

Research Article

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Socratic and Cartesian Personae: Undismembering and Liquidation

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Abstract: The essay investigates two personae: Socrates as depicted by Plato and Descartes as narrator of the *Discourse on Method* and *Meditations*. Socrates is aware of his ignorance and insists on remembering to care for the self; Descartes claims to have overcome ignorance through a method that breaks problems into simple and certain elements, establishing a self-certain yet impersonal subject that comprehends and controls objects. The Cartesian approach has led to the modern process of “liquidation” that reduces beings, property, and truth to resources, wealth, and information – initiating the dangerous and unprecedented epoch known as the Anthropocene. The Socratic approach offers some promise of reintegration and resistance to liquidation by urging us to care for wholeness and recognizing that being exceeds what we comprehend.

Keywords: Anthropocene, care, Descartes, eros, liquidation, memory, Socrates, wholeness

Tout ce qui est incompréhensible ne laisse pas d’être.

– Pascal

Plato’s persona Socrates and Descartes’ persona, the narrator of the *Discourse on Method* and *Meditations*, share a moment in which they realize their own ignorance. Socrates never abandons that realization; Descartes claims to have found the means to overcome it. This is, perhaps, the essential difference in their understandings of self, world, knowledge, and memory. The Cartesian persona, with its claim to certainty, promotes an attitude that liquidates or dismembers the whole; the Socratic persona, in its knowing ignorance, undismembers, recollects, and reintegrates.

Socrates and Descartes have always been controversial. Often, both are taken as emblems of a rationalism that one either celebrates for its brave independence or condemns for its corrosive effects on culture and tradition.¹ Here, we cannot review the personae and the controversies in their full complexity, but will focus on certain contrasts between Socrates and Descartes that pertain to our present and future ways of understanding and dwelling on the earth – for there is far more at stake here than literary devices and theoretical arguments. The Cartesian drive for certainty and control has transformed our planet and initiated the Anthropocene; the Socratic project of recollecting and caring for oneself sets limits to the Cartesian quest. Is there a way to revive Socratic recollection while keeping open to the unprecedented, unpredictable events that may come upon us in this new epoch? Can the Socratic project point the way to a paradoxical ontology of the incomprehensible, a metaphysics of surprise?

¹ The historical Socrates is critiqued by Aristophanes and celebrated by Plato and Xenophon. For an instructive collection of positive and negative later appraisals, which inevitably depend on the personae created by these three authors, see Spiegelberg, *The Socratic Enigma*. The history of modern philosophy can be told as the story of Cartesianism and its critics, including thinkers as diverse as Vico, Hume, Kierkegaard, Peirce, Dilthey, Wittgenstein, and Merleau-Ponty.

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1 The Cartesian persona

Let us begin with the more recent philosophical persona, the one that has done more than any other to transform the planet – for well before Marx, Descartes insisted on a “practical philosophy” that would not just interpret the world, but change it (DM 6, AT 61–62).²

The Cartesian persona is impersonal. The *Discourse on Method* (1637) was published anonymously – for prudential reasons, to be sure, but its anonymity also helps it serve as Everyman’s story. It is written in French, a language that bypasses academic Latin to appeal to the “natural reason” in everyone (DM 6, AT 77). Its philosophical teachings are embedded in an autobiography, a life told as if it were a “fable” (DM 1, AT 4); but the author also warns us that even the most truthful histories are inevitably selective, so they yield a distorted picture (DM 1, AT 7). The reader is thus steered away from taking the text’s brief chapters as reliable accounts of an individual’s life. What matters, instead, are the rules and reasonings that anyone with sufficient “good sense” can adopt in order to achieve knowledge.

Who has good sense? The *Discourse* begins with the jest that good sense, also known as reason or the ability to tell the true from the false, must be equally distributed, since no one seems to want more of it than he already has (DM 1, AT 1–2). But the reader who thinks well will notice that a few pages later, Descartes writes that those who are not sufficiently able to tell the true from the false should not follow his method (DM 2, AT 15). Cartesian reasoning, then, is not accessible to all. However, it remains impersonal, since the qualification for participating in it is not some uniquely individual talent or virtue, but simply a high degree of the quality that makes human beings human: reason itself.

Descartes writes, with false modesty, that he is simply presenting his own, personal method, which may or may not be of use to others (DM 1, AT 4). But the book is not titled *Discourse on My Method*; it is *Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting One’s Reason and of Seeking Truth in the Sciences*. His method is not really his, not personal at all, but “one’s.” He promises that his techniques can be perpetuated, passing from generation to generation of researchers and engineers (DM 6, AT 63), until human beings become “the masters and possessors of nature” (DM 6, AT 62). They will turn nature into their slave and their possession by understanding the forces that drive natural phenomena and harnessing these forces for whatever purposes they are “appropriate” (*propres*: DM 6, AT 62). Since Descartes banishes teleology from physics,³ this appropriateness or suitability seems to be nothing more than the physical limits on technology, combined with the will to enhance and empower humanity. Those limits are very broad indeed: we can build “an infinity of devices,” eliminate the pain of labor, improve our bodies, and perhaps overcome “the infirmity of old age” (DM 6, AT 62). We may someday transcend death.

But first, we must transcend birth – overcoming the unfortunate fact that we were not born with the full use of our reason (DM 2, AT 13).⁴ One can jettison one’s entire past, including one’s culture and education, by insisting on “clear and certain knowledge of all that is useful for life” (DM 1, AT 4) and recognizing that no transmitted learning offers any such knowledge. Having performed excellently at one of the finest schools in Europe, the Cartesian persona concludes that he still knows nothing. Then, “I took the liberty of judging all others by myself and of thinking that there was no doctrine in the world such as the one I had been seeking” (DM 1, AT 5).

The world-transforming method of gaining certain and useful knowledge is revealed to the narrator of the *Discourse* when he is secluded in a warm, womb-like room, from which he will emerge with a remedy for the dependency and fallibility of his thoughts. The method is deceptively simple: admitting only what is indubitably true, one must break problems down to their simplest elements; reassemble them, imposing an arbitrary order if need be; and ensure that no step has been left out (DM 2, AT 18–19). Complex wholes are

² References to Descartes’ *Discourse on Method* (DM) and *Meditations* (M) will take the form of a chapter number followed by the page number in *Oeuvres de Descartes*, eds. Adam and Tannery (AT), vol. VI (1902) and vol. VII (1904), respectively. Translations from Descartes and Plato are mine.

³ See M 4, AT 55. All final causes should be reduced to efficient ones, according to Descartes’ response to objections to Meditation 4: AT VII, 374.

⁴ On the misogyny of Descartes’ self-born persona, see Bordo, “The Cartesian Masculinization of Thought.” I thank Bethany Henning and Alexa Ollier for our conversations on this topic.

reduced to clear and distinct parts – which, at least for natural objects, are comprehensible mathematically. Nature must be spelled out, as it were, into its basic constituents. Then, these constituents can be reassembled – or rewritten into different formations.

The *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641) were published under Descartes' own name, in Latin, and dedicated to the Faculty of Theology at the University of Paris. This text is Descartes' attempt to gain ecclesiastical and academic approbation for his revolutionary vision. Under the guise of a treatise on the soul and God, it insinuates the secular message that the human will, using mathematical tools, can comprehend and control nature. (We cannot plausibly claim that Descartes was an atheist, but theoretically proving the existence of God is far from living a life of faith.)

Although Descartes' own name presides over the text, and its narrator is presumably the same person as the one whose condensed autobiography was presented in the *Discourse*, the persona here is more obviously impersonal. Many commentators refer to him as the Meditator – not René Descartes in particular, for his train of thought is supposed to be one that any rational being can follow. We learn nothing about him personally except that he is wearing a dressing gown and sitting by the fireplace (M 1, AT 18). Of course, even these details bespeak a certain amount of security, health, property, education, and leisure. It can be argued, then, that this persona is not as universal as he pretends to be. If one happens to belong among those who are treated as subrational “sub-persons,” one may not have the luxury of doubting the existence of the external world, a world that subjects one to various forms of abuse. Instead, one may doubt one's own existence and wonder whether one has any reality aside from the hostile projections of one's oppressors.⁵

Even the privileged Meditator admits that it is not easy to affirm the supremacy of self-consciousness. In order to reinforce that supremacy and show that one's own intellect can master one's senses, he takes a piece of wax, “fresh from the honeycomb,” and brings it near the fire (M 2, AT 30). He finds that all its sensible properties change, yet he still knows that it is the same wax. He concludes that the essence of the wax is known through intellect alone: it is simply an infinitely mutable volume (M 2, AT 31). This is true not only of wax, but of all *res extensa*. In this way, the liquefaction of the wax is an emblem of the Cartesian comprehension and transformation of all material nature. At the same time, it draws attention to the intellect as the indispensable faculty of the *res cogitans*.

The Meditator requires memory to compare the molten wax to its former solid state, and thus to establish the supremacy of the intellect. The reliability of memory becomes a major source of anxiety for the Cartesian persona. If one is unable to remember every step in one's own reasoning clearly and distinctly, how can one have confidence in one's conclusions? Descartes even claims that he must prove the existence of a benevolent God in order to still the fear that memory may be untrustworthy.⁶ The need to record unambiguous information reliably and to access the record efficiently and accurately is thus implied in the Cartesian project. Among the Cartesian “infinity of devices” are the information-processing machines that surround us today.⁷

2 The process of liquidation

The modern, self-certain subject analyzes and reshapes the “wax” of nature, presiding over the malleability of matter; it remembers by securely storing and organizing information. This process is manifest today as the liquidation of natural things and organisms into “natural resources”; the liquidation of property into wealth; and the liquidation of integral interpretations into a stream of data.⁸ Within the confines of this essay, we can characterize these aspects of liquidation only in sweeping terms, ignoring qualifications and local exceptions.

⁵ Mills, “Non-Cartesian Sums.”

⁶ M 6, AT 90; *Objections and Replies*, AT VII, 140, 196.

⁷ Pascal, Descartes' contemporary and critic, is the inventor of the Pascaline, the first modern mechanical calculator and a predecessor of computers.

⁸ For another presentation of this threefold process, see Polt, “Eidetic Eros and the Liquidation of the Real.”

“Resource” has become the modern term for an entity in general – from time resources to space resources to material resources. “Natural resources” are potentially exploitable assets that are not manufactured by us, but are available for human taking and use. Whether we “develop” these resources or “defend” and “conserve” them, we experience them as pliable, consumable “wax.” “Energy resources” are particularly valuable, as they magnify our power to transform and utilize all resources. Here, “energy” is freed of any subservience to *energeia*, to some specific kind of actualization; energy is power that can be deployed in any direction, for any willed end.⁹

Likewise, in the modern world, property tends to be “liquidated” into wealth – sheer monetary value that is purpose-neutral.¹⁰ Property – an heirloom, a homestead, an estate – has irreplaceable qualities and makes a claim on us. We belong to it as much as it belongs to us. Modern economies convert this property into “financial resources.” Such resources may take the form of private capital, state-controlled funds, or consumer purchasing power.

Truth, finally, becomes “information resources”: a vast flow of data to be “mined” for useful patterns, its advantages maximized. In traditional premodern communities, truth claims are made and contested against the backdrop of a shared sense of what matters and how to comprehend it. This shared understanding always has its blind spots, but it provides a certain coherence and stability. Now our societies are more disjointed and fluid than ever; they tend to drift apart into subgroups with incommensurable standards of truth. Individuals, corporations, institutions, and governments are driven to accumulate and exploit information to serve their incompatible interests. Remembering means ascertaining data points and keeping them readily available for retrieval and deployment.

There are obvious benefits to liquidation. It loosens confining structures; it liberates us from local conditions that limit us to a narrowly defined natural environment or tradition. Modernity has fostered health, mobility, and an abundance of knowledge and technology. But by the same token, it tends to obliterate the local conditions that we have transcended. Inherited ways of life and ancient ecosystems are easily wiped away by the forces of liquidation.

Amidst this process, what is left of humanity beyond “human resources” who can be plugged into the system of liquidation as needed? What does it mean to be a self now, if the self has drifted free of its former ties to history and nature? The Cartesian persona suggests that the modern self must be impersonal: a calculating, manipulating agent implementing a plan that every sufficiently disciplined mind can adopt, following a method that every sufficiently intelligent mind can understand.

Of course, this has not been the only modern conception of the self: there is the self as the sentiment of one’s own existence and desire for liberation (Rousseau), or as creative passion (Romanticism), or commitment to an uncertain way of existing (Kierkegaard). These are all, arguably, reactions to Cartesianism, and they all arguably share certain modern assumptions with Descartes: for example, the Kierkegaardian leap of faith is anticipated in Descartes’ point that when one is lost in the woods, one must choose a direction and stick to it (DM 3, AT 24–25). But now we will look to the Socratic persona, as crafted by Plato, for an alternative understanding of self, memory, and world, which nevertheless emerges from a situation that is comparable to that of Descartes: a traditional world that has been disrupted by rationalism.

3 The Socratic persona

Let us begin with Socrates’ end – for Socrates is mortal, and his personal mortality is essential to his persona. The story of his trial and execution is an indispensable crisis, a profound and illuminating trauma, not only for Plato but for subsequent Western culture.

⁹ Polt, “Potentiality, Energy and Sway”; Marder, *Energy Dreams*.

¹⁰ Cf. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 61.

Socrates, like Descartes, has a moment in which he recognizes his own ignorance (*Apology* 21d). But Descartes assumes that if he, as an academically proficient young man, knows nothing, then nobody does: he can judge all others by himself. Socrates, in contrast, sets out to learn from others and concludes empirically that everyone he has interrogated is unwittingly ignorant. They are not all completely ignorant: the craftsmen know how to make things, but they wrongly assume that they also know greater things – the meaning and purpose of their own actions (*Apology* 22d). We could take this as a criticism of the technical expertise, without reflection on appropriate ends, that Descartes prizes. Furthermore, Socrates' project of interrogation never reaches a conclusion. He keeps examining himself and others and means it very literally when he says that “the unexamined life is not worth living” (*Apology* 38a). If he is forbidden to question, he might as well die.

Socrates' death is depicted in the *Phaedo*. On the surface, his message in this dialogue again has similarities to Descartes'. Socrates cheerfully insists that he will transcend death, for the soul is immortal, thanks in part to its participation in reasoning, *logismos* (66a). What matters is not the person of Socrates, but *logos*, and *logos* will continue after his disappearance, as long as his friends keep participating in it.

But Socrates' arguments do not seem to cheer his friends' hearts. They all break down in unmanly tears (117d), feeling that they are losing an irreplaceable individual. The Socratic persona, despite Socrates' reasoning, is very personal indeed.

What is more, his reasoning for the immortality of the soul is far from solid. Every argument in the *Phaedo* is flawed, and his final argument may be the most sophisticated of all. The soul, argues Socrates, is essentially alive. A dead soul, like cold fire, is a contradiction in essences. It follows that the soul is deathless (*athanatos*). And if what is deathless is indestructible, then the soul is indestructible; “if not, we need another *logos*” (106d). The fallacy that his friends are unwilling to notice is that being essentially “deathless” does not mean being indestructible. Even though there can be no cold fire, a fire can be extinguished, leaving only cold ashes. Likewise, though there can be no dead soul, a soul may be destroyed and leave only a corpse behind. To “be dead” is not really to *be* at all, but to have ceased being.

What the clear and distinct *logos* offers us is not the immortality we crave – an indefinite prolongation of our existence in time – but an atemporal conceptual relationship. The concept of the soul is “deathless” only by virtue of being lifeless. The concept of the soul does not participate in death, but Socrates' soul, and each of our souls, is irremediably vulnerable to dying.

This is why Socrates' last argument is so unsatisfying, and why it is not actually his final *logos*; it is followed by a *logos* as *mythos*, a tale about the migration of souls to the higher, ethereal regions (107d–114c). This is not a story that can be proved true, but it is one that is worth the risk of faith (114d), because it does more than abstract logic can to satisfy our desires for a meaningful, purposive cosmos – a desire that cannot be fulfilled by the proto-Cartesian physics of the rationalist philosopher Anaxagoras (97b–99c).

Socrates' penultimate message is that “we owe a cock to Asclepius” (118a). This utterance may be taken as the morbid teaching that life is a disease,¹¹ or perhaps he is drawing attention to a subtle healing that has taken place for all the participants in his final dialogue. We should note that he pays some homage, in this saying, to his own religion and culture in a way that may be more sincere than Descartes' pretense of piety.

But Socrates saves his most essential message for last. Immediately after his gratitude to a god, he utters his ultimate parting words: *mē amelēsēte*. This plural imperative double negative is hard to translate into English, although other languages can mirror it well (in Spanish, *no descuidéis*). Do not fail to care, he advises his friends.¹² The phrase is sometimes translated loosely as “don't forget.”

But what is forgetting? What is remembering? In the *Theaetetus*, Socrates experiments with wax as a model for memory: we have a block of wax in our souls, which may be abundant or meager, clean or dirty, hard or soft. On this wax, we imprint sensations and judgments. But this model fails because, as Socrates

¹¹ Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, 12.

¹² In “Have We Been Careless with Socrates' Last Words?” Madison argues persuasively that the healing for which Socrates is thankful is his friends' escape from carelessness – their rededication to caring for their souls and for *logos* (434–5).

points out, it cannot account for mistakes in judgment that are not just mismatches between imprints and perceptions, but occur within the soul itself (196b–c). More broadly, the concept of memory as information recording and retrieval forgets the activity of the self who is recording and retrieving – and self-remembrance, care for the soul, is the crucial form of recollection.

The model of memory as an aviary, which replaces the wax block model, is more mobile: instead of static impressions, we have fluttering, elusive cognitions. But both models fail for similar reasons. The aviary model represents errors in judgment as occurring when one reaches into one's mental birdcage and seizes the wrong bird. But the false judgment is neither the bird itself nor the seizing of it, but rather the soul's judgment that one has the *right* bird – and this judgment is presupposed by the aviary model rather than explained by it (200a–c). Again, the mind's activity resists being represented as a mindless thing. Truth, error, and remembering do not occur in objects, but in “the self itself.”¹³

The self is not an impersonal cognitive system, but an individual who is faced with the challenge of understanding oneself in relation to other individuals, in a concrete situation. Context matters.¹⁴ Socrates makes this point indirectly when, earlier in the *Theaetetus*, he tells the story of how Thales, studying the sky, fell into a well and was mocked by a Thracian servant girl (174a). The persona of Thales, and the whole passage, are usually interpreted as Plato's praise of the otherworldliness of “the philosopher.” But the careful reader will note that “the philosopher” is quite unlike Socrates himself: “the philosopher” does not know his way to the marketplace (173c), never attends parties (173d) (unlike Socrates in the *Symposium*), and cares only about Man while remaining oblivious to particular human beings (174b) – whereas what Socrates wants to know, first of all, is which individual young Athenians are most promising (143d). Most absurdly, Socrates, who is keenly aware of his own ignorance, says that “the philosopher” does not even know that he doesn't know (173e).

The key to this absurdity is simple. One must remember the context – Socrates' concrete situation and interlocutor. He is speaking to Theodorus, an astronomer and mathematician – a proto-Cartesian – who is rather clueless about human contexts. Theodorus does not even know who his prize student's father is (144b). He is a theorist, but he dislikes the rough-and-tumble of philosophical debate (162b, 165a, 169a); he would much rather hear Socrates praise the abstract type of “the philosopher” (177c). Theodorus, like many readers, fails to understand that the figure of “the philosopher” with whom he identifies is a fool who forgets himself. He is oblivious to his own oblivion.

Perhaps the more Socratic persona in Socrates' fable is not Thales, but the Thracian girl.¹⁵ Socrates is quietly laughing at the self-oblivion into which theorists can fall. Of course, Socrates honors reason, and he does his utmost to understand. He does not laugh at the desire to know, but at the failure of self-knowledge that besets those who try to live as if theorizing were all there is to living.

Socrates theorizes, then, but he is not simply a theorist. He remains a loyal member of his community even as he transcends the community's prejudices.¹⁶ He is also a mortal, who never cavalierly assumes, like Theodorus, that “we have plenty of time” (172c). The precious, leisurely space of philosophical discourse,

¹³ In “The Self Itself,” Davis makes the case for this phrase as a translation of Plato's expression *auto t'auto* (*Alcibiades I* 129b). We can at least confidently say that this dialogue is concerned with the supremely difficult project of self-knowledge.

¹⁴ In very abstract terms: If knowing requires giving an account (*logos*), and if giving an account of something means analyzing it into simple elements, then knowledge is impossible: (a) if a whole is identical to its parts, then because these parts cannot be analyzed further, they are unknowable, and the whole is unknowable by the same token; (b) if the whole is greater than its parts, then the whole as a whole cannot be analyzed and, once again, it is unknowable (*Theaetetus* 203c–205e). The Cartesian solution to this dilemma is to assert that simple, unanalyzable elements can be known immediately, without giving an account. Plato's Socrates does not adopt this solution; the reason, I propose, is that Plato is a contextual and anti-reductive thinker. Understanding must keep shifting between parts and wholes, individuals and contexts, making connections and drawing analogies.

¹⁵ Even the erudite Blumenberg overlooks this possibility in his metaphorology *The Laughter of the Thracian Woman*, Chapter 2.

¹⁶ There is, of course, a tension here. The opening of the *Republic* raises the question of whether a curious, impartial observer such as Socrates, who judges the performance of the Thracians to be just as fine as that of the Athenians, can be a patriot. The “just city” can be seen as an experiment in the forced conjunction of philosophy with patriotism, both taken to their extremes.

where ideas can be revisited and arguments can be reconsidered, opens up within an interval that may, at any moment, face the conclusive singularity of death.¹⁷

4 The project of undismembering

Socrates' ultimate imperative double negative – *mē amelēsēte* – can be rendered still more loosely: Undismember!

Socratic remembering resists the process of dismembering to which we all tend to fall prey. The careless, dismembered self contradicts itself and does not care to try to resolve the contradictions; it fails to become its own friend (*Republic* 443d) and feels no responsibility to make an effort to do so. It has drunk more deeply from the River Carelessness (*Amelētēs*), on the plain of Oblivion (*Lēthē*), than was required (*Republic* 621a).

This dismembering is fundamentally unintentional. We are not intentionally so careless as to let ourselves lie about the most important things to what is most important in ourselves (*Republic* 382a) – to deceive our own faculty of *logos* about the good. When it comes to the good, everyone wants truth and knowledge, not semblance and opinion (*Republic* 505d). How terrible it would be to live one's life in confusion about its ultimate purpose. No one would choose such a life!

Nevertheless, for Socrates, most people do live in such confusion – not through an intentional choice, but through lack of intention and the failure to choose. They fail to care because they assume that they are already in possession of the truth, that the truth about the good is something obvious. Life, for instance, may seem to be for the sake of pleasure or knowledge – but just a few simple questions reveal that such dogmas hover over an abyss (*Republic* 505b–c). Socrates does not proffer an answer to the question of the good; in fact, he denies that he knows it (506c). However, he insists that everything depends on attaining this knowledge (505a). He insists that we should care.

The dismembered self fails to understand that it misunderstands what matters most. Why are we normally so careless, so disjointed, so inconsiderate when it comes to what is most important? Maybe we fail to discover it because we have not been moved to search for it.¹⁸ Some unforeseeable encounter – an encounter with a singular individual, such as Socrates himself – might move us to seek. But for this, we must become movable. Socrates meets persona after persona who fails to take a hint, who remains unmoving. Is there a responsibility to become capable of responding?

These are the kinds of questions implied in the so-called “Platonic theory of recollection.” To comprehend *anamnēsis*, we must not stop at the mythology of reincarnation or the metaphysics of eternal forms, but grasp how the demand to undismember oneself challenges each of us to gather together one's own soul.

Can Platonic recollection help us confront the Anthropocene? The answer may well seem to be no. Modern liquidation has unleashed an irreversible transformation that is confronting us with truly new phenomena. In contrast, it seems that Plato advocates a return to the immemorial.¹⁹ To pursue the wax metaphor: Platonic recollection is like a film played backwards, in which Descartes' molten wax would regain its firm, hexagonal structure and then be reintegrated into a living beehive. But just as films in reverse represent practically impossible violations of entropy, there is no going back from modern liquidation. Modern science, instead of contemplating eternal forms and sempiternal cycles, has actively intervened in nature and provoked a chain of events that is comparable to the irreversible, irreparable complications of human action.²⁰ Planet Earth can no more be restored to a set of inviolate ecosystems than human plurality can be formed into the hive-like “just city” fantasized by Plato in the *Republic*.

¹⁷ The *Theaetetus* begins with Socrates dead and Theaetetus near death and then shifts to a recounting of their conversation, which ends with the revelation that Socrates is about to go on trial.

¹⁸ “The most important things ... are visible to us only insofar as we are inexplicably moved to look for them”: Gustafson-Barrett, “The *Lógos* of Agency,” 17.

¹⁹ Kierkegaard explores this point, from a Christian perspective that contrasts recollection to revelation, in his *Philosophical Fragments*.

²⁰ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 238, 323–4.

But Socratic undismembering is more than Platonist recognition of eternal forms. Here, we are touching on the questions of whether Socrates is Platonic and whether Plato is Socratic. I would argue that Plato does continue in Socrates' footsteps, and that he is not a Platonist, even in the *Republic*: consider that the "just city" is primarily an analogue to the just soul (592a–b), which is ultimately confronted with the unanswered question "What is the good?" and the riddle of our ignorance about this matter that matters most. Plato is not reducible to Platonism, and Platonic recollection is not reducible to Platonist knowledge of the forms. Socratic–Platonic undismembering is not simply a return to and preservation of the timeless, but is a care for the temporal self that draws attention to our oblivious self-deception.

If this is the case, then undismembering is a potentially fruitful resistance to modern liquidation. Liquidation implicates modern humanity in a self-certainty that misunderstands itself and a remembering that forgets itself. Socrates urges us to become alert to the need to counter this oblivion.

5 An ontology of the incomprehensible

Can we go farther and construct an ontology, a theory of being, that takes up the lessons Socrates indirectly teaches us through images such as the wax block and personae such as Thales and the servant girl? On the face of it, this seems impossible. Thales and Theodorus are theorists, Platonism is a theory, Cartesianism is a theory, but Socratism is no theory. It is a negative or doubly negative stance (undismember!). Socrates knows that he knows nothing, and his devotion to the imperative "Know yourself" does not yield an epistemology or ontology, but a questioning self-concern. This care for the self might hold us back from reckless decisions, like Socrates' *daimonion* (*Apology* 40a), but how can it positively tell us what to do or believe?

One might also suspect that an ontology of the unprecedented – and we find ourselves in an unprecedented epoch – is a contradiction in terms. Philosophical theorizing looks backward (Hegel), but life must be lived forward (Kierkegaard) – and this truth now applies more clearly than ever not only to human life, but to all life on our planet. The ideal of knowledge as a deductive system closes us off to the novelty and surprise of existence, which may offer us strange, unexpected principles.²¹ Just as there can be no recollection of the future, there can be no ontological system of the new.

All the same, a nonsystematic consideration of being may leave room for what exceeds what we have been able to grasp so far. "Not all that is incomprehensible fails to be."²² In fact, if we take Pascal's dictum in a radical sense, a certain incomprehensibility is even crucial to being. The very sense of being indicates the excess that challenges sense: that is, we recognize something as existing, as real, precisely insofar as it adds to, or even contravenes, our established interpretations. Ontology, then, should not limit itself to explicating what it means to be, but should investigate experiences in which meaning is challenged by what we cannot comprehend, at least not yet.²³

This ontology of the incomprehensible would trace inadequacies, surprises, breakthroughs, and breakdowns; moments when we are blindsided and when we are blind to what lies before our eyes; failures to see and failures to look; times when we are caught by the unpredictable, the barely suspected, the reconfigurations that come upon us and force us to rethink what is.

Such experiences bring us face to face with the question of our *own* being – who we are. They challenge us to care about caring, to undismember, to reintegrate. Socrates' unabated awareness of his own ignorance encourages the attempt to gather oneself in the face of one's incomprehension; Descartes' confidence in his own knowledge excludes a confrontation with the incomprehensible and thus with one's own being.

²¹ "Over the beginning, no logic, no cogent deduction can have any power the self-coercive force of logicity is mobilized lest anybody ever start thinking": Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 473.

²² Pascal, *Pensées*, 48 (Sellier fragment 262; translation modified).

²³ Polt, *Time and Trauma*, Chapter 4.

Elsewhere, I have made a case for resisting the liquidating trends of the Anthropocene by reviving the “eidetic eros,” the philosophical quest for essences – not in a reductive fashion that traces all phenomena back to a single universal, but in a pluralistic spirit that is ready to discover new and diverse entities in their distinctive integrities.²⁴ This eidetic eros can coexist with Socratic undismembering, which reminds us that we *lack* understanding of essences. While this may seem paradoxical, we should remember that eros is precisely an experience of absence (*Symposium* 200e).²⁵ We desire what we do not have. We yearn for the fulfillment that is promised by our glimpses of integrity. The search for new essences has to be driven by a Socratic, erotic sense of lack.

If being is uncomprehended, then certainty is not a sign of success, but a warning that one has failed to do justice to being. A mark of ontological justice would be desire – the desire to approach what is only intimated, what we catch sight of just as it escapes our grasp. We honor being by approaching it, not by reaching it. To arrive at the origin is to destroy it. Neither the ultimate truth nor the whole can be known – not even one’s own true and whole self. But truth and wholeness can be kept in view by desire, by care, by the unfinished project of becoming wise.

A Socratic experience of the failure of figures of thought – the wax block, the just city, and many more – develops our ability to think while keeping us mindful of our limits and open to the new. It makes it possible for us to loosen our attachment to the figure of Descartes’ wax and become alert to possibilities that may arise on the margins of the global process of liquidation – as-yet-incomprehensible possibilities that may be paths to undismembering.

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²⁴ Polt, “Eidetic Eros and the Liquidation of the Real,” 79–81. For example, Michael Marder has produced a series of books that pursue contemporary environmental phenomena, working out the nuances of a figure until it yields new visions of essences: see Marder, *Dump Philosophy*; Marder, *Dust*; Marder, *Energy Dreams*; and Marder, *Pyropolitics*.

²⁵ For a subtle and intricate exploration of eros as lack, see Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*.

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