to the comic books and to Plato's dialogues in all their unreality and appeal, that they are made up and that nonetheless we relate to them in the ways we do, is the theme of the comic books and the dialogues. It is what the books are about. And in its wonderful absurdity and meaningfulness, it is part of what reality is about.

NOTES

1. I am grateful to Jeff McLaughlin for his suggestions as to how to improve this essay. For any remaining faults, of course, the responsibility rests with gremlins.
2. A nice detail here is that "person of the beloved" translates "*idōn to erōtikon*": "the look or visual appearance of the love-worthy." "*Idōn*" is a version of "*idea*," the word Plato uses to mean the true reality (the Idea or Form), so that this passage is beautifully (!) ambiguous as to whether the true reality is in what one sees or separate from it. Harold Fowler translates it as "the love-inspiring vision." Plato, *Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Phaedo, Phaedrus*, trans. Harold North Fowler (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1914) 253E.
3. Similarly, by the end of the *Meno* Socrates realises he has been overlooking something obvious: "absurdly enough, we failed to perceive . . ." (*Meno* 96E). And Socrates in the *Theaetetus*, "So, after going a long way round, we are back at our original difficulty." *Theaetetus*, trans. M. J. Levett, revised by Myles Burnyeat (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1992) 200A.
4. Plato, *Euthyphro*, trans. Lane Cooper, in *Collected Dialogues* 4B, 15C, 15E. Similarly, Ion begins by boasting that "I, of all men, have the finest things to say on Homer," but by the end Socrates observes, "you assure me that you have much fine knowledge about Homer, . . . but you will not even tell me what subject it is on which you are so able." *Ion*, trans. Lane Cooper, in *Collected Dialogues* 530C, 541E.
5. Plato, *Cratylus*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, in *Collected Dialogues* 384B–C. Similarly, in the *Euthyphro*, "It would seem, I must give in, for what could we urge who admit that, for our own part, we are quite ignorant about these matters?" (6B). In the *Meno*, "I'm a forgetful sort of person, and I can't say just now what I thought at the time" (71C). In the *Apology* Socrates insists that it will become "obvious that I have not the slightest skill as a speaker" (17B).
6. And in the *Meno*, "I have heard from men and women who understand the truths of religion . . ." (81A).