

ARTICLES & NOTES

New England Classical Journal 36.3 (2009) 155-167

Eros, Beauty, and the Divine in Plato

Dirk t. D. Held
Connecticut College

Contemporary intellectual culture is diffident, perhaps hostile, towards the transcendent aspects of Plato's metaphysics; instead, preference is given to the openness and inconclusiveness of Socratic inquiry. But it is not possible to distinguish clearly between the philosophy of Socrates and Plato. This essay argues first that Socrates does more than inquire: he enlarges the search for truth with attention to erotics. It further contends that Plato's transformative vision of beauty and the divine directs the soul, also through erotics, to truth not accessible to syllogisms alone. We must therefore acknowledge that Plato's philosophy relies at times on affective and even supra-rational means. Debate over the function of philosophy for Socrates and Plato arose immediately following the latter's death. The early Academy discussed the mode and intent of reason for Socrates and Plato in terms of whether it was best characterized as skepticism or dogmatism. The issue remains pertinent to the present discussion of how Plato intends mortals both to live a life of reason and strive for the divine which is beyond the normal grasp of reason.

What we regard as the traditional "Socratic question" arose in the early nineteenth century from studies of Plato by the Protestant theologian and philosopher, Friedrich Schleiermacher.¹ The phrase stands for the attempt to winnow out an historical figure from the disparate accounts of Socrates found in Plato, Xenophon, and Aristophanes. The question cannot be resolved, and to some it is even a pseudo-problem.² We grant the unlikelihood of any historical purpose underlying Aristophanes' *Clouds*, but the nature and purpose of the other accounts of Socrates do not provide much confidence either. They are called *Sokratikoi logoi* (Σωκρατικοὶ λόγοι) and were regarded as a distinct genre by Aristotle (*Poetics* 1447b11). Plato and Xenophon are the best known authors of this type of work. They each wrote an historically based *Apology* or *Defense* (Ἀπολογία) of Socrates, which in Plato's case was even fashioned as the *ipsissima verba* spoken by Socrates to the Athenian jury. Few today would concede that much. A number of other writers of *logoi* about Socrates are known; nor did the

¹ In English, see Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Introduction to the Works of Plato*, New York: Arno Press, 1973.

² Louis-André Dorion, "Xenophon's Socrates," in Sara Ahbel-Rappe & Rachana Kamtekar, edd., *A Companion to Socrates*, Malden MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006, p. 93.

opposition sit on the sidelines. We know that Polycrates for example wrote an *Accusation of Socrates* (Κατηγορία Σωκράτους)³ which is also an instance of a *Sokratikos logos*.

Since the Socratic question cannot be answered, it is effectively ignored. Contemporary Socratic studies concentrate almost entirely on the works of Plato. This is due both to Plato's fundamental importance as a philosopher and widespread deprecation of Xenophon as an original or significant thinker. I cannot consider here whether such deprecation is fully justified and whether we risk diminishing our understanding of Socratic thought by ignoring Xenophon. The usual disclaimer is that the remarks which follow pertain to "the Platonic Socrates," and I shall follow that practice here.

Setting aside the vexations of the traditional Socratic question, can we move on to a straightforward understanding of Plato's Socrates? Regrettably, that is not the case for reasons I shall lay out below. There is the Socrates of the ethical elenchus and dialogues of refutation (aporetic) and the Socrates who promotes the two-tiered ontology of the divided line. Whoever approaches Socrates and Socratic philosophy even within the confines of the Platonic corpus has to ask, paraphrasing a title used in another context,⁴ "whose Socrates?" "which Socrates?" Neither question can be answered without qualification and cautious judgment, and then only tentatively. In light of the significance Socrates holds as the *fons et origo* of Western philosophy, this is regrettable. Cicero explicitly maintains that Socrates is the originator of ethical philosophy. He says that Socrates was the first to bring philosophy down from the heavens and put it into the cities with people and to make it ask questions about life and about right and wrong:

Socrates autem primus philosophiam devocavit e caelo et in urbibus conlocavit et in domus etiam introduxit et coegit de vita et moribus rebusque bonis et malis quaerere. (*Tusc. Dis.* V.10)

Socrates also embodies the model rational life, famously stating in the Platonic *Apology* that the unexamined life is not worth living: ὁ δὲ ἀνεξέταστος βίος οὐ βιωτὸς ἀνθρώπῳ (*Ap.* 38a).

If "the Socratic question" is not resolvable, can we at least identify which ideas and methods belong to the persona Socrates as he is depicted in Plato's works? The greatest scholar of Socrates in the second half of the twentieth century, Gregory Vlastos, argued skillfully and with great logical acumen that it was indeed possible to distinguish between Socratic and Platonic ideas. This confidence has not survived much beyond the

³W.K.C. Guthrie, *History of Greek Philosophy*, vol. 3, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969, p. 331.

⁴Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, Notre Dame IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1988.

time of Vlastos' death in 1991, since the interpretative model on which it rested, developmentalism (the chronological schema of "early-middle-late" dialogues), has increasingly become viewed with distrust. The developmentalist model long dominated the study of Plato, in fact since the time of Schleiermacher. It was predicated on the not unreasonable understanding that Plato's thought developed over the span of his life.

In his ethical thought Plato is generally taken to have started with an attempt to "define" ethical terms in the shorter "Socratic" dialogues and to have moved on to a bolder, more "positive" ethical theory in the *Republic*. It is generally assumed that the *Republic* is the apex of Plato's ethical thought, and that in it Plato has moved from an early, tentative stage to a confident stage, one where ethics is connected with metaphysical and political theories.⁵

Somewhere along that progression it was presumed that Plato separated from Socratic ideas and advanced beyond them. The problem is that there is no way free of circularity to say just where Plato takes his leave. The situation is complicated by Platonic anonymity, by the fact that as Myles Burnyeat said "We can never accept a conclusion on Plato's say-so because *Plato* never says so."⁶ Plato wrote dialogues, not treatises. The principal speaker in the dialogues is commonly, though not exclusively, Socrates. The prevalence of irony in the dialogues is a further complication, sometimes an obfuscation, since Socrates sometimes seems to say two things at once, one of which is meant and the other not.⁷ Moreover, Socrates may offer a *logos* as a dialectical move rather than as a statement meant to represent a genuine Socratic belief. For all these reasons it is difficult to pin down what Socrates and Plato believe, let alone how we are to distinguish between the two. We ignore at our peril what Charles Kahn refers to as "one of Plato's greatest literary achievements: the creation of the 'realistic' historical dialogue, a work of imagination designed to give the impression of a record of actual events, like a good historical novel."⁸

Debate over the unity or lack of it in Plato's work overall creates a further difficulty for assessing Socrates. Did Plato in his intellectual maturity change his mind to such a degree that he revamped Socratic philosophy past the point of it being any longer Socratic (whatever that might mean)? Numerous scholars have thought so. Charles Kahn in contrast stresses that Plato was a philosopher not an historian. He presents a unitarian view of the Platonic corpus in which the figure of Socrates in

⁵ Julia Annas, *Platonic Ethics, Old and New*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999, p. 4.

⁶ Miles Burnyeat, "Plato," *Proceedings of the British Academy* 111, London 2001, p. 5.

⁷ Gregory Vlastos calls this "complex irony": *Socrates. Ironist and Moral Philosopher*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991, p. 31.

⁸ Charles H. Kahn, *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 35.

the short elenctic dialogues (which proceed through a series of questions Socrates asks his interlocutor) is made to present questions in a protreptic way concerning knowledge, virtue and the like which Plato will deepen and develop in longer and later works. There is no crack between Socratic and Platonic: Platonic philosophy is inextricably bound with Socratic philosophy just as Socratic philosophy is with that of Plato. Multiple perspectives and beliefs are associated with each. Julia Annas, one of several recent scholars who are challenging the usefulness of developmentalist accounts of Plato's philosophy, reminds us that Arius Didymus called Plato *polyphōnos* (πολύφωνος), many-voiced, but denied he was *polydoxos* (πολύδοξος), a holder of many doctrines.⁹ Is Arius right?

I agree with Kahn that we cannot separate with cogency the philosophy of Socrates from that of Plato. The struggle to mold the joint legacy of Plato and Socrates began in the Academy immediately following Plato's death. Briefly put, the argument was whether Socrates in Plato's depiction, and therefore whether Plato himself, is a purveyor of philosophic doctrines, which in the language of the Academy meant that he was a dogmatist; or a skeptic who holds the view that nothing can be ascertained with certainty. On that view Plato never conclusively affirms anything and regards all topics as open continually to investigation.¹⁰ This view, which I have discussed elsewhere,¹¹ has a long tradition in Greek thought which reaches back at least to Xenophanes in the 6th century who claimed:

καὶ τὸ μὲν οὖν σαφὲς οὐτις ἀνὴρ ἴδεν οὐδέ τις ἔσται
εἰδῶς ἀμφὶ θεῶν τε καὶ ἄσσα λέγω περὶ πάντων.
εἰ γὰρ καὶ τὰ μάλιστα τύχοι τετελεσμένον εἰπῶν,
αὐτὸς ὁμῶς οὐκ οἶδε. δόκος δ' ἐπὶ πᾶσι τέτυκται

No one knows nor ever will know, the truth
about the gods or everything I speak of;
even if one happened to say the whole truth
nevertheless he would not know this. Seeming attends all
(DK 21B34)

If the skeptic view is correct, the core of Socratic rationality lies in the aporetic works. On the other hand, if the dogmatic, or as we would more comfortably call it, the doctrinal account is upheld, Plato and Socrates must be acknowledged as holding a clear set of doctrines or principles: about the virtues, about being, and about cosmology for instance. I suspect that most

⁹ Julia Annas (above note 5), p. 9.

¹⁰ This view of his skepticism is taken from Cicero's *Academica*. A full account of the ancient struggle over Plato and Socrates can be found in Harold Tarrant, *Plato's First Interpreters*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000.

¹¹ Dirk t. D. Held, "Hidden Truth in Early Greek Philosophy," *Skepsis* vol. XIII-IV, 2003, pp. 17-24.

people who read Plato have some list of principles they attribute to him, or at least associate with him. The preferred focus has varied across time, but at the end of the 18th century during the ascendancy of German Idealism, Friedrich Schleiermacher established the *Ideenlehre*, the metaphysical doctrine of the Forms, as the most important Platonic doctrine.¹² His view remains influential to this day, perhaps even dominant. Plato and the Forms however have substantially less traction in contemporary intellectual culture than does the provisionality of the *zetetic* dialogues¹³ of inquiry which fail to reach conclusive doctrines. We moderns simply feel more comfortable with *aporia* than we do espousing metaphysical doctrine.

Let us assume for the sake of argument that there are doctrinal teachings in Plato's work which emerge after Plato has introduced the Forms. There is not however anything so explicit as a formal *theory* of the Forms. Plato resorts to philosophical myth and allusion rather than a direct delineation of the knowledge which allegedly grasps the Forms. In part this is because Plato wants to characterize the object of knowledge, that is the Forms, and not the state of the knower's mind. Here lies an important difference between ourselves and the Greeks. Post-Cartesian philosophers stress conditions to be met by the person claiming knowledge. We ask what justifies someone in making a knowledge claim? The Greeks approached knowledge differently. Rather than searching for conditions a *subject* must fulfill to justify a knowledge claim, the Greek approach is to determine criteria an *object* must meet to be knowable, and which will make it free of uncertainty and contingency. This approach has its roots in Parmenides, his long fragment 8 in particular which applies the rigorous grip of the principle of non-contradiction to knowledge. Rather than focusing on the epistemic state of the claimant to knowledge, Parmenides and Plato articulate the criteria that an entity—the thing known—must fulfill if it is to qualify as an object of knowledge.

Whatever disjunctions exist between the skeptical and dogmatic view of philosophy, one commonality holds across the Platonic corpus: *erôs* is the consummate metaphor for the philosopher's life.¹⁴ The philosopher's grasp of Forms requires more than propositional knowledge, and I would argue that Socratic erotics can illustrate this claim. I argue that it is not possible to separate Socratic thinking from Platonic in the matter of *erôs*. Socrates is a lover of wisdom, a *philosophos* (φιλόσοφος). Routine Socratic interaction with others as depicted in Plato's dialogues is by default *philosophic* interaction, since his interlocutors cannot avoid philosophizing if they are

¹² Christina Schefer, *Platons unsagbare Erfahrung*, Basel: Schwabe Verlag, 2005, p. 1.

¹³ The term goes back to Diogenes Laertius. See Harold Tarrant, *Plato's First Interpreters*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000, p. 78.

¹⁴ I am grateful to Richard Moorton for this observation.

to converse with Socrates.¹⁵ His interactions with young men are a form of erotics. John Bussanich captures this nicely when he says that Socrates “possesses an eros for the Good and he seeks to administer the elenchus within the context of an erotic community.”¹⁶

Philia, the stem behind φιλόσοφος, has a broader semantic range when it comes to “love” than does *erôs* which normally connotes erotic passion. Plato knows that *erôs* in the form of sexual appetite, turbulent and threatening to overwhelm its victim, shimmers with disorder. In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates calls *erôs* a μανία or madness and adds the important proviso that the finest things come to mortals through madness (*Phdr.* 244a). In the allegory of the charioteer Plato acknowledges the power of the dark horse which embodies sexual appetite to drag the soul away from returning to its celestial home. In the form of poetic inspiration, madness releases the soul from the realm of the mundane and allows it to receive the Muse’s voice. Similarly, erotic madness in its benign form leads the soul to its transcendent destiny. Initially the lover is aroused by the physical beauty of his beloved, and Plato paints a vivid picture of the lover’s soul sprouting wings from the excitation of beholding the object of his desire. The philosophic lover naturally moves beyond physical arousal since the beloved’s beauty summons forth in him memory of the eternal beauty his soul beheld directly prior to assuming an earthly life. Granted that philosophic lovers share reasoning with one another rather than just their bodies, yet philosophic *erôs* which strives to plant virtue and beauty in another’s soul contains affective and non-cognitive components.

Socrates’ encounter with Diotima of Mantinea established the inadequacy of the preceding encomia in that work to understand *erôs* since the initial speakers in the dialogue did not recognize the underlying relational logic of *erôs* and its need for an object. Love must be love of something, and cannot be described in isolation from its object. When Diotima describes the pregnancies of soul and body she confirms Pausanias’ account of the twin *erôtes*. *Erôs* is love of the beautiful and good, which proves that when we love, we love the good even when we are mistaken as to what constitutes it, for example believing it is bodily pleasure. Diotima then refines her point to say that it is not the beautiful which we love but the begetting and giving birth of the beautiful (*Sym* 206a).

Before Diotima embarks on her final account of *erôs* in the *Symposium*, she tells Socrates that he too might be initiated into τὰ ἐρωτικά, by which she means that he can readily comprehend the discursive analysis of love set forth up to 210a. That part of the dialogue we designate the lesser mysteries of *erôs*, since Plato puts into the mouth of Diotima at *Sym.* 210a

¹⁵ Charles Griswold, “Plato’s Metaphilosophy,” in D. O’Meara, ed., *Platonic Investigations*, Washington 1985, p. 24.

¹⁶ John Bussanich, “Socrates the Mystic,” in John Cleary, ed., *Traditions of Platonism*, Aldershot: Ashgate 1999, p. 41.

language normally applied to the religious mysteries, specifically the verb *μυεῖν* (μυηθείης), which means “to initiate into the mysteries.” She then tells Socrates she is not certain that he will be able to move beyond this preliminary stage to reach the highest level. She describes that stage with additional language from the mysteries, τὰ τέλεα καὶ ἐποπτικά (210a), the rites and revelations. An *εποπτής* (ἐπόπτης) was someone who had been admitted to the highest level of the Eleusinian mysteries and had seen with his own eyes the sacred objects. An individual who underwent this experience was an eye-witness, and such autopsy would later be used by Proclus and Iamblichus to describe visions of the supernatural.

Diotima tells Socrates that upon viewing beautiful things in the proper sequence and correctly, the initiate suddenly will behold in his vision a beauty wondrous in its nature:

ὅς γὰρ ἂν μέχρι ἐνταῦθα πρὸς τὰ ἐρωτικά παιδαγωγηθῆι,
θεώμενος ἐφεξῆς τε καὶ ὀρθῶς τὰ καλά, πρὸς τέλος ἤδη ἰδὼν
τῶν ἐρωτικῶν ἐξαίφνης κατόψεταί τι θαυμαστὸν τὴν φύσιν
καλόν.

The man who has been tutored up to this point in matters of love, viewing beautiful things in proper sequence and correctly, approaching now the end of the matters of love, will suddenly behold in vision a beauty wondrous in nature. (*Sym.* 210e)

The *Symposium* displays a conspicuous discontinuity between the argumentation used by Diotima on the one hand and the sudden mystic perception of Beauty she describes at 210 on the other. Her arguments supersede the discursive contents of the encomia offered by the several preceding speakers to *erôs*, they demonstrate the daimonic nature of *erôs*, and articulate the ascending stages of the *scala amoris*. The mystical experience at the culmination of the ascent passage is made note of, as Athenian participants in the Eleusinian mysteries could make note of theirs. Its experiential content however can neither be communicated nor conveyed through the recitation of any proposition. It seems that the initiate in the words of David Sedley is promised “the privilege of apotheosis . . . [and] the attainment of an immortal *nature*.”¹⁷ This state in principle must remain opaque to mortals.

In Diotima’s account of the final revelation of the mysteries, Beauty appeared with dramatic suddenness to the true lover. As a mystical vision, the experience is short lived but has profound and lasting effects. To be capable of reaching it, the initiate into *erôs*’s mystery must subject himself to a dialectical purging of mistaken ideas, exactly the work of *elenchus*.

¹⁷ David Sedley, “The Speech of Agathon in Plato’s *Symposium*” in Burkhard Reis, ed., *The Virtuous Life in Greek Ethics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2006, p. 63.

When completed the philosophic lover is poised to receive the revelation which bursts upon him suddenly (ἐξαίφνης *Sym.* 210e). The grasping of Beauty itself is impervious to rational demonstration though the road to the experience required preparation by rational argument. We should not of course underestimate the cognitive component of Socratic erotics. The *Symposium* reads like it was Plato's first attempt to stipulate characteristics common to all the Forms. Generic criteria for all Forms are offered at 210e ff: eternal, not generated or destructible, free of increase or diminishment, and so on in a full Parmenidean program. It is not likely to be an accident that Plato chose Beauty rather than say Courage, Justice, or Triangle as the Form chosen for this initial foray through Diotima's mystical account. The role of affect is more evident in the case of Beauty which manifests an aesthetic radiance and resonance not so dependent on more rigorously cognitive exercise as would be the case with the other Forms. But this does not mean that it is devoid of cognitive elements. On the *scala amoris* or "ladder of love" each upward step demands a cognitive grasp of the more inclusive scope of beauty. Eric Voegelin described this "noetic illumination of consciousness" as a form of theophany. If Socrates' inquiries emanate from his theophanic experiences his rationality will be quite different from our notion of secular rationality.¹⁸

The overpowering experience of the lover, in Plato's words, catching sight of "beauty wondrous in nature" (*Sym.* 210e)—something which gives meaning to all his previous efforts—intimately links a rational accomplishment to a transforming affective response. It is transformative because the lover of Beauty has risen to a unity with the cognized entity Beauty. For Plato truth indeed *is* beauty and not an inert result of syllogistic reasoning.

Predicates ascribed by Diotima to the Beauty which the initiate beholds adhere to a Parmenidean canon: Beauty is "ever-existent," not subject to coming-to-be or passing-away; it is without growth or diminishment, neither is it beautiful in one respect and ugly in another, nor beautiful from one perspective and not from another. This Beauty is free of all predicates of aspect in accordance with the Parmenidean axiom: ἔστιν τε καὶ ...οὐκ ἔστι μὴ εἶναι [whatever] is, is and cannot not be (28DK2, line 2).

Diotima thus puts Socrates, along with the reader of the *Symposium*, in a situation in which he can at least "think about" Beauty in terms of the formal properties which a syllogistically inclined intellect can list.¹⁹ He is not yet in a position directly to "think of" Beauty. I take the distinction between thinking of and thinking about from A.C. Lloyd's paper on

¹⁸ Bussanich (above note 16), p. 38. He quotes Eric Voegelin from his *Order and History* vol. 4, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1974, p. 48.

¹⁹ Stanley Rosen, *Plato's Sophist. The Drama of Original and Image*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983, p. 73.

non-discursive thought in Greek philosophy.²⁰ We think *about* Beauty through propositions latent in the predicates Diotima presents. “Thinking about” relies on propositional structure while “thinking of” in Lloyd’s formulation is free of transition from concept to concept and hence is free of propositions.²¹ Diotima in fact at 211a7 says that Beauty will not be presented (φαντασθήσεται) to the initiate as a *logos* or an *epistêmê* and that it is independent in itself and singular in form (αὐτὸ καθ’ αὐτὸ μεθ’ αὐτοῦ μονοειδές).

Discursive knowledge proceeds by reason and argument from premises to conclusions. Does this famous *Symposium* passage suggest then that Plato allowed for some kind of *non-discursive* knowledge? Is such a notion coherent? Is there support for it elsewhere? Or is Diotima’s tale of the sudden apprehension of Beauty an anomaly?

There are grounds for considering the modalities of Socratic reason even in *Republic*, though this is a controversial reading which I will address in greater detail elsewhere. The dialectician deploys arguments “apart from all sense perceptions to find the being itself of each thing” (ἐπ’ αὐτὸ ὃ ἔστιν) “until he grasps the good itself with understanding” (αὐτὸ ὃ ἔστιν ἀγαθὸν αὐτῇ νοήσει λάβῃ *Rep.* 532a-b, Grube-Reeves translation). The grasping is expressed through the verb λαμβάνω, to get or seize, necessary since we were earlier told that the Good was not a being, not an *ousia* (ουσία *Rep.* 509b) as other Forms are (*Rep.* 507b). Discursive argument alone therefore will be unable to describe the Good. As discursive argument in the *Symposium* necessarily preceded the initiate’s grasp of Beauty so in the *Republic* discursive reasoning in the form of *dianoia* leads the aspiring philosopher to achieve the *synopsis* (*Rep.* 537c), a unified vision of the kinship of all things. The true dialectician (in the sense in which Plato uses this term in the *Republic*) is one with a synoptic vision: ὁ μὲν γὰρ συνοπτικός διαλεκτικός (*Rep.* 537c). I argue that just as the mortal lover can only momentarily hold the vision of Beauty, so too the true dialectician of the *Republic* will burst the synoptic vision when compelled to articulate in discursive fashion the separate *ousiai* of the ingredients of reality, of what there is.

Some of Plato’s philosophical priorities are different from ours. We should not forget that the Academy was legally a religious corporation or *thiasos*. Scholars do of course acknowledge, and even write books about, Plato’s religion. Nonetheless the scope of its impact on Plato is frequently undervalued. David Sedley claims that unlike contemporary readers of Plato, an ancient would commonly have said Plato’s philosophical objective was “becoming like a god as much as possible” (*Theaet.* 176b1). Here is the *Theaetetus* passage on becoming like a god:

²⁰ A.C.Lloyd, “Non-discursive Thought: An Enigma of Greek Philosophy,” *PAS*, n.s.70, 1969-1970, pp. 261-274.

²¹ Lloyd (above note 20), p. 263.

ἀλλ' οὐτ' ἀπολέσθαι τὰ κακὰ δυνατόν, ὥ Θεόδωρε—ὑπεναντίον γάρ τι τῶ ἀγαθῶ ἀεὶ εἶναι ἀνάγκη—οὐτ' ἐν θεοῖς αὐτὰ ἰδρῦσθαι, τὴν δὲ θνητὴν φύσιν καὶ τόνδε τὸν τόπον περιπολεῖ ἐξ ἀνάγκης. διὸ καὶ πειραῖσθαι χρὴ ἐνθένδε κείσε φεύγειν ὅτι τάχιστα. φυγὴ δὲ ὁμοίωσις θεῶ κατὰ τὸ δυνατόν: ὁμοίωσις δὲ δίκαιον καὶ ὄσιον μετὰ φρονήσεως γενέσθαι.

Theodorus, it is not possible for evils to be destroyed—for necessarily there must always be something opposite to the good—nor for them to get foothold among the gods, but out of necessity they frequent human nature and locales. Therefore it is necessary to attempt escaping from that place as quickly as possible. Escape is becoming like a god as far as it is possible, and this becoming is to become just and holy with wisdom. (*Theaet.* 176a5-b3)

Sedley regards the objective of the doctrine of ὁμοίωσις θεῶ, of becoming like a god, to be “a pivotal feature of Plato’s thought.” He complains however that the topic “does not even appear in the index to any modern study of Plato” known to him²² though he does call attention to the publication, in the same year as his own essay appeared, of *Platonic Ethics, Old and New* by Julia Annas. Annas reaffirms the stress ancient Platonists put on the notion of becoming godlike. She in fact devotes an entire chapter to the Platonic claim that our final end is to become like a god.²³ Yet even with her sustained attention to the topic, a twenty-page analysis of her book in *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* did no more than state that her treatment was fresh and rewarding without granting it any further discussion, a fact I have commented on elsewhere.²⁴ Moreover, Annas herself confesses to feeling uncomfortable with the “unworldliness” found in the *Theaetetus*, *Phaedo*, and *Phaedrus*. She says that in the *Theaetetus* passage “the idea of becoming like a god is associated with the idea that this is a *flight* from human life” and an escape from “the mix of good and bad that characterizes human life.”²⁵

Sedley on the other hand argues that in the case of the *Theaetetus*, becoming like a god “falls strictly within the confines of an incarnate life.”²⁶ He rejects Plotinus’ interpretation of “the *homoiōsis theōi* doctrine as describing a purely intellectual assimilation to a higher being.”²⁷ According to Sedley, assimilation is achieved when an individual virtuously lives a mortal life. You “narrow the gap between yourself and the god” when you

²² David Sedley, “The Ideal of Godlikeness,” in Gail Fine, ed., *Plato 2: Ethics, Politics, Religion, and the Soul*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 309.

²³ Julia Annas (above note 5), p. 52.

²⁴ Dirk t. D. Held, “Was Plato a Platonist?,” *POLIS* vol. 19, 2002, note 6, p. 160.

²⁵ Annas (above note 5), p. 59.

²⁶ Sedley (above note 22), p. 310.

²⁷ Sedley (above note 22), p. 322.

“become just and . . . holy.”²⁸ If this is all Plato intends by the *homoiōsis theōi* doctrine, the process of striving to live virtuously must be analogous to the lesser mysteries of *erōs* with their vicarious forms of immortality. Diotima says are achieved when mortals beget physical children or write beautiful laws. Those accomplishments, however desirable, fall short of genuine union with the divine. According to Sedley’s reading of the passage, there is no more theophany in *homoiōsis theōi* than there is in begetting mortal children.

A passage in the *Phaedrus* states that a soul successful in following a god will get a glimpse of the outer region of the heavens and become like the god. The best souls will even escape further reincarnation in human form.

θεσμός τε Ἀδραστείας ὄδε. ἥτις ἂν ψυχὴ θεῶν συνοπαδὸς γενομένη
κατίδη τι τῶν ἀληθῶν, μέχρι τε τῆς ἐτέρας περιόδου εἶναι
ἀπήμονα, κἄν ἀεὶ τοῦτο δύνηται ποιεῖν, ἀεὶ ἀβλαβῆ εἶναι.

And this is a law of Destiny, that the soul which follows after God and obtains a view of any of the truths is free from harm until the next period, and if it can always attain this, is always unharmed. (*Phdr.* 248c)

Yet in spite of the misgivings of Annas and others, it is hardly unreasonable to ask whether we can ever reach a deep understanding of Plato if we do not appreciate his attraction to a transcendent reality, however unfashionable that may be today. In the *Phaedo* Socrates likens the philosophic life to the practice of dying:

κινδυνεύουσι γὰρ ὅσοι τυγχάνουσιν ὀρθῶς ἀπτόμενοι φιλοσοφίας
λεληθέναι τοὺς ἄλλους ὅτι οὐδὲν ἄλλο αὐτοὶ ἐπιτηδεύουσιν ἢ
ἀποθνήσκειν τε καὶ τεθνάναι. εἰ οὖν τοῦτο ἀληθές, ἄτοπον δήπου
ἂν εἶη προθυμείσθαι μὲν ἐν παντὶ τῷ βίῳ μηδὲν ἄλλο ἢ τοῦτο,
ἤκοντος δὲ δὴ αὐτοῦ ἀγανακτεῖν ὃ πάλαί προθυμοῦντό τε καὶ
ἐπετήδευον.

It is likely that people do not notice that all those who correctly take part in philosophy do nothing other than make a practice of dying and of being dead. If this is true it would be strange indeed for someone to be eager in his whole life for nothing other than that, but that when it arrives what for a long time they were striving for and practicing would now grieve them. (*Phdo.* 64a4-9)

While this passage could be seen as pointing to a non-discursive secession of the soul from its embodied condition to its true immortal state,

²⁸ Sedley (above note 22), p. 313.

the purport of its message is driven by Plato's desire to state the necessary conditions for reason to function at fullest capacity. The requirement that a philosopher make a practice of dying and being dead is a direct consequence of the philosopher's need to free his soul from the hindrances of the body if he is to grasp the truth (τῆς ἀληθείας ἄπτεται). The clearest knowledge, says Socrates at *Phdo.* 65e, is attained by one who approaches objects so far as possible through reason alone:

ἄρ' οὖν ἐκεῖνος ἂν τοῦτο ποιήσειεν καθαρῶτατα ὅστις ὅτι μάλιστα αὐτῇ τῇ διανοίᾳ ἴοι ἐφ' ἕκαστον, μήτε τιν' ὄψιν παρατιθέμενος ἐν τῷ διανοεῖσθαι μήτε [τινὰ] ἄλλην αἴσθησιν ἐφέλκων μηδεμίαν μετὰ τοῦ λογισμοῦ, ἀλλ' αὐτῇ καθ' αὐτὴν εἰλικρινεῖ τῇ διανοίᾳ χρώμενος αὐτὸ καθ' αὐτὸ εἰλικρινὲς ἕκαστον ἐπιχειροῖ θηρεῦειν τῶν ὄντων.

Would not that man do this most perfectly who approaches each thing, so far as possible, with the reason alone, not introducing sight into his reasoning nor dragging in any of the other senses along with his thinking, but who employs pure, absolute reason in his attempt to search out the pure, absolute essence of things. (*Phdo.* 65e)

Dianoia is not the word which we would anticipate to denote a non-discursive process. In fact, the *Phaedo* passage stresses the need to isolate the soul's reasoning power from the senses. Granted that the idea of *catharsis*, which hovers in the background of the discussion, resonates in the dialogue for Socrates' Pythagorean companions Simmias and Cebes, the passage nonetheless emphasizes the efficacy of reasoning when it operates free from the bodily senses:

ἀλλὰ τῷ ὄντι ἡμῖν δέδεικται ὅτι, εἰ μέλλομέν ποτε καθαρῶς τι εἶσεσθαι, ἀπαλλακτέον αὐτοῦ καὶ αὐτῇ τῇ ψυχῇ θεατέον αὐτὰ τὰ πράγματα. καὶ τότε, ὡς ἔοικεν, ἡμῖν ἔσται οὐ ἐπιθυμοῦμέν τε καὶ φάμεν ἐρασταὶ εἶναι, φρονήσεως, ἐπειδὰν τελευτήσωμεν, ὡς ὁ λόγος σημαίνει, ζῶσιν δὲ οὔ.

... in fact we perceive that if we are ever to know anything absolutely, we must be free from the body and must behold the actual realities with the eye of the soul alone. And then, as our argument shows, when we are dead we are likely to possess the wisdom which we desire and claim to be enamored of, but not while we live. (*Phdo.* 66d-e)

Socratic rationality does more than seek the knowledge of definitions which in itself cannot bring about moral wisdom.²⁹ This supports the

²⁹ Bussanich (above note 16), p. 49.

skeptic argument in that rational inquiry is necessary but not sufficient for the philosopher to attain truth. This account of skepticism does not preclude the reality of objective values but concedes human inability to determine them.³⁰ As to the dogmatic or doctrinal Plato, we can at least say that the relationship of humans to the divine is central to Platonic philosophy, though ratiocinative reason cannot fully capture this relationship. I believe that there are a number of metaphysical doctrines or *beliefs* in Plato, but qualify this with the reminder of the Socratic, and Greek, assumption that human wisdom is limited. So too will be a full grasp of Platonic doctrine. No knowledge which is “hard as adamant” (σιδηροῖς καὶ ἀδαμαντῖνοις λόγοις *Gorg.* 509a) is possible until we have fulfilled the injunction in the *Theaetetus* to become like a god.³¹

And what mortal can do that? If the Platonic injunction to become like a god is the centerpiece of his philosophy as Plato’s ancient interpreters thought, the zetetic function of inquiry lies at the heart of Plato’s philosophy. Closure and full delineation of truth and reality, through rational inquiry, is not possible for mortals. The zetetic attitude acknowledges this profoundly. It resonates deeply with Socratic behavior in the aporetic dialogues. Both are Platonic, both are Socratic.³²



³⁰ This is what Academics like Antiochus of Ascalon found in Plato’s dialogues: not system (for which you went to Aristotle) but “the Socratic spirit, questioning received wisdom and exploring tentative solutions to the problem at hand.” Myles Burnyeat (above note 6), p. 5.

³¹ The late commentators Alcinous and Arius Didymus agree that this is a Platonic doctrine. See Annas (above note 5), p. 52.

³² I am grateful for some acute observations and suggestions of Nina Coppolino, an anonymous reviewer, and Richard Moorton. Remaining inconcinnities and shortcomings are mine.