

Concluding Plato

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With respect to the influence or the impact of Plato's philosophy, four subject headings summarize how we can speak about a number of consequences (or allegedly the “fallout”) that has resulted for us within the subsequent history of philosophy in the kind of reflection which belongs to the work of philosophy. In Plato, we have (1) a philosophy of ethics, (2) a philosophy of science, (3) a philosophy of religion, and (4) a philosophy of aesthetics as this exists in Plato's notion of beauty or in how his notion of the Beautiful has had a fructifying influence as a possible or initial point of entry (serving, in other words, as a point of departure) for anyone who could begin to have an interest in the value of asking philosophical questions: pursuing personal studies and reflections that could lead into higher reflections as these exist within philosophy and the kind of manifestation which can exist within the order of human culture. An abbreviated discussion of these themes points to the possible truth of a judgment which originally comes to us from A. N. Whitehead when he says that the subsequent history of thought in western philosophy is to be regarded and conceived as a footnote that has been appended to the texts of Plato's philosophy.¹ We attend and look for the kind of causality or the kind of stimulus that has always belonged to the accumulation of insights and oversights that have come to us from the study of Plato's thought as these studies have existed in our western culture through passages of time that has passed through a succession of generations where each tends to grasp a teaching or a meaning in a slightly different way.

First, with respect to ethical questions and how we should live a truly good life, since Plato's aspirations and philosophy is entirely directed toward a knowledge of stable, fundamental, and final realities (from a knowledge of metaphysical realities, one best moves toward a knowledge of moral realities), his philosophy has been described as a study of how we are to die well: how we are, in fact, to cross over from the being of one world to the being of another world *within the context of our present life* prior to any kind of physical death which would inevitably come to us as human beings at the conclusion of our life on earth.² In referring to Socrates and by means of the person and figure of Socrates, Plato's philosophy seeks to teach us how we are to undergo a species of radical change within ourselves (a change which exists as a moral and as an intellectual species of conversion that can be given to us within the context of our current life) since, if we are philosophical, if we are truly philosophical in how we think and live, then, even if and as we die within ourselves by way of a change of self which occurs in how we exist and think as human beings, through this type of death, we will achieve a true kind of morality as, gradually and increasingly, our souls are joined and assimilated to the being a greater, primary world from which we have all originally emerged and come from. As our human souls remember this primary world through an interior process of recollection, we will be moved and stirred by an inner yearning and seeking that soon wells up from within ourselves: a desiring and appetite that wants to return to the world of our origins through an *eros* which can be identified as a species of love. Physical death then, when it comes, comes and exists as a liberation as, now, we are separated and disjoined from our mortal bodies in a manner which is akin to the birth of philosophy within the depths of our souls (within the procedures and the steps of our rational life) as this occurs within us and as it is achieved through any kind of growth in knowledge that can come to us

¹Koestler, *Sleepwalkers*, p. 55.

²Stratford Caldecott, *Not As the World Gives The Way of Creative Justice* (Kettering, OH: Angelico Press, 2014), p. 30; *Beauty for Truth's Sake*, p. 21.

whenever we engage and enter into the form of self-liberation which properly belongs to us as human beings through the kind of activity which properly belongs to us within the practice of our cognition: as we exercise the powers of our rational human souls in a manner that detaches itself or which separates itself from the being and the life of our bodies toward actuations of reason that are given to us through reminiscences which recall and which remember truths and realities that had been previously known by us, truths or realities that we have long since forgotten but which can now be brought back to life and put into a form of conscious awareness which has now become explicit through a deliberate kind of remembering that moves into speech (by way of an articulation which moves from the inner word of our thoughts toward the outer words of expression and concept). As a general maxim thus: to know any kind of truth is always to liberate ourselves from the pull and lure of material conditions as we begin to discover the reality of the human spirit which belongs to us and the kind of transcendence which properly belongs to the being and the life of our questing, yearning, desiring spirits. Despite any difficulties, we can more easily understand and work with the transcendence of our human spirit than with that which exists and which is given to us as a material, outer, external world which exists in a shadowy kind of way because, in its being, variety, and changeableness, it is none too reliable, steady, or constant.

Second, with respect to the kind of knowledge which properly belongs to the nature of scientific activity as a distinct species or form of cognition, in Plato's philosophy of science, a number of points presage or we can say that they suggest an understanding of science that belongs to the extent of our current understanding. Three points stand out. (1) First, if we are to move toward any kind of scientific understanding, we must prescind or we must move away from the kind of knowledge that belongs to our acts of human sensing. A real distinction exists between the direct objects of our human experience and the direct objects of our understanding and, if we are to understand the objects of our human sensing, we must move into a species of cogitation activity that moves to another set of objects and properties. (2) Second, an apprehension of the being of intellectual objects and properties is greatly helped if, by means of mathematics and through the use of mathematics, these objects or properties are given a form of denotation that is grounded in the use of mathematical symbols. Numbers express quantities and, as the same time too, they can indicate where proportions exist as differing variables are related to each other in ways which point to the being of a greater scheme of things that can be known and mapped out more easily if mathematics is used as a species of scientific tool. So much of this goes with so much of that. Between, say, x and y , a relation exists which corresponds or which resembles a second relation which exists, say, between m and n . Mathematical equations introduce an order of things into the world of our ordinary experience in a manner that cannot be rendered if we continue to rely on a kind of knowing that is more closely linked to our acts and data of sense than the kind of knowing that also belongs to us in our human reasoning and the kind of distancing that can effected if, through our acts of inquiry, we move from the acts and data of sense toward the acts and data of our understanding. The abstractness of mathematics introduces a greater degree of abstractness into the conduct of our scientific inquiry than would be the case if we should think about the possible objects of our understanding in ways that would want to limit the kind or form of denotation to a symbolism that is more closely related to the language of our ordinary speech than to the technical kind of language and denotation which belongs to the kinds of procedure which exist within mathematics. (3) Third, in its truthfulness, the kind of understanding which exists in science is best described as probable and not as certain. In Plato's language, in the *Timaeus*, we refer to how a given understanding of things would exist as a "likely story."³ As a consequence of probability and

³Meynell, *Redirecting Philosophy*, p. 248, citing Plato, the *Timaeus*.

because of judgments which are grounded in the sense and rationality of probability, a provisional understanding of things, as this exists within science, is not to be confused with the kind of provision or the kind of contingency which exists whenever opinions or beliefs are espoused in a manner that is divorced from the presence of any kind of evidence. Truths which are known through apprehensions of evidence exist more surely or with a greater degree of stability and credibility than any claims or assertions that are made in a manner that is bereft of any kind of evidence or proof.

Third, with respect to how Plato exists as a philosopher of religion, since philosophy in the Platonic tradition requires a conversion of the whole human self that is not limited to only our acts of thinking and reasoning, Plato should not be viewed as, strictly speaking, a rationalist but as something or as someone who was more than that: existing as a spiritual or as a spiritualist type of thinker. Since Plato's philosophy involves more than having a rational grasp of reality (where this reality is understood to refer to the being of an externally existing world), his thought requires elements of estrangement from the world of our ordinary experience and so, in the kind of distancing which is needed in our thinking and reasoning, our present life is turned or it becomes a kind of preparation or a function of some kind of higher form of existence, an aspect that was later noticed and picked up by early Christian theologians who tried to incorporate Plato's philosophy and thought into the newly emerging being of a Christian Catholic theology. Persons like St. Augustine (and others) turned to both Plato and Plotinus in the declining days of the Roman Empire in order to escape or to look toward other sources of meaning in ways that could enhance the possibility of our human salvation and, in a related way, also increase or add to the extent of our human understanding. Hence, within this context, a struggle soon ensued between a Jewish conception of man and a Platonic conception of man. How to combine the two together? Where Plato believed that our current human life was not as it seemed to appear and look and that, as messengers and helpers, we must go back down into the cave of mortal human existence in order to convince and help our fellow human beings, in the Platonic philosophy of **Plotinus**, instead of reaching out to our fellow man, we must seek to be free of the material order of things where these impinge or influence us in how we live and think. Where in Plato, a basis exists for having legitimate political desires and interests, in Plotinus a break or a total severance from the contemporary order of things which exists within our world is to be encouraged and esteemed. In a more radical kind of way, one would try to live apart from other human beings, separately from the being of other persons. Better to live the life of a hermit.

Fourth and lastly, in Plato's notion of the Beautiful or in his notion of beauty, a foundation is given or, better still, a foundation is laid for subsequent reflections that would try to distinguish that which is beautiful or the Beautiful as a reality that exists on par (comparably) with the Good and the True, that which is good and that which is true. If Truth exists as a transcendental (it cuts across the being of all cultural differences) and if Good also exists as a transcendental (it also transcends the being of all cultural differences), cannot the same thing be said about the being or notion of Beauty and any instances or manifestations of beauty? If truth and goodness inform each other (each is the other), why not beauty? Is not the good, beautiful and is not truth, beautiful also? In fact, with further reflection, if truth is grasped by understanding minds as an intelligible understood entity (it is not informed by the presence of any material determinations), and if good is understood as a practicable deed or action that is to be brought into a concrete form of existence within the being of spatial and temporal conditions, then, given the kind of cognition which belongs to us as human beings, our acts of sense constantly interacting with our acts of understanding, can experiences of beauty serve as the best point of entry for us if we are to move toward other apprehensions which know about the being of truths and yet other apprehensions which know about the goodness of different things? In other words, apprehensions of

beauty exist in a manner which is closer or more adjacent to us in the kind of knowing which exists for us in our various acts of human sensing. In our human lives, we sense before we understand. Our acts of human sensing exist before we begin to move toward our later acts of understanding. One type of act precedes the other and, so, this difference accordingly points to a kind of priority which can be ascribed if, with Plato in his *Symposium*, we should refer to the Idea or the Form of Beauty as the chief of all the forms, governing all else in the hierarchy of different forms and ideas. Pedagogically or cognitively, we understand the kind of supremacy which should be ascribed to the role and the function of Beauty although, from a point of view which attends to the primacy of a metaphysical perspective, we can understand why, in this context, Truth can be regarded as the chief of all forms since from the primacy of understanding and through our apprehensions of differing truths, we can then move toward apprehensions which can know about realizations of being that are possible for us but which can only be brought into being through externalizing actions which move from the kind of order and acts which belong to our human cognition toward another order that is constituted by the doing of actions that are other than those which belong to the performance or the actuality of our human cognition. While Plato does not speak (in so many words) about the primacy of the Idea or the Form of Truth (he speaks about the primacy of the Beautiful and, elsewhere, about the primacy of the Good), in reading Plato's texts, we can wonder and perhaps suppose and then proceed to argue that, in the meaning of Plato's thought, the primacy of Truth within the order of Ideas is to be regarded as a forgone conclusion. Absent the primacy of truth and, from this, we can absent the being of any kind of goodness. In a tradition of thought that comes to us from Socrates and which has dominated the subsequent history of western philosophy until into the life and times of St. Thomas Aquinas in 13th Century: from our knowing, comes our willing, the form of our human doing. Our acts of willing and doing are ruled by our acts of understanding and knowing. We do what we know and if we fail to know, we will fail in the good that we would like to accomplish within the order of our willing and doing.