

Plato's Lost Lecture

“On the Good.”

Normative Ethics and Intellectual History.

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Bennett Gilbert

Dedicated to

Robert Sherrick Brumbaugh

(1918 - 1992)

Professor of Philosophy, Yale University

My first and best teacher of Plato. He sought truth. He's been forgotten.  
Someone should remember him. I remember him.

δη γάρ με κέκληκε θαλάσσιος οἴκαδε νεκρός,

τεθνηκῶς ζῶι φθεγγόμενος στόματι.

It, a corpse, sea-soaked, chatters at me to go back to my homeland,

Murdered, breath mumbling through its fleshed cheeks.

Theognis 1229-1230

## Abstract

Plato is known to have given only one public lecture, called “On the Good.” We have one highly reliable quotation from Plato himself, stating his doctrine that “the Good is one.” The lecture was a set of ideas that existed as an historical event but is now lost—and it dealt with ideas of supreme importance, in brief form, by the greatest of philosophers. Any reading of the lecture is speculative. My approach is philosophical rather than historiographic. The liminal existence of the lecture is taken as an exemplar of the retrieval of what is lost in historical time. Through the lecture-event I examine several major schools of Platonic interpretation—the esotericists of the 1950's, and after, and Hans-Georg Gadamer and the “aporetic” reading—and reject most of it. My method is to establish in tandem an explanation of the lecture doctrine, especially by a reading of issue of normative ethics in the *Philebus*, and an account of how we are to understand Plato’s way of teaching. Plato affirms the existence of the Good itself and was concerned with explaining its relation to persons as moral agents, which includes teaching, amidst the determinants of moral life and in transmission across time. The tension between universal good and plural goods suggests a fruitful relationship between normative ethics and historical theory. I apply this especially to the viability of intellectual history, to material culture studies, and to our understanding of the way in which history “lives.” For this I suggest “a moral turn” in historiography in support of cultural theory.

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## Chapter One: Introduction

The purpose of this degree paper is to reconstruct Plato's lost "Lecture on the Good," taking it as a treatment of universal and plural goods in normative ethics, and then to try to learn something from the act of historical reconstruction itself. I offer a suggestion as to how we can apply these notions to historical and cultural theory.

Because there is very little in the way of facts to be known about it, Plato's lecture might seem to be a small topic. But when we bend down our eyes to make a close reading of the four extant words from this lecture, we quickly fall through this fascinating gossamer into the bottomless well of Platonic studies. Even the tiny reliable extant record of the lecture raises majestic philosophical issues. This doctrinal weight and the lecture's liminal, feather-weight existence as an artifact have combined to produce an immense, though very scattered, literature about it in one way or another, out to the farthest reach of the Platonic inspiration.

The lost lecture can serve as an epitome of Plato's later work. Any reading of the extant text of the lecture and any conclusions about the lecture, including those I make in this degree paper, must always be highly tentative and experimental. The brevity of reliable text from the lecture means that closely reading it requires closely reading of others texts by Plato. As to earlier texts, we guess a great deal more than we know about the origins of Socratic-Platonic thought. We have plenty of guesses, but recent work by Jaap Mansfeld,<sup>1</sup> Leslie Kurke,<sup>2</sup> and others complicate the conventional story. We are, however, better able to talk about the later philosophical development of the Platonic author because we have his texts. So the view backward

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<sup>1</sup>See Chapter 3.C.

<sup>2</sup>See below in this Chapter.

from his late development helps us a lot more in thinking about the lecture than the forward-look from earlier Socratic Platonism. I will not cover the Middle Academic, Aristotelian and neo-Platonic accounts of the doctrine of the Good. The brevity of extant text also spurs us to look closely at the circumstances of the lecture-event. In terms both of what we know and what we do not know, this aspect opens up a dimension of the lecture new to scholarship.

One who reconstructs a performance walks out onto an ontological edge between past and present and, as well, onto a spiritual edge somewhere between heaven and earth where the fugitive actions of their creator conveys ideas of perennial grandeur. Plato's lecture was a live solo performance about philosophical ideas that does not survive in authorial text, transcription by any hand, or in still or moving image. The path traced by the vestiges of his expression of his idea is a singularly tight, twisted, crooked, and crinkled one, shaped in the first instance for us by what we do not and cannot know about this event.

In Greek accounts of this event, it is not described by the name of a verbal genre. Mostly, the writers say that Plato had this or that to say on the Good. They do not say he gave a lecture (*anágnōsma*). They simply refer to *hoi logoi* of Plato on the Good.<sup>3</sup> A group of words can be an odd comment and table-talk, a logical argument big or small, a short piece of prose, a long piece of prose, a single lecture, or a group of lectures, and the Greeks used the phrase to signify each of these things and, in time, a great many other things as well. A *logos* may be almost anything except a poem. One of the chief reasons for which Greek philosophers recalled this event is that Plato spoke in monologue, rather than in dialogue, to which his name is eternally attached. As the *logoi* were widely called "heard" (*akroamata*) and as Plato seems to

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<sup>3</sup>This and the following paragraphs briefly refer to issues of the our sources and the audience for the lecture that I take up in detail in Chapter 2.B.

have made an effort concerted in a specific time and place, I call it a lecture (and occasionally call it a monologue as well, without distinction). This is both convenient and tolerably accurate, but the reader should know that those who were nearer to it than we called it *hoi logoi*.

Whether the time and place of Plato's talk was pre-appointed we cannot say, nor can we say in what manner or by whom it was arranged, or whether it was arranged at all. Important friends and students of Plato's were present, but this is not a good reason to think it was a planned affair. One imagines his students and friends were often in his presence, perhaps nearly every day, and often prepared to write down notes. They would have been fools not to be prepared. So, the lecture might equally well have been spontaneous or planned.

We do not know if Plato's monologue was ever Plato's monograph. Several students took what must have been extensive notes, now all lost, except bits quoted or paraphrased by much later writers. Later sources assume Plato's *logoi* constituted a book, but only one, very late, refers to Plato's book.<sup>4</sup> They refer to notes taken by auditors and to references to those notes. No source anywhere clearly confronts the question whether Plato ever wrote down his *logoi* on this occasion, either affirming or denying it. We do know that Plato gave a oral verbal discourse. Some say that the ideas he spoke about were among his unwritten doctrines (*agrapha dogmata*). But those who say this are not ultimately referring to the material form of this lecture. They refer instead to the esoteric status of a group of doctrines they argue Plato conceived and held in secret communion with some of his followers. Although at least some of them argue that these doctrines were really never put into written texts, and others among them might be less doctrinaire on this matter, they primarily use *agrapha* to mean esoteric rather than exoteric, having no evidence unknown to

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<sup>4</sup>Findlay discusses this pp. 248ff.

others to show that Plato did or did not write down his lecture. We must remain almost completely in the dark as to whether he wrote a book on the Good, save for the induction that since Plato's known writings were blessed with abundant survival, this writing too would have survived had it ever existed in the first place.

There has been a good deal of pointless speculation about Plato's intention in choosing on this occasion to teach by lecture, rather than by live dialogue or by circulated text. One is readily tempted to think about the intellectual, social, or personal circumstances that motivated him to create this picturesque event. But as to Plato's intention in giving this lecture, or any other lecture he might have given, I have nothing to say, other than that he lectured because he wanted to lecture. I hope that after reading through all of this degree paper the reader will have found that I have not speculated at all on this interesting, rather obvious question, for the answer to which we have no evidence whatsoever. I can, however, name a few possible motives of which we must rest in certainty Plato was innocent. This lecture was not a fund-raiser, and it was not an epideictic exercise. Plato didn't take money for teaching, by conviction and because he was not in want of it, and he did not speak to show off his skills. His intentions in putting these thoughts into the manner of a lecture on this one occasion can tell us nothing about how to direct our analysis of his reasoning either as abstracted argument or as situated in the literary and dramatic form he chose, even had we more of Plato's text than the few words now at the doorstep of our thoughts. The monographic form does have consequences, which I shall consider from time to time. But it is also just like any other form in which Plato chose to teach because it is thought in motion, his thoughts moving from his mind to the minds of those who would listen to him or read his words. As one fine philosopher recently put it,

I have always imagined that Plato was so quick and so smart that

schemata...simply popped into his head all the time. His underlying thesis is deadly serious, but he is not above having some fun along the way.<sup>5</sup>

We have no better reason for thinking that Plato's intention in lecturing was to communicate hand-signals and thumb-signs for a secret gospel than that he was moved to lecture publicly because he thought it would be fun or interesting to do so. This lecture came out of creative abundance, chosen with the same artistic intuition, insufficiently explicable by way of motives and intentions, by which a choreographer decides a movement or a step fits the dancer and the dance or by which a visual artist picks out the first shape or color for an object she has yet to bring into existence. Beside all the other serious and sound reasons against considering intention, there is this as well, that creative work is much more complex than the outermost range of what observers are capable of explaining by motive.

In this case, where we have vast doctrinal information but little material information, I argue that Plato's ideas in the lecture suggest something typical about our relationship to historic time (i.e., "the past") to which the extreme disparity between the our knowledge of the intellectual and of the social circumstances gives us access. The disparity clarifies, rather than obscures, the relation of ideas to time, although at the same time it also confirms its mystery, of which we are likely never to have complete understanding.

My narrative of the lecture event opens Chapter 2. My thesis as to the lecture itself is this account of what I think happened on that occasion. Our focus on the reconstruction of this event, which begins here in this Introduction, would be lost by taking as the first task that of working up through all Plato's thought to the lecture. The few words preserved from it are a kind of Mt. Everest peak of Plato, with so

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<sup>5</sup>Robert Paul Wolff in Plato's Gorgias: a Mini-Tutorial Part Four" on his blog The Philosopher's Stone for February 29, 2012, at <http://robertpaulwolff.blogspot.com/2012/02>.

many long, difficult, confusing routes to the top that it seemed best to go directly to the peak—to drop in from above—and then to unwind the evidence arguing for the version of the lecture-event that I narrate. Writing this narrative was the chief act of reconstruction; re-enacting it in my written English, a way for us to find what must have taken place viewed as a creative act rather than as the determinate consequence of a great group of definable factors where we lack facts and definiteness. The reader will find herself at the beginning of Chapter 2 in medias res.

In the balance of Chapter 2 I discuss the Greek authorities for the lecture and determine the one certain reliable account, which includes the direct quotation from Plato, that “the Good is one.” I consider the nature of this text and the most important points of view used to approach this suggestive phrase. It is, I conclude, best understood as a highest-order theory in normative ethics that determines, rather than is determined by, interpretive approaches to Plato.

In Chapter 3, I specify this ethical notion by considering the way high-order theories were communicated in Plato’s Athens and in Plato’s own works. I lay out two prime questions about its doctrines: that of the relation of the Good to the sciences Plato names and that of its overall ethical theory. Problems in the middle period ethics and metaphysics led to the development of a new position that the lecture helps preserve for us. My major text is *Philebus*; an ethical work, the task of which is to claim and to explain the unity of the Good itself. Out of line with most readers, I suggest that in *Philebus* Plato exhibits dialectic in order to show its limits, turning to pleasure and pain as a better way to establish his onto-ethical claim. Plato’s argument here is specifically non-recursive; throughout *Philebus* he criticizes recursive thought in normative (and other) theory. Finally, I attempt to show how Plato embodied his later normative discourse in something very like what Kierkegaard called “indirect communication.” This ends the Platonic part of this



degree paper.

In Chapter 4 I turn to speculating on the place of notions of ethics, such as those I developed in both the historical and doctrinal studies of the lecture, in theories of culture and of historiography. For these theoretical studies do look at our struggles with wider and narrower and conflicting moral obligations out of which we create culture and history. I combine the notion of the current re-presence of an event from historical time with the ideas of Plato that I considered in Chapter 3. Like historiography itself, philosophical ethics raises the question of how ideas live in material circumstances. Historical work brings to philosophical ethics the awareness that this happens across historical time—that teaching, transmission, and communication of ideas is both circumstantial and abstract. These are simultaneous; everyone’s goal is to get the right balance. After examination, I conclude that social constructivism is a flawed balance and that in the Platonic idea of the Good itself, expressed in the lecture and understood by other readings in Plato, suggests a valid ethics-oriented concept of intellectual history. Plato’s lecture not only concerned the relationship of the Good itself to moral agency in time, but it also is an artifact is a model of the transmission of moral ideas.<sup>6</sup>

Each of these three chapters in turn concerns historical facts, ways to interpret these facts, my suggested reading of Plato, my defense of certain Platonic notions, the question of the validity of intellectual history, and my own thoughts about normative ethical theory.

Much of my drive to do this was supplied by reading Prof. Leslie Kurke’s recent profound work on the origins of the Platonic notion of philosophy, *Aesopic Conversations*.<sup>7</sup> Her topical concern is why Plato created philosophical prose, but her

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<sup>6</sup>For a more detailed preview of Chapters 2, 3, and 4, the reader is referred to the Analytic Table of Contents on pp. v-vii.

<sup>7</sup>See Kurke pp. 242-261 and 315-323.

account has great consequences, for she questions philosophy's own origin-myth. In her view, it was an older, particularized, worldly-wise, sarcastic, and rebellious wisdom tradition circumscribing Socrates's activity that Plato used to overcome conditions of social struggle with an anti-materialist, anti-particularist abstraction that denied the popular wisdom tradition. The great historiographer of mythology Bruce Lincoln expressed a view very close to this in a nutshell when wrote that "Plato's dialogues are not plots but weapons, through which the discourse of philosophy was prescribed."<sup>8</sup>

Now philosophers are full of boundless self-regard and often have an uncommon disdain for other ways of thought expressed by declining to recognize that every kind of response to the world shares its history with every other kind of response. But in communicating with one another we expose our thoughts to adversity and modification; and in communicating ideas concerning the maximally coherent accounts of things we expose them to maximum critique. By maximum, I mean that their final import, the moral choices to which or from which they can persuade us, is never lost and brought always into view by the requirements of philosophical discourse discovered by Plato: thoroughgoing truthfulness and rigorous honesty. The moral positions of pre-philosophical discourse, of wisdom traditions, of philosophy, of modern science, and of our most complex and full historiographic understanding do not escape exposure to analysis and critique. No genealogy protects them. Philosophical activity is founded on the same universal moral commitment that obliges each person. It is a extension of moral personhood. The story of philosophy, like our daily lives, inevitably contains this function, no matter what else it responds to or fails to do.

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<sup>8</sup>Bruce Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth: Narrative, Ideology and Scholarship* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 156. James Davidson (2011) follows something this line.

## Chapter 2: The Weed of Care

And I am convinced that from the heads of all ponderous profound beings, such as Plato, Pyrrho, The Devil, Jupiter, Dante, and so on, there always goes up a certain semi-visible steam, while in the act of thinking deep thoughts. While composing a little treatise on Eternity, I had the curiosity to place a mirror before me; and ere long I saw reflected there, a curious involved worming and undulation in the atmosphere over my head. The invariable mixture of my hair, while plunged in deep thought, after six cups of hot tea in my thin shingled attic, of an August noon; this seems an additional argument for the above supposition. (Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*, Chapter 85.)

### A. My Narrative.

Perhaps it was on a blazing hot day, or perhaps on a cooler but dry day, a day likely to have been in a year around 355 B.C.E., and it was certainly in the Piraeus, where the salt-sea spiced the air; on this day Plato gave a lecture somewhere in the port-town, either under tree shade or in an open room, to a crowd (some seated, some standing) among whom he counted five or more of his own students and friends—their number perhaps was near that of the groups with which he usually discussed philosophy—but among whom there were, as well, others unknown to us,

including people of different character from that of the lecturer on the threshold of immortality, Aristocles son of Ariston called Platon, and different from the character of those other men who had attained the immense privilege of his friendship and his company as their teacher—men not from the Plato's circle but men who worked with their hands and who cunningly traded goods in and out of the port, and also non-Academic younger and older well-born men, citizens of Athens— all come by purpose or chance to the place in the port to hear Plato lecture on the good.

These persons sought to increase their stock of happiness, which meant to know how to choose actions in such a way as to accept unpridefully the forces of necessity governing, if not actually constituting the substance of, the world around them, wherein they must consciously make choices though they had no foreknowledge of all that these choices were going to cause for themselves and their families and their city. The product from this pair of necessity and ignorance was the notions of responsibility and freedom attached to their choices, troubled strivings that choice itself arouses no matter how narrow or hopeful the circumstances of choice. Choice itself, though it led them on some occasions to seek a fool-proof knowledge of facts as they must be now and must be after this moment, led them also through the inevitable recursions of thought to the uncalculated uncertainty—the conflict and the dilemma—comprising any choice at all, whether it was in the matters of health or of wealth. People often find that these two necessary goods demand a choice between them, for no amount of wealth buys health and no amount of health suffices to bring wealth, and because both goods often arrive and depart a person's life in weird company with one another, a sum of the former along with a degree of the latter; both of these, despite the daily struggle of these men for them, seldom failed to crumble before troubles nothing anyone knew of could palliate, so resolved is necessity upon whatever its purposes in making our destinies. To choose well, the

men in the Piraeus hoped, would be to dispose themselves and their people to happiness.

The strong, famous old man who addressed them described a kind of quadrivium of what appears to us as useful knowledge, comprising mathematics, arithmetic, geometry, and astronomy.<sup>9</sup> Though the men in the audience used numbers and volumes every day in their lives they did not understand how these could be used for the purpose of happiness, showing thereby an aspiration in their notion of happiness that seems to us either highly elevated, requiring them to shed the practical uses of numbers for the sake of more profound goods, or crassly utilitarian because they would or could not grasp that the stereometric metaphysics Plato offered them was crucial to understanding the forces of necessity the audience sought to comprehend. I say that the audience's response, which is reported to have been confusion, seems to us to be either elevated or crass because we—that is, the Western tradition of philosophical ethics from the time immediately after Plato, in the person of Aristotle, into our own day—speaking very broadly for this tradition—think that happiness in its truest and inner form must be either spiritual and intellectual in something like the way of the eternal pure forms Plato was thought to have spoken of or it must really be something like the will and its pleasures, those practical goods that the non-philosophers in the audience must have been hoping to learn about. Our conception of the audience is due to some of the later accounts of the lecture but also is caused by easy assumptions we sometimes make about people far away from us in time and place, whom we know must be as complicated as we ourselves are though we forget to credit them with this. Doubtless, some of Plato's auditors wanted the elevated and others the crass, and still

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<sup>9</sup>Archytas fr. B1, from his lost *Harmonics*, in Diels-Kranz is the earliest extant description of a quadrivium course of study (arithmetic, astronomy, geometry and music).

others—or perhaps every one of them—had a dream of knowing something that was both, a way of figuring things out that was sure and certain to be the way of thinking about moral dilemmas that they, and we, can and ought to use, quite naturally to our natures—a stock of truths and techniques, or both, perhaps not heard of before Plato spoke it or perhaps more like the wisdom we tend to think our predecessors possessed but now has been lost. But on the day of this lecture, the paths of intellect and will in ethics had not so firmly come into opposition as they were shortly to come, so that if Plato described mathematics as way to learn about things unseen, such as happiness, rather than as a measurement of things seen, or if Plato said the Good itself is something never seen but always present, they grasped the concept or not according to their education, experience, and sophistication. But on the whole, they did not grasp it, because what they wanted was a short to-do list, or a diagram, or a gadget,<sup>10</sup> like many they used in the course of private, religious, and political life, some thing that uses numbers or some thing that produces a visible response, by which to make happiness plain to find and easy to choose.

Instead of a gadget, Plato gave them a final specification of what his demonstrations of arithmetic and stereometric operations and his references to translunary things meant. This specification, spoken at some point in the lecture (as likely the beginning as the end)<sup>11</sup> was that the Good itself is one. By this he meant

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<sup>10</sup>The subject of the philosophical implications of the Greeks' love of gadgets was a new one when Robert Brumbaugh took it up in 1966. Today the study of Greek technology is as important to Greek philosophy and culture as is Greek science, partly because of Brumbaugh's pioneering work with Derek Price on the Antikythera. Jean-Paul Vernant in *Myth and Thought Among the Ancient Greeks* (2002) follows Brumbaugh's tracks in this without seeming to be aware of his work.

<sup>11</sup>The phrase *tò péras* in Aristoxenus's account of the lecture, which is, as we shall see, central to the matter, signifies the last of or the summing up of a series of topics, but any given occurrence of it does not signify the conclusion of an entire work. Gaiser insisted that it must indicate the end of Plato's lecture, but there is no reason why, in the Aristoxenic account, Plato could not have used it to conclude a chain of thought anywhere in the

that Good itself is an actual existent, internally consistent, pure in some sense of the word, and prescriptive as to all things with one consistent truth. This Good itself is like a law but is not a law, it applies to all matter and things but is not expressly their substance. The Good itself is, in this account, firm and plain but also various and elusive. It is not just an efficient necessity, though it is like one, nor is it subject to change and shifting circumstance, though everything good is subject to these. The Good itself is better than that, it is more reliable for happiness, and it is, perhaps for the first time in our philosophical tradition, more truly good than anything else however good, or true, or necessary. Thus presented, “the Good itself” to most of Plato’s audience was an insult, or rather, the account he gave of it was insulting. It was as certain as law but as variable as life. It described necessity but did not coerce choice. It infested happiness but eluded it as well. It promised everything but settled nothing. Definite as a sum of numbers, demanding as anything at all might possibly be, it was not to be calculated and it was not to be plainly known without proceeding upon a way of thinking perhaps unfamiliar to everyone present but the five students, there in the front row, trying to think through again what they had heard thought through, talked about, in parts and bits, objected to and rejected, tried out and clarified, during many conversations among themselves and with Plato, while behind them the rest of the crowd rose and scattered in a hullabaloo.

Whether any of the auditors who were not then students of philosophy reflected much on the lecture will always remain unknown to us. Maybe some became happier and better persons because they deliberated what Plato claimed. Some of these perhaps studied philosophy or transmitted to others a bit of love of philosophy, by the doing of which they became philosophers in so far as they did so,

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lecture, especially because we do not know what areas other than those reported in the testimonia Plato might have gone into during his talk.

for Plato spoke, as had Socrates his teacher, with the maieutic intention, that his words and thoughts about what is and about what ought to be should move those who heard or read them to see in themselves some portion of what is real and by consequence live as good person ought for the sake of their private happiness yet also for the sake of the good things about being good, that mystery of moral obligation and freedom that wittingly or unwittingly humans seek to comprehend.

### B. Early Accounts

On the other hand we know with no doubt whatsoever that Plato's presentation was very much talked about in the following years by his students, in the following centuries in the Academy and other Greek philosophical schools, and in the millennia since. The chief of the five students we know to have been present<sup>12</sup> was Aristotle (384-322 B.C.E.), whom Plato called "super-smart" and as energetic as a colt kicking away from his mother. Plato also said that Aristotle was *anagnōstēs*, well-trained for learning.<sup>13</sup> In their day this meant that he was a superb listener as well as a studious reader—sometimes a lecture was called an *anagnōsma*—and as he surely also was a superb talker, like his philosophical father and grandfather. It is likely that Aristotle, in speaking often of this event, might have launched more than one account of it. Perhaps his own memories changed. He also wrote about it in a work or works widely read in antiquity and often mentioned but now lost and guessed at from testimonia. The issues of Plato's late ethics were at the core of this work by Aristotle, as the issues of Plato's late ontology were the foundation of his *Metaphysics*. It is said to have been a dialogue in three parts titled *On the Good* (*Perí*

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<sup>12</sup>Diogenes Laertius 3.46 is the basic authority for the list of students, cited and discussed as (= Findlay no. 1 and Gaiser (1953) no. 4.

<sup>13</sup>See Riginos pp. 129-134.



agathou), just like Plato's lecture, or On Philosophy.<sup>14</sup>

Plato's nephew Speusippus (ca. 408-339/8 B.C.E.), his sister Potone's son, was among the auditors who wrote down what they heard that day, standing out from the others for his position and age, by which he inherited direction of the Academy for the ten years he survived his uncle. While still a student Speusippus put his opinion on the matter of the good into debate,<sup>15</sup> that the good had nothing of pleasure in it nor was it an ontological foundation of reality but rather that it was a result of action rightly made so that the moral agent is able to remain undisturbed by pleasures and the desire for them, not to struggle but to stand in *ataraxía*. Xenocrates (396/395-314/313 B.C.E.), who held the same views on the good that Speusippus held and succeeded him in the Academy's third generation, heard Plato's lecture and wrote about it. Almost a millennium later Simplicius (490-560 C.E.) adds to the attendance roster Heracleides of Pontus (390-ca. 310 B.C.E.), Hestiaeus of Perinthus, "and other associates of Plato."

...they all wrote down and preserved his teachings, and say that he recognized these first principles.... They wrote down what he said just as enigmatically as he said it.<sup>16</sup>

Simplicius says he had all this from Porphyry (234-305 C.E.), who devoted a commentary on *Philebus* to understanding Plato's ethics. By this same route, into Simplicius from Porphyry, we have the account of the metaphysical foundation of Plato's ethics, though it does not mention the lecture on the Good, by Hermodorus, Plato's companion or disciple (*etairos*), probably not much younger than the teacher. Here we glimpse through Porphyry the chaining of memories from the era of the

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<sup>14</sup>Ross collects all the fragments and testimonia in *Fragmenta*. See also Morvaux, *Liste* pp. 39ff., 195ff.

<sup>15</sup>See Taran, *Speusippus* (1981).

<sup>16</sup>Simplicius, In *Aristotelis Physica* 453.29.

lecture—the last years of Plato’s life and the first of the Academy after its founders passing—for Porphyry has his Hermodorus from the eleventh book of a lost work on the philosophy of Plato by Dercyllides, who cites this lost work of Hermodorus.

Out of the inter-generational and intellectual network of the Greek philosophers grew the activities of two students who did the most to construct the story of Plato’s lecture that we have today. Hestiaeus of Perinthus, author of nothing extant and probably the eldest in this grouping, was more an old friend of Plato’s than a student. By the date of Plato’s lecture Hestiaeus had a family in Tarentum, where he likely belonged to the ancient Spartan ruling families, that included his son Archytas (d. ?350 B.C.E.), the general who rescued Plato in Italy as well as the most prolific Pythagorean philosopher, the last of the tradition before Plato. If the aged father Hestiaeus could come to hear Plato speak in the Piraeus, so also young students must have sailed from the political and intellectual milieu of Archytas’s Tarentum into the port to study under Plato but also later under Aristotle. Aristoxenus (ca. 375–ca. 300 B.C.E.), a young Tarentan whose father Spintharus, also a musician, was close to Archytas, studied with Aristotle and wrote down his teacher’s version of what must have been one of the best remembered and famous moments in Plato’s life as regarded from within the Academy; written down many times, his record is the only one that survived in the author’s own words.

Aristoxenus tells the story about Plato’s lecture as he heard Aristotle “always” (aeí) tell it:<sup>17</sup>

It is surely better to begin by stating the nature of the inquiry, and what it involves, so that with this foreknowledge we may proceed more easily on our

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<sup>17</sup>The Greek text is from the Macran edition 2.1. In lists of sources on Plato’s “unwritten doctrines, this anecdote is Findlay 1, Gaiser (Testimonia) 7, Krämer 1, and Baltz-Dorrie 1 (which is the most orderly and complete presentation of all the supporting texts and information. This anecdote is Riginos 124.

chosen way, and recognize what stage we have reached and not unwittingly deceive ourselves about the matter.

As Aristotle was wont to narrate, this was what happened to the majority of the people who (listened to Plato speaking) on the Good. Each came expecting to learn something about the things which are generally considered good for men, such as wealth, good health, physical strength, and altogether a kind of wonderful happiness. But when the mathematical demonstrations came, including numbers, geometrical figures and astronomy, and finally the statement, (that) (the) Good itself is one, it all seemed to them, I imagine, utterly unexpected and strange; hence some belittled the matter, while others rejected it. And what was the reason? They did not know what was coming but went along, like argumentative people at the mere word. But if someone begins with a summary of his Lecture, then, I hold, everyone who came to listen is free either to give up, or, if he likes, to stay, with the understanding he has already gained.

Hence Aristotle himself, for these very reasons, as he said, used to give his prospective audience a summary of what he intended to say, and in what manner. Likewise it seems to me better, as I said at the beginning, to have foreknowledge.<sup>18</sup>

We take Aristotle to be as good a witness to Plato as Xenophon was to Socrates: imperfect but absolutely first-rate and at first-hand.

By all accounts Aristoxenus was a bitter pill who had a bad word to say about almost everyone, often in his biographies of Plato and others,<sup>19</sup> all now of course lost, along with most of the 400 scroll-length texts (or “books”) he is said to have written,

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<sup>18</sup>This is Macran’s translation, to which I have made some changes.

<sup>19</sup>Gibson p. 126. Tigerstedt (1977) uses the earlier secondary literature on Aristoxenus.

but his surviving works are a tremendous accomplishment in the old marriage of music and metaphysics. Aristotle taught him to delimit topics strictly,<sup>20</sup> pursuing the analysis more thoroughly than Plato had, by the method of division and also by demonstrations, and to rely upon empirical evidence in order to describe specific things by their separate and common causes. With these principles he produced the most important work on music in antiquity, extant as the full first book and the fragment of the second book of *Elementa Harmonica*.<sup>21</sup> In his story of Plato's lecture it is at once clear that he prefers the Aristotelian method to the Platonic both as a method of study and as a body of theory.<sup>22</sup> But his position was more conflicted than it has commonly been taken to be. Often those with sharp words about their opponents harbor great doubts about their own beliefs.

Aristoxenus's mature work showed continued influence from the prestigious musical culture among educated Greeks that Pythagoras's discoveries initiated. He employed new methods to analyze harmony, but he is not known to have fully rejected the Pythagorean beliefs about harmony although he is very critical of them.<sup>23</sup> Along with his emphasis on perception, he retained the interest in arithmetic quantity as an element of rhythm.<sup>24</sup> Analyzing perceptions of music need not exclude the mathematical relationships among sounds and did not among the Greek theorists of music.<sup>25</sup> In fact, it certainly must not, since these relationships do exist, so that both approaches were used together in antiquity as they are today. But number was not merely method for Pythagoras and his followers. It was also a source of ethical

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<sup>20</sup>Gibson pp. 31, 33-35.

<sup>21</sup>Gibson p.8 and 53ff. argues that what we know as Bk. 2 is a revised draft of Bk. 1.

<sup>22</sup>Gibson p. 59; cf. p. 79.

<sup>23</sup>Gibson p. 118.

<sup>24</sup>Gibson p. 96.

<sup>25</sup>Gibson pp. 166 and 169-70, suggesting that Aristoxenus intended to repair failures of the Pythagorean method.

values, and these Aristoxenus did not reject in the culture of music, of which the supreme representative of this was not Aristotle but Plato. Music's powerful moral effect was inseparable from *éthos*, the character of a person and the character of a society. What we know of Aristoxenus's thought on musical education "shows a surprising affinity with theories in Plato's Republic."<sup>26</sup>

One finds the same pattern of instruction in his *Elementa Rhythmica*, his only other work of which a substantial fragment survives (from Book II). Right at the start he says that a word like rhythm has not one reference but many "natures" (*phúseis*).<sup>27</sup> Aristoxenus's view is that univocality hides differences among the natures of things that we ought to distinguish if we are to understand them by essences. Identifying method of instruction with method of investigation, he proceeds to

...apply our sense-perception to the analogy (to words) that has been suggested, in an attempt to understand what happens in each of the two processes, in shaping the shapable as in rhythmizing the rhythmizable.<sup>28</sup>

Aristoxenus's approach to explain rhythm is better than its predecessors but does not make universal rejection of their theories. He makes no judgment at all about Plato's metaphysics or ethics in his account of Plato's lecture. Starting his book on rhythm by the same principles and method, Aristoxenus wants a better explanation of the working parts that give make music powerful than equivocation and imprecision can give us.

Aristoxenus's story of Plato's lecture is first of all a pedagogic device, probably very much like one by which Aristotle taught him. Like Aristotle, our author explains (*diēgeíto*) what happens (*patheîn*) when the teacher starts on the wrong foot. His students "had expectations," as we now say, of learning (*hupolambánonta*

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<sup>26</sup>Gibson pp. 112, 112-120.

<sup>27</sup>Aristoxenus, *Rhythmica*, sec. 2.1, 2.3.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, sec. 2.5.

lēphesthai) certain matters that were commonly and traditionally esteemed. But Plato's manner of exposition left them very strongly (hupo-) mocking and criticizing what the philosopher intended to teach. Aristoxenus does not say that the cause of this was faulty thinking on Plato's part. The chief problem was that the audience were those nit-picking, touchy, opinionated, catty Athenians, whom he calls *kexēnaioi*, a Comic word for this Athenian character trait, again adding the prefix *hupo-*: they are super-quarrelsome. They wanted to get fast, easy or blissed-out happiness (*eudaímonia thaumasia*). Their impatient disposition was, it seems, worsened by their expectation that they would hear answers about the good in the ordinary way from the extraordinary man whose lecture they came to learn from. Aristoxenus concludes simply that a speaker (or writer) will get better response if he lays out beforehand (*proexetíthei*) a little path for the auditor, a glimpse of the whole or a summary (*oimai...to holon*). Note that Aristoxenus's reasoning at this point in the *Harmonica* is more reserved than in the *Rhythmica*. He gives no larger theory of instruction, though this is clear in what follows, that the whole matter is one of Aristotelian theory of knowledge. From the day of the lecture to the time of Aristoxenus's composition of his book, less than 50 years, the recall of the event as an enigma had given place to remembering it as a lesson about philosophers and their students.

We have a few other whispers from the long conversation about Plato's lecture, one from Albinus and three comic fragments, that present a more oppositional view of Plato than Aristoxenus's, a firm, hostile, and mocking view of his thought embedded in a sarcastic portrait of the man through details that, though they are possibly historically true, are not found in the source closest to the event.<sup>29</sup> Here is Proclus's (412-485 C.E.) version:

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<sup>29</sup>Gaiser (1980) is a good brief treatment of these.

(Interpreters) raise the question whether philosophers should read out their writings before an audience, as Zeno did; and they insist, if one does so, only to read material suited to the audience so as not to suffer the same fate as Plato when he announced a lecture on the Good. A great throng of all kinds of people assembled; but when he delivered his lecture, they did not understand his argument, and went away one by one until finally they had almost all gone. But Plato knew that this would happen to him, and had told his followers beforehand not to refuse entry to anyone, since the lecture would still only take place before their group.<sup>30</sup>

The Hellenistic orator and philosopher Themistios (317-ca. 390 C.E.) told the most colorful version:

It [Plato's reticence] did not in the least prevent wise old Plato from being wise on the occasion of his lecture in the Piraeus when people came flocking from all around and assembled together, not only the townspeople from above but also workers from the fields and vineyards and from the silver-works; and when he presented his treatise on the Good, the huge crowd became dazed and streamed away from the place until finally the audience was reduced to Plato's trusted followers.<sup>31</sup>

With this, Plato's lecture has become fully anecdotal, a narrative that serves the purpose of thought by example rather than by propositional logic.

Aristoxenus, while not disputing Plato's doctrines, tells a story about Plato's behavior as a teacher, using the memory of the lecture as a way of stating his own method of teaching, so that Plato's ineffectiveness stands out in the teacher's mind against some muddled phrases of doctrine. In the last ancient versions, the

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<sup>30</sup>In *Platonis Parmenidem* 128c. The translation is from Findlay.

<sup>31</sup>Gaiser (1963) pp. 452-453; Themistios, *Oratio* 21 (245c ff.). Punctuation added. The translation is from Findlay.

personality of Plato is yet more prominent: he is a humiliated bumbler or a narcissistic manipulator, but he is in any case the impractical man, with his head in the clouds like Socrates, or Thales, lost in thought and thinking about things that cannot be known in any way but by thought, entities whose abstract incorporeal nature is mimed by Plato's out-of-this-world disposition. This Plato is a contemplative master or a clueless fool, but he is the Plato we know, *weltfremd*<sup>32</sup> as one scholar says, the *imago* either of a god or of a fool that neo-Platonists and anti-Platonists alike took him to be in most of the last twenty-three hundred years. On the day of the lecture Plato's effort came to naught, it seemed, but it came to quite a lot in the long run. The caricature nearly becomes allegory in Raphael's portrait of Plato in the Stanze. Perhaps the core of Renaissance neo-Platonism was a caricature. But this also argues that the motion of translunary attention enduringly appeals. Like the capillary action of plant fibers hungry for minerals and thirst for dew, the story of the lecture was drawn into the course of philosophical inquiry as a narrative representation of the ideas, of their thinker, and of the philosopher as a type, rather than simply as the propositional claims for which Plato argued in his talk.

Since Plato is not a conversant in any of the dialogues, some doubt it is Plato who makes any propositional claims at all in them. They also doubt whether Plato's ideas were propositional or even doctrinal and wonder what it means to speak of Platonic propositions. Plato does speak in the first person in the Seventh Letter.<sup>33</sup> When we look elsewhere for words stated by Plato as his own opinions, we come to

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<sup>32</sup>Gaiser's term.

<sup>33</sup>"Plato" speaks in first person in all the Letters, all of which are doubtful attributions excepting the Seventh and possibly Second. The Seventh is now conventionally accepted as authentic, but I find the loud "philosophical" passage in the middle so striking and bizarre that it must be an interpellation even if it is genuine. But if genuine parts exist in a text by non-authorial intervention, isn't it then difficult to call the text canonical? On re-interpreting the Seventh Epistle see Gonzalez (1989) pp. 245-274 .



Plato's own students, who are in theory the best sources, such as Heracleides Ponticus, whom we met at the lecture, who said, according to Proclus, that Plato commissioned him to collect poetic texts of Antimachus.<sup>34</sup> This must very likely be true, since Heracleides speaks of his own actions on a relatively uncontroversial matter.<sup>35</sup> But if one wants to find among the *anecdota Platonica* solely those stories expressing substantial statements on philosophical ideas by Plato in his own words, or something very near them, one will in the end have but one Platonianum, Aristoxenus's account of Plato's sole public lecture, because it includes four or five words cited as Plato's:

...καὶ τὸ πέρας ἡτί ἀγαθόν ἐστιν ἐν....

For all its brevity and obscurity, these words from Aristoxenus might have been the most important element in his story of the lecture, for here a reliable writer quotes or closely paraphrases Plato speaking a philosophical claim not found in his extant works.

Plato's lecture "On the Good" became something other than a collection of philosophical claims, though Aristotle must have discussed such claims in his own *On the Good*. The first extant account, by Aristoxenus, has facts, reliable facts, including the quote or paraphrase from Plato, notwithstanding that it is also written so as to typify something about Plato's teaching and his philosophical method. Aristotle, in the telling of it, might have had this in mind as well as the metaphysical arguments at issue. The later stories present this typification as the truth about Plato, about his philosophy, and about the event of the lecture itself, the philosopher presented as a

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<sup>34</sup>Riginos #124, pp. 167-168.

<sup>35</sup>However we have also an obvious fable from Speusippus, Plato's nephew and his successor as head of the Academy. Speusippus said that Plato was the son of Apollo. Riginos has exercised poetic justice by putting this as her anecdote number 1, letting it represent the strength and grandeur of Plato's life and thought. See Riginos pp. 9-32.

controlling and dominating man within his own sphere, the director of its drama and the puzzle-master of enigmatic concepts shrouded in an enigmatic scenario. Plato was, it suggests, lost in the world because he was enclosed in his own domain of thought and of persons who helped him cloister these concepts, enforcing isolation in the face of outsiders who subverted it by their own simple, wholly understandable interests and whose obvious, inevitable responses to aggressive mystification attain a measure of triumph relayed by intellectuals who, sharing their honest and plain dissent, placed it, rather than Plato's idea, at the core of the reconstructed story perhaps also signaling their own disquiet in the contemplative life. Back through time to Plato as a man with his head in the clouds and yet a man comfortable with the use of power in the world, the anecdote remembers for us some of what everyone present, including Plato, knew or felt on the day of the lecture but which survives in the kind of memory not bounded by propositional logic.

### C. The Lecture as Anecdote.

Absent exogenous evidence, an anecdote conventionally understood seems to bear about the same relation to biography as alchemy bears to chemistry. But the anecdotal involves more than something like a pre-scientific fable. The word itself in Greek means simply "things that have not been made public." When a story-teller or a writer publicly communicates an anecdote, he or she says, in addition to the story itself, "This story formerly was not made public, but I now make it public." Thus the anecdotal is in dialectical relation to customary truth. It contains two aspects, since once one makes a story public it no longer is secret. Once the first person who tells a specific story calls it an anecdote, the meaning of the word shifts from "not made public" to "made public" because the facts of its transmission have changed. The flip, hidden within the name, from being hidden to formerly having been hidden leads to

other features of anecdotes.

Once a story is dubbed anecdotal it is usually under suspicion of falsehood, insignificance, pretense, or of other kinds of mischief. This is especially true of anecdotes from ages very far in time from our own. The category of the anecdotal gathered more coloring during its passage through the Romantic era of modern letters, coming to signify reports of purposely hidden actions or words, being accounts of wicked or shameful matters pulled out of hiding. It has grown more florid in our age of celebrity: information about celebrities is often given by hearsay anecdotes, even when it is an outright lie, so that anecdotal story-telling, short and revelatory, is part of the machinery of gossip, fandom, and scandal. Although the anecdotes about Plato do not have any quality of Gothic mystery,<sup>36</sup> some do “tell on” Plato. They ascribe to Plato speech and actions represented as unworthy of a great man on ordinary grounds of common courtesy. The reader is thereby to be moved by lessened respect for Plato to think Plato’s ideas less forceful or true than they are reputed to be. Even without our swollen sense of secrets hanging about in the world around us—conspirators and gangsters in historical and in present time—the anecdote as a class has the air either of pure invention or else of something to which some mystery or trouble is attached, though the story itself might have been reported from Plato’s own day.

Historians like stories because people love using them to show what they think and esteem or oppose. But anecdotes are a kind of story that maintains a dialectic by emphasizing both temporal and spatial distance from the events they report. The genre gives the air of privacy to the events it reports. Those receiving the anecdote were not permitted to be present at the event, but they “hear” it through a chink in the wall. Sometimes this adds to their character of fault or deception, and

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<sup>36</sup>Riginos pp. 2-3.

at other times this give them the authority that comes from opposing the views of conventional authority. Or they are tales lost and then found again. The air of privacy can diffuse authority in favor of individual interpretations. Reception of anecdotal information suggests that someone has his or her own gaze at events, a singular take on reality that might well be more true than the standard interpretation. Sometimes people want to use anecdotes even when they know that they are not factually true reports because, they will say, the chosen anecdotes enlighten us as to more profound, more basic or more broadly truthful understanding of persons and events. This is history as told in some kinds of moral inquiry or, in reverse, historiography determined by ideology. Even in scientific endeavor, faithfulness to facts sometimes stems from faith in an ethic or ideology that can lead to betrayal of the facts. If certain moral or highly valued truths are commonly inconsistent with factual truths, then one has in hand the kinds questions as to the truth that we ask about historical time: whether there is more than one kind of truth or not about the past and what are the values or uses of historical truth that we ought to esteem.

One of the issues suggested by the class of the anecdotal is that anecdotes occupy a region into which we divert truths that we desire not to recognize. The reasons for such a desire include the salacious and the defamatory, but they also include a consequential line of thought: we fear the suppression of moral values in favor of the triumph of morally neutral empirical fact, because accuracy and logic might evacuate moral reasoning, which we may preserve by hiding it in illuminating but brief tales. In this case, the category as a whole, without reference to the fact that anecdotes may both favor and disfavor their subjects, is a weapon against loss, a surplus of good knowledge rather than deprivation of it. This is the claim of many Greek historians: the claim, of Diogenes Laertius, for example, who fills his history of philosophy with stories we call anecdotes; and of Procopius when he revealed the

misrule and erotic adventures of Justinian and Theodosia under the title *Anékdota*. Today anecdotes sometimes seem to make up for the grand narratives we have lost faith in, just as allegories or hieroglyphics answer to a curiosity not satisfied by facts or by the correspondence theory of truth. They are small quick clarifications or blurry intimations of teleology. Even dispensing with the modern sense of loss and exclusion—though we must recognize it as one of our biases at work when we receive anecdotal evidence from antiquity—the body of anecdotes about Plato has both sides of the tensions attached to the creation and reception of historical anecdotes (though perhaps in different proportions from those in later mentalities). The first side is that they exist in the realm of imagination because they are the hardy rare survivors of suppression or bad luck and that at the same time they tell us truths that seem abundantly reported and therefore obvious. The second side is that they exist in the realm of observation because they are sometimes true, sometimes false and might be both at the same time. Stories may seem to explain things simply, but the reality of life ought never permit honest reflection to stop at a story.

The anecdote of Plato's lecture presents two kinds of information, the doctrinal and the narrative, both of which combine veracity and artfulness, so it has been easy to pick out the truthful datum in the former and ignore the art or the complexity of the latter. By telling my version of the event at the start of this chapter I have tried to reconstruct the widest likely range of emotions, thoughts, and interactions that one may reasonably find in it; and then in setting this account in the midst of the history of this anecdote I have tried to show how it has become a caricature. Despite the fictionalization of the event, it was an occasion at which Plato gave a lecture on the Good itself. We know now, as cited above, that Aristoxenus's account is not evidence of his implacable sarcastic contempt for Plato, although he may have exhibited this attitude in his lost biography of Plato. His words here are

not full of gall but rather are a straightforward point of pedagogy firmly grounded in method and convictions about philosophical analysis. So they leaves us with the facts of the event and the facts of Plato's statement, if only we can reconstruct them.

In rationalist philosophy in general the story is famous for a version of the narrative, in which Plato's words play the role of the punchline: it is the "infamous" or "unfortunate" story, in which Plato "confuses the laymen"<sup>37</sup> who "left in disgust."<sup>38</sup> This reflects the confusion people encounter when they first start to read Plato, that such famous thoughts as his should become more confusing contradiction than dazzling enlightenment upon the least consistent examination. Persons today with no experience reading Plato are in much the same position as the "laymen" in the lecture audience, and they often have the same response. The caricature of the anecdote is rendered seemingly true in every such encounter, carrying forward one of the permanent character-portraits of Plato expressed by the typification in the anecdote. Even Aristoxenus, and even those who made the story a jibe mocking Plato might have indirectly expressed a less tangible "fact," the search for meaning in our lives and in human history, like the search for the Good itself, has never yet ended with well-planned, neatly presented, clearly classified facts about the observable world.

Conflict and clarity, secrecy and expression, doctrine and occasion are the themes of the most vigorous modern Platonic readings of Plato's lost lecture. These are the esotericist approach and the aporetic approach, with the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer having fostered much of both approaches and sharing much from each as well. They primarily concern those issues of historical fact about Plato, including establishing the correct way to read him, and yet they both seek ways to value and

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<sup>37</sup>Ausland in Tarrant & Baltzy, ed., p. 123 no. 46; Berti in Migliori, ed., pp. 35-38. This also is Guthrie's notion of the lecture

<sup>38</sup>Gonzalez in Annas, ed., p. 30 n. 20.

promote Platonic thinking in contemporary philosophy. Analytic philosophers, beginning with G.E.L. Owens, also created striking new approaches to Plato, but these were not concerned with the questions raised by the lecture “On the Good” and so will not concern us here. However, in so far as the lecture is a kind of epitome of Plato’s thought, the way in which they are understood very much affects what we will learn from Plato’s normative ethics when we look at it in the context of the major philosophical struggles over the nature of moral principles and their relation to the world, the actual world, of history and circumstance in Chapter 4.

#### D. The Esoteric Reading.

Plato’s philosophical claim, preserved by Aristoxenus in the four or five words quoted or closely paraphrased from Plato, has been read as a doctrine not stated in any of the Dialogues. The most prominent interpretation of this unwritten doctrine is made by a group of scholars who consider it to be part of a field of Platonic doctrines unknown to us because they were kept secret and, on top of this, they hold that these words are a clue---one of approximately 56 such clues from non-Platonic texts surviving from antiquity—to the fact these were highly systematized doctrines, developed by Plato from his early years, taught orally in the Academy by him and by his successors along with ascetic and contemplative practices. They claim that these doctrines and their ascetic enactment were thought to conduce students into the philosopher’s way of pursuing higher wisdom, this practice being more necessary to the activity of philosophy than is argument. Over the decades since the early 1950's these scholars, applying these clues to the Dialogues themselves, to Aristotle, and to the extant work from the Early Academy to neo-Platonism, have proposed a detailed account of the esoteric system of metaphysical, ontological, and ethical doctrines properly Platonic. The chief of these is the proposition in Aristoxenus’s story that the

Good itself is One. English translations vary, but to the esotericists the Greek words are the earliest known form of an ontological concept now commonly called the Indefinite Dyad.<sup>39</sup>

The esotericist theory of Plato's unwritten doctrines (*ágrapha dógmata*) began in the work of the "Tübingen School" but was the product of developments in the interpretation of Plato extending back to Schleiermacher's notes on *Philebus* and other dialogues and even to Ficino's commentaries on *Philebus* and the rest of his writing. The "Tübingen esotericists" set their approach in a very intricate account of developments in Platonic studies in the last two centuries. As complex as their account is, it does not seem to touch significantly on the development of hermeneutics through classical and philosophical work starting right with Schleiermacher (1768-1834) and going through to Dilthey (1833-1911) and vast regions of modern thought. The German scholars have been followed in their work by French, English, and Italian philosophers and historians<sup>40</sup> and opposed by American, Canadian, and English classicists in one of the most extensive and intense phases of the life of Platonism. There are very good accounts in English of the intellectual history and of the opinions of esotericists' Platonic scholarly history by its chief proponents and by its opponents, including not only philological critique but high levels of very fair, honest, neutral historiographic and philosophical critique.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup>Discussion of the Indefinite Dyad goes far beyond that of the lecture anecdote, though I will return to it in Chapter 3.L.)

<sup>40</sup>The earliest advocate was Léon Robin. The chief "Tübingen" proponents are Hans-Joachim Krämer and Konrad Kaiser. A "Milan Esotericist" school is led by the prolific Giovanni Reale, who has given the concept a Catholic variant, as opposed to the traditional Lutheranism of Tübingen scholarship. John N. Findlay argued the case to the Anglophone audience, combining it with his own distinctive Pythagorean and Buddhist mysticism. Enrico Berti is a thoughtful contemporary commentator on the scholarship and on Plato.

<sup>41</sup>Gregory Vlastos and Harold Cherniss, and latterly Luc Brisson, are among the chief disputants.



The proponents of the theory of Platonic esotericism at first argued that the lecture anecdote revealed

...not one lecture but a whole series of lectures, a real course, and that this course was regularly repeated in the Academy, constituting the very essence of Plato's teaching. As in H. C. Andersen's fairytale one small feather becomes seven hens, so in the fertile imagination of the esotericists this one Platonic lecture—the only known to us—changes into “something rich and strange”, a whole systematic teaching of philosophic fundamentals.<sup>42</sup>

In later work, the esotericists have moderated this position, not only because the case for many lectures, rather than one, weakened if not failed, but also because the School of Tübingen no longer places Plato's form of discourse (akroasis) in the lecture on the exalted level of the spiritual-verbal training” they believe “presupposed in the Seventh Letter.”<sup>43</sup> Plato's remarks on the written word, expressed in the Seventh Letter, have been interpreted with savage abandon by readers of every stripe but by none save the esotericists as fundamental to understanding all the rest of Platonism.<sup>44</sup> Similarly, Plato's use of mathematics and, presumably, of diagrams when taken as trumping his words, as the Esotericists do, leads them to replace his ethics with pages of stereometric diagrams. But the Seventh Letter is better the corrective to rather than the instigator of this procedure. As the Platonist Robert Brumbaugh, who thought of Plato's mathematical diagrams and concepts as metaphors and not as analogous truths, pointed out, the Seventh Letter states that words are so readily misunderstood that even correct technical words may be used to misrepresent and to strangle the spiritual truths for which they are the tools.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>42</sup>Tigerstedt (1977) p. 72.

<sup>43</sup>According to Reale (1997).

<sup>44</sup>Krämer (199) pp. 42-46.

<sup>45</sup>Brumbaugh (1977) pp. 4-5.

The value of the anecdote for the estoericists is solely its contribution to a fully titivated systematization of unwritten doctrines. Although the first great statement of the esotericist reading of Plato was entitled *Aretē*,<sup>46</sup> the chief principal of the re-discovered Platonism was

...the philosophical principle of unity itself in all its aspects —transcendental, ontological, axiological, linguistic, epistemological and noetic—...in linear progression in all the individual spheres of being and knowledge.<sup>47</sup>

The idea of the Good itself is the totalization of all being, placing all value in unity and none in the untotalized realm of becoming. Under this view, the lecture on the Good (to *agathón*) is indeed the final and comprehensive statement of Plato's thought, but moral goodness has little to do with it.<sup>48</sup> True of Plato or not, this kind of ontology has played a founding role in centuries of philosophical ethics. Though Plato's Good itself is certainly not a crassly practical one and is positively guided by reason, both its form and content are difficult to understand.<sup>49</sup> It seems to require a metaphysics. The Estoericists maintain that either in his late periods or throughout his life Plato's metaphysical solution was mathematicized ontology to which his line in the Lecture anecdote is a key.

Rather like those who see only Plato's philosophical and personal character summed up in the Aristoxenic anecdote, the estoericists see only his doctrines in the report of the lecture, although they fit this report into a vastly broader reconstruction. It has long since been pointed by its critics out that Platonized esotericism defeats itself, no less in reconstruction than in original work, because it

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<sup>46</sup>Krämer (1967).

<sup>47</sup>Krämer (1999) p. 180.

<sup>48</sup>Wilpert p. 222 et pass.

<sup>49</sup>Annas (2006) pp. 108-116.

tries to conceptualize what it claims is unconceptualizable.<sup>50</sup> This is a point made by philosophers and mystics from Eckhard to Wittgenstein<sup>51</sup> and perhaps explained by no one better than by Nicholas of Cusa. For this reason, and a matter of common sense, it easy to conceive of unsolved questions in continuous discussion in Plato's Academy without the esoteric apparatus, and it is very difficult to think of Plato as not engaging in discussion with his associates of his most important theories. To argue for the kind of philosophic practice they claim concerned Plato and his successors, the esotericists rely a great deal, in highly controverted ways, on Aristotle's critiques of Platonic theories, inferring from them to actualities of Plato's thinking and teaching. But Aristotle rarely explicitly attributes a doctrine to Plato himself. He doesn't even mention Plato's name very often.<sup>52</sup> Though there are ways around this if one believes that the enlarged esoteric field of philosophical life was concretely practiced by Plato and his immediate successors, the very first fact from the Aristoxenic story of the lecture is that Aristotle was perfectly willing to mention Plato by name in connection with specific places, people, and things and often did so. Returning then to the story as a whole, the lecture event, as well as its fabular afterlife, shows us an unresolved conflict: just the conflict around which moral and spiritual struggles have turned for ever so long, to which, for all his efforts, Plato might not have found the solution satisfactory to both his religious, spiritual, or moral convictions and his intellectual, scientific convictions.<sup>53</sup> One's having successful and mature "independent activity of mind" (in Stenzel's phrase<sup>54</sup>), or one's having

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<sup>50</sup>Gonzalez (1989) pp. 11-12ff. gives a but of the history of this argument.

<sup>51</sup>As Szlezák himself, in Michelini, ed., laboriously points out.

<sup>52</sup>Eudaemean Ethics 1218.

<sup>53</sup>Lloyd pp. 257 and 284.

<sup>54</sup>Stenzel pp. 30-31.

recognized that “sensation could never be an independent source of knowledge”<sup>55</sup> does not mean that one must certainly succeed in solving problems by ever more pure unities, such as lines and points or binary operators. It is the common experience of geniuses as well as of ordinary persons to struggle ceaselessly with the deepest questions, no matter how strongly Plato’s, or Kant’s or anyone’s, nisus toward unity of thought.<sup>56</sup>

The Aristoxenic story of the lecture suggests almost anything about Plato more clearly than it suggests a conclusive and arrogant Plato.<sup>57</sup> It suggests, instead, a man humiliated in public, for in any performance the actor or the actress is the chief target of analysis. Her irresolution, denial, paradoxes, and impossibilities are exposed, though she might seduce the members of the audience into showing their conflicts, some flavor of masochism as well as of sadism being helpful even for performers who perform just for a day. Class resentment on the part of some of Plato’s auditors, or a distaste—a sick furor, in my view—for the actuality of personality at work in the grinding out of philosophy on the part of others, or Plato’s own foolishness might have turned the event into an interrogation of Plato by auditors. Aristotle was a careful student of Plato’s when, having distinguished practical wisdom from philosophical wisdom, he refuses to put them into moral conflict.<sup>58</sup>

In addition to this, the history of the lecture suggests two problems with the esotericist approach. The first concerns the material transmission of texts. The esotericist interpreters certainly understand the intensely complicated history of reception, recension, and edition accompanying any text. The lecture story, like all texts, would not have survived without copyists and typographers, and their editors,

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<sup>55</sup>Ibid., p. 130.

<sup>56</sup>Findlay p. 79.

<sup>57</sup>Cf. Cleary p. 209, who puts the point well if rather anachronistically.

<sup>58</sup>Nicomachean Ethics 6.7 1141b8-23.

readers, and collectors. But our understanding of texts as part of the fragile and widely distributed system of human communication is more recent than the founding writings of the esotericist reading. As in the study of consciousness itself, the more we find out the more we realize there is to know, including the revision of what we thought we knew. Though the trade probably was very large, we know next to nothing about the distribution of texts in Greek antiquity,<sup>59</sup> though some scholars still easily refer to the “publication” of “editions” in ancient Athens.<sup>60</sup> This means that we do not really know what “Plato giving a public lecture” means as to the ideas of publicity and secrecy. Themistios, much later, says that the pre-Socratics distributed pre-notice of their talks.<sup>61</sup> Plato regarded paid admissions and public exhibition among philosophers as contemptuously as he possibly could, but this does not mean that he sought secrecy.

We are wise to recognize our position as readers. Whereas Aristotle’s and Aristoxenus’s pupils were both auditors and readers of the tale, we are joining the many generations of students who are solely readers. We are accustomed to and trained by readership, which is a kind of consumption and a kind of communication developed over the twenty-three centuries since their day. Readership as we now have it did not exist then, nor did it spring into existence at any moment of technological or social progress. For example, some key parts of the power of readership came into being a millennium after Plato in the organization of text by Hellenistic editors, and other parts appeared the two centuries after Gutenberg in the scientific circles in London.<sup>62</sup> Surely we have changed as readers within our own

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<sup>59</sup>Haslam p. 338.

<sup>60</sup>I discuss the circulation of texts at greater length in Chapter 3.C.

<sup>61</sup>Themistios Oratio 26; discussed by Laks pp. 9-10.

<sup>62</sup>The book currently indispensable to understanding Hellenistic textual learning is Anthony Grafton’s *Christianity and the Transformation of the Book : Origen, Eusebius, and the library of Caesarea* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006); and the book currently

lifetimes.

The second problem is that the esotericists do not seem to have recognized the operations of fictional narrative. The typified caricature of Plato in the anecdote of the lecture follows a common pattern in the creation of fiction.<sup>63</sup> For all their focus on the doctrinal line in the story, these scholars, like anyone else living after the creation of the novel, understand fiction and fact in modern ways. Like all anecdotes, this story comes to us as a fragment, whereas in the early Academy it was told and heard in the culture of which speaker and auditors were living members. A fragment has become a literary form for us in many, many ways in which it was not for the members of that and other cultures. We take up the significance of objects from the past, including anecdotes, differently from the way in which those sitting on the Academy's benches did. For example, it has been argued that the scientific historical method, under the impact of Hegel, makes sense of a story from the past the way a modern physician makes sense of a patient's case by relating it to a large body of facts and laws that explain what used to be or still seems anomalous. Under this theory, the anecdote is "the smallest minimal unit of the historiographic fact," being "the literary form or that uniquely refers to the real....", in a consciousness in which "historiography gave over the experience of history, when the force of the anecdote was rewritten as experiment."<sup>64</sup> Under any non-mimetic theory of communication or

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indispensable to understanding the development of readership in the 17<sup>th</sup> century is Adrian Johns's *The Nature of the Book: print and knowledge in the making* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998). The important esotericist scholar Thomas Szlezak (1999), pp.12-15, has not grasped the larger questions of the development of book-reading when he claims

that just because admiring the wide distribution of knowledge is supposedly a concept congenial with moveable type that the Greeks therefore thought secrecy was better. Mansfeld (1998) p, 287, n. 34, and elsewhere comments on the question of secrecy in antiquity.

<sup>63</sup>Schaeffer p. 76.

<sup>64</sup>Fineman pp. 53, 55-56ff., and 63.

culture—any theory taking mediation and indirection into account—the esotericist reconstruction of Platonic thought would have to be considered in a more complex light, and the esotericists would have to see themselves as what they are: modern readers.

In conclusion, (a). The esotericist reading fails the spiritual aspect of Platonism, though it attempts to privilege it, by valuing final expression more highly than it values exposure to inquiry, because (b). it must ignore the actual circumstances of the transmission of ideas exactly at the same time it misprizes the one instance of Plato communicating ideas that it takes as the key to its reading. Its notion of unwritten doctrine, if one followed it, abandons the history of ideas, regarded either as material or as transcendental objects. This attempt to replace, suppress or elide the history of ideas seems anti-Platonic rather than super-Platonic. In any case, it must certainly fail. Therefore, Plato as an agonistic thinker and author opens the case for the aporetic interpretation of his lecture “On the Good.”

#### E. Gadamerian and Aporitic Readings.

These considerations do, I think, certainly mean that Plato could not have had his system of secret doctrines fully formed from youth and used the Dialogues to hint at them and to hide them at the same time, as some esotericists have claimed.<sup>65</sup> Who has anything fully formed from youth straight through until death? However, this does not mean that the interconnectedness of things in unity and multiplicity did not vex Plato throughout his entire life;<sup>66</sup> none of it means that he could not or need not have felt the force of weaknesses in his middle metaphysics and struggled to adjust his theories to the progress of his understanding; and none of this means that he did not

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<sup>65</sup>For example, Szlezák (1999) pp. 9-10.

<sup>66</sup>Gonzalez (1989) p. 213 n. 3.

think about, discuss, or publicize unfinished doctrines. He might have written them down, though they are now “unwritten” in the senses of “not extant” or “not completed.” As Gadamer says, they helped to halt a shift to a completely “empiricist” approach to Plato that, abandoning the theory of forms and the protreptic nature of his teaching, ultimately took the former to be unintelligible and latter to be broken by the passage of time.<sup>67</sup> In this shift the principle that aretē is a kind of knowledge would finally yield a completely naturalized form of knowledge in order to make sense of Plato within a modern framework. Or, it might lead to a view of this knowledge as being that of numbers, entirely that of numbers which, however morally hortatory the rubric or the reading, must itself burrow away at any non-calculatory view of the Good, leaving only stereometry as the husk of Platonic ethics.<sup>68</sup> This is the cratering impact of philosophy since Kant on Platonism that has pushed the esotericists to find the obscurantist way for the whole to be more than the sum of its parts by hypostasizing numbers.<sup>69</sup> They responded to the right problem with a careful but unlikely answer.

In 1978 Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002) began an essay by asking, ...what was Plato thinking of when he took up the principle of the one and the indeterminate two in his famous public lecture ‘On the Good,’ and then nevertheless came to speak in it of human virtues?<sup>70</sup>

Like the neo-Platonists and the esotericists, Gadamer thinks that the key to Plato’s ethics handed us by the lecture is concerned with numbers, but his view of this has a

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<sup>67</sup>Ibid., p.196; Cleary p. 195 calls it “conceptual flattening.”

<sup>68</sup>Cf. Cleary p. 207.

<sup>69</sup>De Vogel I pp. 197 and 203.

<sup>70</sup>Gadamer (1986) p. 104. That we might be think Plato’s thoughts in the lecture are both interesting to us is due in considerable part to the influence of Gadamer’s Habilitationsschrift of 1932, *Platos dialektische Ethik: Phänomenologische Interpretationen zum Philebos*, which is in English as Gadamer (1986).



very special form. His earliest statement of it, in his 1931 commentary on Philebus, was part of the broad framework within which the esotericists worked. He organized a conference on the subject and worked with the Tübingen scholars but modified his support for the esotericist reading in several of the Platonic essays published in English in 1980, nonetheless insisting on the philosophical value of their contribution.

Gadamer's original view<sup>71</sup> was that the extant Platonic dialogues do not give an account of their author's view by direct propositions and arguments, in the systematic literal manner in which academic philosophy became constrained. This customary manner is a representation of thought according to an inaccurate mimetic pattern. It is one way of thinking, but its inherent claim to be the tryer of truth is limited by conditions it does not admit. The mysterious recursions in Plato's works suggested to Gadamer that Plato did not hold truth to be a "repeatable possession."<sup>72</sup> No proposition, however repeatedly verified, is true if no one is in the room to hold it true; its truth is merely necessary but stands nowhere, placeless, amidst the difficulty and obscurity of this world for the human person. This would leave the human person placeless and solitary, like the authorial voice of Aristotle whose truths, Gadamer wrote, stem from necessity rather than agreement with another,<sup>73</sup> as if it were not by the hands of students that they have survived and gained authority. This necessity is not in truth autonomous, though it has come to seem to be, nor is the world an environment that orbit our minds. Rather, the world is the human medium, the human tool to repeal "disconcerting unfamiliarity" with each act of knowing.<sup>74</sup> Behind inference, then, is judgment, and after inference too there is judgment. Logic,

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<sup>71</sup>Gadamer (2006) p. 356-363.

<sup>72</sup>Gadamer (1991) p. 3.

<sup>73</sup>Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>74</sup>Ibid., p. 22.

or *lógos*, works within this surround of ambiguities, suppressed as “refutations” though they rest upon agreement to continue the conversation.<sup>75</sup> Persons always stand in agreements of this sort, upon which floats their competitive eristic.<sup>76</sup> Discourse counts in what is not present, having been assumed or not yet to be approached, as well as in what is present. It does so no matter what the topic.<sup>77</sup> No form of discourse is better suited to practicing this disclosure than the Platonic dialogue, in which the speakers have to become aware about all the nature of thinking in the actual conduct of discourse.<sup>78</sup> That is how Gadamer asks us to think of the Platonic dialogue, as concerning itself with something unspoken and unwritten. Plato discovered the recursion of discourse, which I define as the bottomless regress of interpretations. His critique of it was rapidly submerged in Aristotle’s method; but its truth, some of the contents, are extant and mangled throughout the history of philosophy. They are most visible, though already tangled up, in Aristotle’s reports of his teacher’s doctrines. So Gadamer claims that there must be unwritten Platonic teachings by virtue of the nature of Platonic thought and claims as well that these unwritten teachings did in fact exist and are recoverable. His work on *Philebus* was an attempt to discern them by reaching inside the dialogue with Heidegger’s phenomenology as his optical fiber.

The dialectical practice he recovers is the norm of ethical life. This means that the twists and turns of dialectic are just the sort of things that can tell us about moral dilemmas.

After all, dialectic, as the art of differentiating rightly, is really not some kind of secret art reserved for philosophers. Whoever is confronted with

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<sup>75</sup>Ibid., pp. 37, 39.

<sup>76</sup>Ibid., pp. 44, 50-51.

<sup>77</sup>Ibid., p. 62.

<sup>78</sup>Ibid., pp. 112-113.

choice must decide. Being confronted with choices...is the unalterable circumstance of human beings.<sup>79</sup>

In Gadamer's view of Plato, dialectic is the soul's guide (psūchagogía) free recognition of itself, or of one's self, rather than a calculable instruction to the perplexed. It puts a person in ethical transit toward

the place where we see how the being of the good and the true is constituted....

This doctrine has far-reaching consequences for any appropriate understanding of Plato's dialectic and of the problems of chorismos (separation) and methexis (participation).<sup>80</sup>

Conventional interpretation of Plato's ethics and ontology prescribes a problem here, a scrambled mess of separation and participation that displaces the human either into the rational but lonely observer or away from the society of her fellows to the society of spirits. This meant that the Good itself was subject either to calculation, or to revealed authority or to nothing at all, being in neither realm. If this is not the case, then perhaps our thinking it is the case led to our misreading Plato over the millennia, the misreading being part of why philosophy thinks in the way it had come to think; and in reading what has not been read in Plato by the tradition but is unwritten, obscured by readers and by the fate of texts, we will come closer to his doctrine, as well as the truth of the matter, as to what was after all his principal topic, the Good. Under this view, Plato's lecture on the Good was "unwritten," and its ideas are indirect, but along with other recollections it indicates the foundation of ethics that Plato found for philosophy and that philosophers have since lost in the ceaseless dislocation of human life, like a squatter evicted from slum to slum by ambitious

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<sup>79</sup>Gadamer (1986), p. 109.

<sup>80</sup>Ibid., p. 113.

people and conquering governments.

Gadamer also writes about the Indefinite Dyad and multiplicity, but there is no need to understand the traditional meanings of these terms to understand what Gadamer means when he discusses the historical metaphysics employing these terms. Gadamer wants to reveal what the history ontology covered up. What Gadamer signifies by these terms is the conversation among two or more people. The “dyad” is a stand-in for two persons in dialogue. The one must become two because the truth will not be contained in one person;<sup>81</sup> and the whole is more than the sum of its parts because particular existences have relationships out of which comes our knowledge of true ideas,<sup>82</sup> which is analogous to the generation of numbers.<sup>83</sup> This is the call “to wake up and think”: the way fallible and limited humanity undertakes its task of “constantly limiting the measureless with measure.”<sup>84</sup> Gadamer brought one of the most powerful ways of solving this part of a vast battlefield of ancient and enduring dilemmas to the study of Plato’s ethics.<sup>85</sup>

But if push came to shove, Gadamer’s real interest is dialogue rather than numerology, and so between the esotericists and him the relation was truly fraught, each supporting a part of the other’s philosophy though in deep opposition to its full tendency.<sup>86</sup>

Does reading the openness and commitments of communication as the core of Plato’s message, for all its richness of this idea, suggest any answer to the question of the relation of intellect to will in ethics? Like the audience at Plato’s lecture, they

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<sup>81</sup>Gadamer (1980) p. 136.

<sup>82</sup>Ibid., p. 132.

<sup>83</sup>Ibid., p. 151.

<sup>84</sup>Ibid., pp. 154-5.

<sup>85</sup>Clery pp. 198, 201.

<sup>86</sup>Grandin 155: a “non-debate”.

and we struggle to find the human sense of the Good itself in both our reasoning about moral life and perhaps also in non-human reality. The later versions of the lecture-event anecdote portray the audience refusing to ingurgitate what they regarded as gasconnades from Plato. If the Good itself is found in the many, and if the many share one Good, do we lose the Good itself in actions, will, and pleasures of plural life, or do we lose in the one intellectual Form of the Good itself those projects that our lives are commonly about?

On the one hand, the esotericists have given us something that though it sounds like an answer is actually a weak run of logic which, under almost any modern analysis, firmly finishes off Plato's Platonism as a defensible ethics or ontology. If, on the other hand, doctrinal content is sacrificed, the literary form of the Dialogues by itself, with its dodgy logic, incompleteness, and counter-intuitive claims, can become "little more than a curiosity or even an embarrassment"<sup>87</sup> unless something philosophical remains to be argued. Gadamer in a way did part of this salvage on the basis of phenomenology, but a number of scholars in the last decades have argued for a broader basis to a non-doctrinal, or aporetic, approach. Under this view, the lecture anecdote, as a text supposedly from an oral tradition, is a fiction built of typifying gossip that serves to perform the examination and critique that philosophy can embody in life.<sup>88</sup> It "models" ethical conflicts."<sup>89</sup> The whole story is within the limits of hearsay (ákousmata) such Plato used in dialogues, showing the "limits of akousmatic orality"<sup>90</sup>—or the opposite, according to an esotericist,

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<sup>87</sup>Gonzalez in Gonzalez, ed., p. 13. I do not cite this to dismiss Plato as not good or modern enough—this is obviously not my view of Plato—but simply to acknowledge the force of the analysis of concepts when applied to the Dialogues.

<sup>88</sup>Nightingale pp, 2, 3, 5, 12.

<sup>89</sup>Blondell p. 48.

<sup>90</sup>Erler in Michelini, ed., pp. 154-5, 164-5, 173.

condemning “anything written.”<sup>91</sup> Under this approach, all verbal doctrine, whether oral or graphic, is inadequate to truth philosophically pursued. Because it needs fixed words, the externality of doctrine will replace the heart with the mind.

...for Plato remembering may not consist in memorizing...but in hearing again in the world the sounds of a friend’s talking so that...one will be reminded within of the sounds of something once said in the world...<sup>92</sup>

Taking Plato for his word in the Seventh Letter about “the weakness of language” (to ton lógon asthenēs),<sup>93</sup> true philosophy “is a vision rather than a matter of doctrines,”<sup>94</sup> “a personal orientation towards the truth in which this truth can make itself manifest,”<sup>95</sup> and must necessarily be a conversation or perhaps an event rather than a theory, “always situational.”<sup>96</sup> The forms themselves are aporetic rather than “axiomatic-deductive.”<sup>97</sup>

Like the soul in its earthly existence, forms...are caught in a hermeneutic circle such that an approach to their innermost nature is possible only from within the conflicting variety of historical contexts in which they, or their pursuers are embedded.<sup>98</sup>

This approach is sometimes called “The Third Way,”<sup>99</sup> although it really must be the n<sup>th</sup> in the long list of ways to read Plato.

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<sup>91</sup>Szlezak in Hershbell in Gonzalez 37

<sup>92</sup>West in Gonzalez, ed., pp. 58-9.

<sup>93</sup>Seventh Epistle 342e; see Bluck’s comments on p. 127 and Gonzalez in Gonzalez, ed., p. 185

<sup>94</sup>Press in Gonzalez, ed., p. 147.

<sup>95</sup>Gonzalez in Gonzalez, ed., 161.

<sup>96</sup>Hyland in Welton, ed., p. 266.

<sup>97</sup>Gonzalez (1989) p. 13 n. 49.

<sup>98</sup>Benso in Welton, ed., p. 277

<sup>99</sup>Welton’s introduction in Welton, ed., details concept behind this expression; see esp. p. 4 n.20 and p. 6 n. 47.

The neo-Platonist scholar Lloyd Gerson writes that to understand the fully matured, dense, late expressions by Plato of his theory of forms one must know that

The account that one gives in words is distinct from the knowledge that one has, if one does have it. In the interstice between a self-reflective cognitional state and a representation of that state to oneself or to others lies the key to much of Plato's method of doing philosophy.<sup>100</sup>

The notion of an interstice, or third region, for thought, is a small-scale model of a much larger battle. The criticisms to which Gerson's defense of the aporetic Plato is subject—that inward knowledge is not always self-reflective but can be intuitive or unconscious, that it offers nothing to explain the necessity or possibility of expression of the interstitial thinking, that it sounds like a Third Man argument, that the question of truth remains unaddressed—are the criticisms directed to phenomenology, the grand-father of the aporetic reading of Plato, its feste berg around which the primary battle about the meaning of experience and history rages.

As an interpretation of Plato's lecture, aporetics ignores the monologic form of the lecture and what this form might mean in comparison with dialogues, especially when viewed as a part of the development of Plato's practice of philosophy in the later period of his thought. The esotericists, on the other hand, take the lecture as a ticket to shutting themselves inside the gates of their hermeticized academy. From this follows a yet more important problem for the aporetic reading. If Forms are aporetic goads, why did Plato in his lecture state the existence of a non-aporetic reality? Some aporeticists even deny that Plato had a theory of Forms. But whatever one's view of this or of the developments of his theory in his later work—toward immanence—Plato at the time of the lecture (if not even earlier) recognized the

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<sup>100</sup>Gerson in Welton (2002), p. 97. Cf. Gonzalez in Gonzalez, ed. (1995), p. 167. I return to foundationalism in Chapter 4.B et seqq.

necessity of something foundational. The oneness of the Good itself is clearly a foundationalist quality, and therefore aporeticism does not erase all the old questions as to the relation of the foundation to the rest. Phenomenology re-cast, and later movements discarded, the idea of foundations, but we cannot accept or reject Plato's later foundationalism until we know what it is. These questions remain; for the lecture they take this form: how and why did Plato mean this statement to address the old questions? The aporetic approach merely suspends these questions, or refers their solution to the large-scale conflict of ideas of which it is a ray shone into a corner of the history of philosophy.<sup>101</sup>

#### F. This Reading.

The esotericist reading of the lecture is too narrow; the aporetic reading is too broad. The esotericist errs as to doctrine and ignores historical and rhetorical form; the aporetic reading errs as to form and ignores doctrine. The esotericists claim that the "old problems" of participation and foundationalist issues have been solved, as the neo-Platonic tradition held, but makes the solution obscurantist. The aporeticists say that these old problems have been overcome, and indeed they have been—except that in one area, the question of the how we are to guide our actions, they remain. This question is the reason men were interested in Plato's lecture topic and came to hear him, and it is the reason women and men still question these issues today. That Plato's doctrinal statement concerned the Good itself, rather than any other unchanging, pure, or transcendent entity, suggests that he had something in mind that was both past aporesis and something that persons, like those in his audience, could grasp hold of. He placed it in some certain connection to other kinds of knowledge. Neither locking the gates, as the esotericists do, nor taking struggle for

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<sup>101</sup>See also Chapter 3.D for further comments on esoterics and aporetics.



defeat, as the aporeticists do, explains the lecture. Plato's lost lecture includes a significant and highly reliable philosophical claim. An obscure episode with only a slender tender living green shoot, the consequences of this little fact are sufficiently extensive as to undermine these approaches to Plato and to suggest another line of thought.

The lecture and its history exhibit the conflicts between life and logic, between inquiring and concluding, between inward experience and outward necessity. In its concrete aspect, the lecture is an artifact produced out of facts, hearsay and fabrications, with a vivid kinetics of power relations and intellectual struggle among the participants in the lecture event, which infiltrated the twists and turns of each felt, spoken, and enacted response. Whatever anyone present at the lecture might have intended to do, the acts of all of them are frozen in the event and in its story as the dilemma between two kinds of philosophy and the moral salience of both. One observes this dilemma acted and re-enacted in the stories of Plato's lecture, as if wearily on a flecked and dim looped film. But there is an enduring, living part of this story. It argues a doctrine, but it is also a testimony to us from Plato that the claims of doctrine and the claims of situation are both necessary in moral philosophy.

### Chapter 3: Hunting the Good.

I wonder if Socrates was so cold, I wonder if it did not pain him that Alcibiades could not understand him. (Søren Kierkegaard, *Papirer*, V B43.<sup>102</sup>)

#### A. Overview.

When we turn to considering the doctrines Plato expressed in his lecture “On the Good,” we are obliged to turn to the material circumstances of the lecture as well as to its content. The reason we cannot content ourselves solely with the latter is that the lecture, no longer extant, is an object of reconstruction. By “reconstruction” I mean the narrative investigation of an object or event in historical time as both material and ideal object. Under this view, reconstruction involves intellectual history and material culture studies; and, by consequence, each of these requires the other in order to gain whatever understanding of history that historiography in the mode of reconstruction can give. This is the mode of historiographic work that is at hand if we are thinking of getting at the lecture in any but superficial ways. The lecture’s existence for us is inseparable from the manner of communication it employed, especially since this is a unique choice by Plato so far as we know, just as it is inseparable from the material, personal, and intellectual transmissions by which it

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<sup>102</sup>As cited from *Papirer* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1968) and translated by Daise, p. 24.

(and anything else) has been preserved. Such preservation is always incomplete (though in a theoretical way we might say virtually always incomplete), from which it follows that we gain the meaning of historical time by attending to intellectual and material disappearance, loss, wear, and incompleteness. As I shall argue, study of the way in which Plato taught his ideas on this occasion improves our understanding of his ideas rather than restricts them to the social traditions of which they are a part, partly because the format opens up a tradition of conceptual work in Athenian society that Plato used to expand conceptual thought to the furthest degree it had yet achieved. Having established Aristoxenus's account of the lecture as reliable, I hope in this chapter to make an advance on what has hitherto been said about Plato's lecture.

Why is everyone, including the scholars and students of the twenty-first century, so puzzled by the lecture? Aristoxenus did not say the doctrines were puzzling or enigmatic. He merely says that Plato's way of expressing them was unhelpful. A tradition that the doctrines are enigmatic has early roots and is supposed to have started with the judgments of the students who attended the lecture. The lay-people found it confusing, but this doesn't mean that Plato's thoughts were enigmatic. Even if the non-students found it confusing, why did Plato's students? There were no limits to speak of in Aristotle's curiosity and comprehension, and Eudoxus was a brilliant mathematician. If lay-people just objected to its abstractness, why should we credit the tradition that students and friends in attendance found it so jarringly incomprehensible that they never stopped referring to their confusion? Can it be that Plato was just losing his grip? Did the old man have the dwindles, just wandering off to do strange things, such as lecturing about stereometry to dockworkers and fishmongers on the streets of Piraeus? The *Timaeus* is hardly evidence of an author whose powers of expression are failing.

I suggest that we do not here see the kind of befuddlement associated with the teacher speaking over the heads of his students. I suggest that Plato, in giving this lecture, did not discuss Zenonian paradoxes or deal with difficult abstractions, perversely contrary to common intuitions—such as that visible space is not divisible but that invisible things are divisible or that time is continuous but eternity is not. I do suggest that his subject was, as always, that the examined life is the best, and that latterly he thought we can know the Good itself because wisdom is teachable. In his later work, Plato seems to have thought that the philosopher is obliged not to trick or grip or to seduce his students, to exercise no influence directly by logical force, but to understand that truth and the Good itself will work in its own many ways, personal or impersonal, in its own time.

The first part of the argument is a look at Plato's view of the responsibility of those who make inquiry into truth. I argue a Platonic view of this responsibility as a kind of intellectual history because it is trans-generational from *The Sophist* and *Parmenides*. The next step is a look at the material means for transmission of concepts across time in Athens. Putting Plato's lecture into this context, I pose two principal questions about it. Discussions based on *Thetaeteus* and *The Symposium* advance these issues of moral historical responsibility into normative ethical theory, with discussion of the special issue of moral partialism. In *The Republic*, we find this issue in terms of the ontology of the Form of the Good. Comparing these to the lecture provides logical and historical reason for affirming the claim that Plato's later ontology changed from his earlier work in response to compelling problems in his philosophy. I hold that these problems are more ethical than ontological at root. The chief burden of this case then falls on *Philebus*. I look at it as a discourse on normative ethics that presents some of the major changes Plato made in his later ontology in order to adapt it to ethics. I close the chapter by outlining interpretations

of the doctrines of Plato's lecture and presenting my conclusions.

### B. Communicating Ideas.

When Plato's delivered his monologue "On the Good," he acted within a group of means of verbal reproduction by which ideas were stored, retrieved and disseminated. These means of communication served conceptual thought as well as other discourses and purposes. They are evidence of the forces that produced it, but it was not the central power these forces served. The axis of technology is not equipment but rather is the persons who operate the equipment.<sup>103</sup> For the historian of conceptual thought, and for thinking itself, extant technology is a corpus of tracks made by thinking persons that contributes to understanding ideas, actions, and narrative in historical time. This is true of both the machinery itself and of the impress it makes on the objects people make.

Plato made original contributions to this system of transmission in both its literary and philosophical aspects. We will find the monologic event, when viewed in the context of a cognate dialogue, the *Philebus*, tells us that Plato altered his thinking about the transmission of ethical thought. In response to the strain his ontology put on his ethics in and after the *Republic*, Plato conceived the first normative ethical theory built on the basic conflict of moral life.

Throughout the *Dialogues* Plato speaks in his own person on one sole occasion. Using the first person, he refers to his own words in another work. The Stranger, leading discussion in *The Statesman* (*Politicus* ), says that "...in the *Sophist*

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<sup>103</sup>This is the position eloquently and classically argued by Michael Warner in his *Letters of the Republic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), framed in part as a critique of Elizabeth Eisenstein's *Printing as an Agent of Change* in its first edition (1979).

we forced non-being to be.”<sup>104</sup> Plato is quoting this passage from the Sophist:<sup>105</sup>

Stranger: Our object was to establish discourse as one of our classes of being. For if we were deprived of this, we should be deprived of philosophy, which would be the greatest calamity; moreover, we must at the present moment come to an agreement about the nature of discourse, and if we were robbed of it by its absolute non-existence, we could no longer discourse; and we should be robbed of it.<sup>106</sup>

His verb in both passages is *prosēnagaskaásamen*:<sup>107</sup> that “we” thoroughly (also, repeatedly) studied and thought, in the manner of a good reader or lecture-listener, with the sense (based on the root *anagakázo* shares with *anagkē*, “necessity”) of entailing the conclusions of thought by force of reason (that is, “coming to agreement”). This means that non-being is constrained by being—an idea closely related to what I shall call “the synoptic principle” later in this Chapter.<sup>108</sup>

Accordingly, we are commanded in our thinking to grasp non-being by its connection with being<sup>109</sup>—ordered and required by thought itself (*lógos*) if it is to be true. The underlying point is more concrete. He is saying that our thinking is constrained solely by that reality itself from which it arises, rather than that realities are governed by our thinking. The Stranger is concerned enough to press the point in drastic terms, insisting on the rightness of his point in virtue of the cataclysm that

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<sup>104</sup>Statesman 284b7.

<sup>105</sup>Sophist 260a3; cf. Sophist 235.

<sup>106</sup>Plato, trans. Harold N. Fowler, *The Sophist* (Vol. 12 of *Plato in Twelve Volumes*.) Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1921.

<sup>107</sup>Mansfeld (1994), p. 72. Cf. *prosanagkasteon* in at 284b.

<sup>108</sup>Section I of this Chapter.

<sup>109</sup>This is in accord with the careful analysis of Platonic non-being by Owens (1999), who firmly separates the sophistic puzzles from the earnestness and depth of Plato’s approach, showing that the claim that Plato held non-being not to “be” or to be non-discussable is

must follow denial or neglect of it. Through the Stranger Plato claims that, though natural fit of thought and the world must be the case, it might well escape us and be forgotten: not robbed from us<sup>110</sup> but lost by our own commission, and finally that with truth-seeking will go justice and goodness into oblivion.<sup>111</sup> Not thinking can be as powerful as thinking; thoughtlessness, as powerful as thoughtfulness. This freedom of ours to choose the path for our own thinking is a danger with which we shall, in all our futures, struggle in a fight (*diēmachometha*) for *logos*.

With regard to reality, each of us is one of the *dramatis personae*.<sup>112</sup> Each *persona* is both responsible agent of inquiry and is as well the guises that inquiry takes. To speak *ek prosōpou* (as one's scripted character) is to be both a masked actor and a student of the action. The role of being a student masks to some degree one's participation in life, even though the role is a job devoted to the task of grappling with reality. Plato's slip of his *persona* as the Eleatic Stranger in this passage may tell us how much he was concerned with inspiring the pursuit of truth and goodness, rather than with dispensing answers. It is also a *parataxis*, a slip of the tongue, revealing anxiety about maintaining his *maieutic* position. In his later work (save for *Philebus*) he largely let go of the forthright manner of Socrates, though it was doubtless still fresh decades after the execution. The public instruction on the Good and this moment in *The Statesman* are extreme instances of a manner of communicating that is neither Socratic nor characteristic of Plato's middle and late-middle periods. This suggests developments in the conception of teaching, which was always the paramount practice in his philosophy from the profound *eros* to the combative *elenchus* to ironic teasing.

On another occasion at the beginning of his later period, Plato uses a measure

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<sup>110</sup>“Robbed from us” is Fowler's translation.

<sup>111</sup>Cf. *Statesman* 284a-b.

<sup>112</sup>Mansfeld (1994) p. 12.

of humor to show the intensity of the effort he made to revise his earlier notions. The *Parmenides*, initiating his later period, is set up as a recitation, or re-enactment of the occasion at which the young Socrates heard Zeno of Elea (ca. 490-ca. 430 B.C.E.) read his book on Being and then debated its hypotheses first with Zeno and then with Parmenides himself (fl. 500-450 B.C.E.), the founder of the Eleatic school of philosophy.<sup>113</sup> The story-teller is Antiphon. The audience for this reconstruction at the house of Cephalus included Plato's half-brothers Glaucon and Adeimantus and was therefore more or less a family affair, much like the *Republic*.<sup>114</sup> It need not be a surprise that the men of Plato's father's generation, having been profoundly involved in the great crimes of Athenian politics of their day, endeavored to examine, along with or through their children, the nature of justice in the *Republic*, while their deeds lived on in the thoughts of their successors assembling at the Pnyx; but that some of them should also assemble to hear the most abstruse logic debated third-hand and at length is a joke. But the *Parmenides* is not a joke but is a most serious inquiry into the ontological basis of all the ethics and all the philosophy Plato had pursued for three decades since he first heard Socrates, who had heard it from great citizens and great strangers on the streets of Athens. Yet for this serious purpose the *dramatis personae* attending the scene of the dialogue are men whose lives had been ones of action rather than of abstract thought—or at least of that mix of concrete action and cosmological reflection preserved in the remains of Greek literature—listening in on the philosophy others discussed, hearing it repeated at their own request. Perhaps they or others, such as some in the audience of his lecture on the Good, criticized Plato when he turned his attention to something about justice and the Good that was at once bizarre and also more familiar, being echoed from Parmenides's generation.

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<sup>113</sup>Parmenides 125ff.

<sup>114</sup>Burnyeat (2004) p. 83



The comic bit is not so much the length of time Zeno's reading would have taken, for we must not measure their patience for long abstract oral discourse by our own, as it is the mis-match between the principals, or actors, and the audience for the revival. We do not know whether such auditors as Plato's patrician but soiled uncles would have actually requested this, or would have expected a more practical discussion, as Plato's lecture audience did. But we do know that Plato insisted upon it for himself, with increasing intensity, through two more decades, and that he put his kin right there where he was, as if he were uncertain and anxious when rigorously honest thought constrained him in a direction few understood. The passage I cited in *The Sophist* argues for this kind of obligation of honesty. But in the *Parmenides* he shows it to us as a spectacle, in which the harshness of the work is neither constrained nor suggested by the human reality of the occasion. The force of thought was like a forced march, under the command of wiser predecessors as well as under the pressures of his students' questions. This is the first step to understanding the force of logic that moved through the Dialogues up to the metaphysics Plato evolved in his last period, of which the lecture is a part—and a clue to us in understanding the results of that development sufficiently well as to be able to catch its force and appraises its claim.

Plato's population of auditors, participants, friends, relatives, lovers, and students in the Dialogues taken all together were not only dramatic characters. They tell us about the circulation of his work because their real-life models helped to comprise a functional equivalent of publication. They were among the material and social circumstances of the movement of his ideas in his own day, in addition to being *dramatis personae*.

In his lecture Plato discussed not only the monadic character of the Good but also the heavens and the earth and that which is in-between—astronomy, geometry,

and arithmetic. We ought not assume that the lay auditors were correct when they were disappointed, which is what both the Esotericists and those who dislike the other-worldliness both seem to agree on. Nor ought we assume that Plato's ideas were truly confusing, antinomic, or dense, since it is the later tale-bearers and not Aristoxenus who says the lecture was so "enigmatic" that the intramural auditors were obliged to write it down in order to figure out what the teacher meant by his words. Plato's students surely had written down his words many times before. For the practice of writing down spoken words in philosophical school was not invented by Aristotle's students as if it had never before existed. Rather, it was a practice ordered to some degree by experience, as the preservation of Aristotle's lectures by student notes attests. We might venture to say that the written verbal system was ordered to a high degree, but it is enough to say that it was ordered to a degree sufficient to have put about three hundred thousand words of Aristotle's in ink onto papyrus, not to mention what has been lost. Almost all of what we have by Aristotle are notes of his lectures. They are akróamata, like Plato's one and only known speech, "On the Good," intended for pedagogic purposes just as were Plato's written works and his Lecture. The approximately 600,000 words we have from Plato<sup>115</sup> were directed into written form by the author.<sup>116</sup>

### C. Athenian Communication of Ideas.

I'll look at three parts of the contemporary Athenian ordering of verbal reproduction to show how they served the purposes of storing and transmitting conceptual thought, though also shaping it. I call these parts (1). editorial, (2). performative, and (3). graphic

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<sup>115</sup>Theses word counts are on the Perseus site .

<sup>116</sup>There is no evidence to the contrary.

(1.) Editorial. The transmission of ideas and texts to Plato, to his students, and from their hands followed the practices of fifth and fourth century Athens. The society mixed oral and graphic literacy, the age of purely oral cultures having ended long before Homer. Written collections of verbal texts, collected from several or many speakers and writers on intellectual matters, are likely to have existed in Socrates's youth and even in the time of Xenophanes. "Epitomators" and monographists both put written texts that included the words of others into circulation. Furthermore, I suggest that these authors at least on occasion arranged ideas in orders designed for the purposes of teaching, which were later called *schemata isagogica*.

I have borrowed the specification of editorial tasks from the brilliant work of Jaap Mansfeld, whose studies of "the historiography of doxography" have created out of neglected philological and antiquarian research an exquisite form of theory that can, if taken into account on a broad field, illuminate the origins of critical reading. The weight of the evidence indicates that these handbooks of ideas in short statements, called *placita*, now utterly lost from any period before the first century B.C.E., were read by students both silently and aloud for discussion. They were a form of memory of philosophical expression in the crucial span between Socrates and Aristotle. As Mansfeld notes, these doxographers were under no obligation to be accurate.<sup>117</sup> They probably would not well understand what we today mean by editorial accuracy as something distinct from their deliberated notions of truth, justice, and goodness. Also, from the surviving later *placita*, he surmises that the compilers' choice of material rode on the context in which the *placita* were designed to be used, which may have been philosophical, or scientific, or apologetic, or

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<sup>117</sup>Mansfeld and Ruina p. xix.

epideictic, or otherwise.<sup>118</sup> We ourselves are easily oblivious to the shape given our image of Plato's text by the grid Henri Estienne imposed on it in 1578. Editors of all periods—and perhaps above all of Hellenistic antiquity and of the Renaissance—are like artillerymen, each scratch of whose pen calibrates what effect their work has, like the rifling in a gun barrel, editors. These doxographical influences channeled our impressions of Greek philosophy in ways easily escape our attention when we focus on such modern constructs as the “worlds” of mysteries and secrets or the “worlds” of technology and trade.

(2). Performative. In addition to doxographic form and tradition, Plato's transmission of his ideas was indebted to theatrical performance. The relation of philosophy to drama in Greece is the main part of this, but for my purposes here I refer to the oral performance of the Dialogues by Plato's students and friends.<sup>119</sup> Since Plato's creation of this form of text was inspired by the stage, the Sophists, and Socrates, it is reasonable to think that it was also inspired by what he saw and heard his students do right in front of him and that the students' ideas affected his composition and reasonable to think that the unscripted live conversations of Plato's youth and middle age behind all the dialogues are also his source material. The image of Socrates is partly due to a character from the Old Comedy,<sup>120</sup> with which in turn Plato novelized the life of his teacher, responding to Socrates's harsh fame. Diogenes Laertius says that Plato exhibited (*ékdounai*) dialogues when they were ready to be shown, which Mansfeld calls a sort of vernissage.<sup>121</sup> Group reading aloud is consistent with verbal practices throughout the development of literacy and scholarship in the

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<sup>118</sup>Mansfeld (1994) 107.

<sup>119</sup>Yunis p. 198; Kahn in Yunis (2003) p. 160.

<sup>120</sup>A look at MaryLouise Hart's *The Art of Ancient Greek Theater* (Los Angeles: Getty, 2010) readily shows this.

<sup>121</sup>Mansfeld (1994) pp. 160-161.

West.<sup>122</sup>

Both broad theatrical traditions and the nuances of bodily performance in private and public life, as well as within the Academy, are influences we ought to take into account when we try to think through Plato's conceptions in the Dialogues and in the lecture-event, to which they have a particular relevance.

(3). Graphic. A third factor, beside doxography and performance, comprising Plato's exposure of his philosophy through *dramatis personae* (or "the functional equivalent of publication") is the graphic part of communication. Recension by doxographers and indeed all reception of written words is subject to graphic means. In Plato's time the technologies were: scratching into stone, painting on whitewashed wood (*leukóma*), applying ink on papyrus scraps or on sheets glued to make up rolls, and inscribing blocks of wax (usually red) layered into gouged depressions in blocks of wood. These last two were correctable by erasure. Also, the tablets could be strung together in pairs or threes or as many as ten, sometimes boxed (*casus ansatus*).<sup>123</sup>

In classical Athens there was of course no such thing as "publication" or any "edition" of anything, except if we are to change the meanings of these words, nor can we positively say there was a book trade, although it is not a stretch to think that the production of rolls was a skill attended by some of the elements of order, value, and respect attending better known trades of the time. Furthermore, we do know that rolls were bought and sold, collected (by Arcesilaus of Plato and by Plato of poets<sup>124</sup>), commissioned,<sup>125</sup> and even rented, as Diogenes Laertius tells us Plato's texts

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<sup>122</sup>Roger Chartier demonstrates this in his discussions of group reading aloud in the 16th-18th centuries in volumes 3 and 4 of *The History of Private Life*.

<sup>123</sup>E. G. Turner (1968).

<sup>124</sup>Arcesilaus owned Plato's "books" (*Lives* 4.32) but these were not an "edition" but rather commissioned manuscript copies.

<sup>125</sup>I refer to the error of the so-called "Thrasyllus edition."

were, probably by the Academy itself in the early third century B.C.E.<sup>126</sup> Thales was said to have put written collections of his words into circulation.<sup>127</sup> Socrates learned about Anaxagoras's ideas when he bought a roll of this text perhaps including other placita), for one drachma in the orchestra of an Athenian theater.<sup>128</sup> In this story graphic communication and bodily performance are adjacent by virtue of vending texts engrossed on papyrus. In the dialogue *Ion* Socrates says that a rhapsodist must understand the words he is to sing before he can perform well, and *Ion* replies that his own knowledge improves his discourse by exceeding that of four much earlier commentators whose work he knew.<sup>129</sup> Socrates is criticizing rhapsodists but he does not say they are ignorant.

Collections, or *súggramata*, on poetry, the natural world, magic, sex, household matters, religion, and philosophy, drawn from one author or from many, probably comprised a substantial or even lively trade we now know next to nothing about, since only one Greek papyrus of the fourth century B.C.E., from Dherveni, is extant. In addition to written words, graphic communication included diagrams, drawn into wet pressed sand, painted on *leukóma*, inscribed into slate or wax, or even just written on papyrus scraps and clay shards. For Socrates and Plato visual communication included other lost objects likely to have existed in their time, such as maps and models. If we can reconstruct Plato's diagrams from his texts, or if we can reconstruct the long-since lost illustrations used by mathematicians on the basis of their texts (which has been attempted with considerable success<sup>130</sup>), we, as Robert Brumbaugh pointed out long ago, would have reconstructed primary sources that,

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<sup>126</sup>Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* DL 3.66, referring to circa 280-270 B.C.E.

<sup>127</sup>Themistios *Oratio* 26.317 in Laks (2001) pp 8-10 and n.s 42 and 52 on Thales.

<sup>128</sup>*Apology* 26d-e.

<sup>129</sup>*Ion* 530b-d.

<sup>130</sup>Netz (1999).

although uncertain, can by comparison with one another reveal new lights on Greek intellectual operations.

#### D. Plato Communicator.

Conceptual thought was among the forces driving these techniques of communication in Classical Athens. Correcting our mistakes by improving our knowledge drives of a great part of human history. Using the available means, persons sought to transmit conceptual thought. Plato, by the particular and specific content of his conceptual work, stimulated a great change in each of these three aspects, including the creation of the philosophical dialogue. His heavy emphasis on teaching in philosophy is likely to have been one of the causes of the unprecedentedly expansive commentary that his work provoked right upon his death—or during his life if we count the shouters and grumblers at the lecture as exegetes. To the extent that we think of teaching as transmission of ideas from persons to persons by way of material, personal, social and technical circumstances, we can think of education as a kind of interaction between abstract and particular things, a kind of *méthesis*, or participation without simultaneously voiding the concepts of content, either as a matter of reduction or of aporetic theory. One should add this notion to the critique I made of esoterics and aporetics in Chapter 1.E, both which use different versions of Plato *absconditus* and works away toward views of Plato communicator.

One of the benefits of looking at Plato with the editorial, performative, and graphic capabilities of his culture in mind is that our understanding of his discourse is less stressed by his not speaking in his own person than it has been in scholarship of the last several decades. Suppose that acting, and enactment, was a part of teaching in the Academy, just as rhetoric was a part of public discussion in Athens and the

theater was a part of Greek life. What we think of as withdrawal or intentional obscurity, even when we call it protrepsis or the maieutic in order to throw a white sheet over the vague presence, would then be, in the light of an active verbal culture now extensively unknown or alien to us, a set of forthright and well-handled personae of the teacher, of which we have now forgotten the tricks and skills. We have later versions in our daily pedagogy, and this is one of the reasons that we can, within limits, re-create Plato's own presence in the dialogues. The first editors of Plato organized the Dialogues into trilogies or tetralogies by dichotomous division of their range and effect (*skopós*). The commentators in the succeeding centuries knew dialogues by their sub-titles (*epígraphata*), by their parts, and finally by personae in them.<sup>131</sup> The tendency to think of Plato's meanings as secrets grew with the distance of neo-Platonists from their source, just as the past in general feels full of secrets in the eyes of persons sensitive to it. It is true, as a prominent esotericist scholar points out, that antiquity nowhere had the notion of accessibility to knowledge developed by us since the Renaissance, but it does not follow from this that the ancient idea of secrecy is as opposite to openness as ours, or that Plato governed his unwritten thoughts by thinking them more complete and final than they were.

If Plato's genius does not exclude the protreptic by an esoteric posture, it also did not flee the difficulties posed by the deepest problems in the outcome of furthering his thought under cover of the aporetic posture. To examine a Platonic doctrine neither requires a completely aporetic approach nor is it incompatible with those elements of the aporetic approach which are assignable to the effects of the material transmission of verbal text. One can argue that the aporetic approach is the better alternative to a systematized Plato retrojected onto Plato through the modern idea of philosophical systems, whether theosophical or analytic, which is like

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<sup>131</sup>Mansfeld (1994) pp. 34ff.



spraying something sticky onto Platonic discourse through a Stephanus-like stencil, natural in citation but artificial as to thought.

In Greek, *aporía* is “distress.” One can hold a belief, sustaining it as a doctrine by argument, and still be no more free of conflict about it than one who is constrained to state it for good and all in one statement at one place in one text. Aporetics is as much a construction of modern forms of discursive thinking as is esoterics. Distress is not the opposite of doctrine; doctrine can be argued by distress. All such claims come from reflective thought and do, to a greater or lesser extent, take reflective thought itself as their object and for this reason are something more than logic, something less than ineffable secrets, and something more than questions alone.

The monographic lecture breaks Plato’s *prosopopeia*—this is one of the many things about the event that intrigues historians. His “reticence” is less like the alluring but inedible curate’s egg. The doctrines and the problems they respond to are neither secrets nor gestures. Such things as these are caricatures. Conceptual thought comes along with its problems, which are part of its inner dynamic, an actuality in its own right because, not despite, its being competently conveyed in material form from one thinker to another and from teacher to student. In the lecture Plato uses all three of the means of conceptual communication that I listed—a monographic prose piece, performed, and circulated in writing—to transmit doctrinal content. I suggest that the use of these to break persona is an *exposé*: it exposes not only Plato’s mature doctrine but also Plato himself by revealing the confusing, frightening, uncertain direction into which the problems of his middle period metaphysics led him.

E. Doctrines in the Lecture.

To understand the doctrines in Plato's lecture, I shall pose two chief questions. The answers are not purely logical claims nor are they non-philosophic facts about historical circumstances as they are conventionally understood. The questions about doctrine are also questions about the transmission of ideas. The answers come neither from the means of transmission alone, even in the universalized aporetic version, nor from the propositional content alone. They arise out of a singular and striking fact about Plato's monological adventure: it was an effort to teach what the good is.

Aristoxenus, on whose account we rely, was not given to imprecision. His charge of imprecision against Plato, an example of Aristotelian critique of philosophical and pedagogical methods, is in fact the broad reason he recounted this story. Aristoxenus is specific in the words he chooses to describe the audience's interests, and he is specific in the words he chooses to name Plato's topics of discussion. The audience, he says, were interested in finding out about

...those things called goods: wealth, health, endurance, and amazing happiness.

Plato, he says, talked

...about mathematics and arithmetic and geometry and astronomy and also stated that the Good itself is one....<sup>132</sup>

This pair of topics links the Socratic ethical and ontological topics for teaching virtue to the terms of Plato's middle-age defense of his ethics by his metaphysics, and it links the middle Platonic topics to the differing scope of the later ontology and ethics. Socrates said he did not know what virtue was, but he believed it could be known and could be taught. For all the focus on the audience's disappointment, no one has noticed that Plato's lecture is an attempt to teach virtue. We have for once caught

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<sup>132</sup>I have discussed the force of the words initiating this list, *hoi logoi*, in Chapter One. Some editors have added the definite article "the" (to) to the word "good" (*agathon*), contracted to *t'agathon*, for a variety of philological reasons. Esotericists have both used, used and retracted, and not used the article. I conclude that it make no difference at all to our understanding of Plato's talk

Plato himself in the act—doing that act which Socrates and he considered the principal task of philosophy. The scene, apart from being a lecture rather than a dialogue, is in line with the ethical pedagogy of Socrates. It is the sort of thing Plato watched Socrates do, and it was the sort of thing Plato did throughout his life. It also is something Socrates and Plato alike were both famous and infamous for doing. The audience, drawn by reputation as well as by friendship, seems to have wanted to take hold of (*lepsesthai*) the good. The idea in the verb is to possess, as in learning and then being able to do or act according to what has been learned—or, in a word, being taught. To teach what the good is and how to be good is to teach virtue. But this is not to be mistaken for a case of virtue ethics, because it certainly involves an ontology of the Good itself.

But we see in this moment another philosophical function. Plato is working out an idea of the Good itself through number-like Forms up to the most rarefied possible degree. The final development is stingily signaled by one phrase, which vexes our understanding the text of Aristoxenus. Aristoxenus connects Plato's list of topics with Plato's quoted or paraphrased words by the phrase *tò péras*. This denotes some conceptual, temporal, or rhetorical relationship between the set of specific topics Plato discussed and the set of specific words Plato used. Here it connotes particularity in the topics and universality in the words; or, if you will, concreteness in the topics and abstractness in the words. Even this connotation warrants neither philosophical theory nor evaluation. I have translated the phrase *tò péras* by the harmless word "also;" at the end of this chapter I will suggest a more consequential word. So the first question concerning the doctrine of the lecture is: what is the relation between the set of topics Plato discussed and his statement on the Good?

Aristoxenus's account gives us one of the most compact great philosophical statements: "that the Good is one." These three Greek (or four English) words present

the foundational problems of Plato's work in one handy damnable little knot: the nature of the Good itself adequated to the essence of pure Being by the copulative verb. The verb is by no means the easy part. It can refer to metaphor as well as to adequation. It leaves the range of relations between "good" and "one" open along the whole spectrum from likeness to identity as well as the many definitions thereof. The second question concerning the doctrine of the Lecture therefore is, what is the theory of normative ethics suggested by Plato's statement that the Good is one?

As I said in Chapter 1, there is no knowing why Plato gave a public lecture. But his ideas and words here are part of his long voyage in thinking and are part of the long effort of the Greeks to create forms of discourse suited to such ideas. In turning to the content of his lecture, the little we know of Plato's thinking in the lecture might add to things we know better from the rest of Plato's work, but we must also turn to the rest of Plato's work to help us understand his reported lecture.

#### F. Communicating Virtue.

In the Protagoras, Socrates listens to Protagoras explain his lecture course for teaching men to be good citizens. Their sample student is young Hippocrates, who, as Socrates points out, is perfectly free to switch from Protagoras's curriculum to that of Zeuxippus of Heraklea who teaches painting or to that of Orthagoras the Theban who teaches fluting. Protagoras stands firm, though, by insisting that he respects the student's autonomy and will not

...bring them back against their will and force them into arts, teaching them arithmetic and astronomy and geometry and music (and here he glanced at Hippias); whereas, if he applies to me, he will learn precisely and solely that for which he has come. That learning consists of good judgement in his own affairs, showing how best to order his own home; and in the affairs of his city,

showing how he may have most influence on public affairs both in speech and in action.<sup>133</sup>

Socrates then makes his round-about critique of Protagoras's idea of virtuous citizenship and simultaneously of his way of teaching it. Part of the story he tells describes a public hullabaloo not unlike what seems to have occurred at Plato's Piraeus lecture. I quote it at length for that reason.

Socrates: Now I observe, when we are collected for the Assembly, and the city has to deal with an affair of building, we send for builders to advise us on what is proposed to be built; and when it is a case of laying down a ship, we send for shipwrights; and so in all other matters which are considered learnable and teachable: but if anyone else, whom the people do not regard as a craftsman, attempts to advise them, no matter how handsome and wealthy and well-born he may be, not one of these things induces them to accept him; they merely laugh him to scorn and shout him down, until either the speaker retires from his attempt, overborne by the clamor, or the tipstaves pull him from his place or turn him out altogether by order of the chair. Such is their procedure in matters which they consider professional. But when they have to deliberate on something connected with the administration of the State, the man who rises to advise them on this may equally well be a smith, a shoemaker, a merchant, a sea-captain, a rich man, a poor man, of good family or of none, and nobody thinks of casting in his teeth, as one would in the former case, that his attempt to give advice is justified by no instruction obtained in any quarter, no guidance of any master; and obviously it is because they hold that here the thing cannot be taught.<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>133</sup>Protagoras 318e1-319a2.

<sup>134</sup>Protagoras 319b3-d6. Cf. 325c-d.

Given these and other failures, some of which are made by great men in teaching their own children, Socrates asks, how is virtue to be taught? Socrates implies that something fundamental in knowledge—in the kind of skillful knowledge called *technē*, at this point—is accessible to every person and that Athenians, finicky in such matters, recognize and accept it.<sup>135</sup> But Socrates makes no commitment to any definite set of virtues or virtuous attitudes.

What does unteachable capacity for giving virtuous advice do, if it cannot teach or force virtue? It might protect the old virtues—such as those described by Theognis:

stay rich, be a rock-steady friend to his friends, breed horses, keep dogs, love a boy, and care for a wife....<sup>136</sup>

or those described by Hippias:

...for every man and everywhere it is most beautiful to be rich and healthy, and honored by the Greeks, to reach old age, and, after providing a beautiful funeral for his deceased parents, to be beautifully and splendidly buried by his own offspring.<sup>137</sup>

Or it might not protect these. Socrates does not criticize them in criticizing the sophists. Just as different men have different skills but still all are men who can be wise and good, so different kinds of knowledge still incorporate or depend upon some other knowledge separate from particular goods.

Socrates tells us this by indirection. He says virtue cannot be taught, and he means it cannot be taught on the terms Protarchus sets for teaching it. No one can teach it by direction, that is, by leading others into it (*hēgoūntai*). Advice has but

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<sup>135</sup>Miller (2008) p. 283.

<sup>136</sup>Theognis 1255-1256. Cf. 255-256.

<sup>137</sup>Hippias Major 291d9-e2.

partial effect (*sumbuleúein epicheireĩ*).<sup>138</sup> Protagoras rejects a list of mathematical knowledges very much like that which Plato taught at his lecture, with the exception of music. These are the sorts of knowledge liable to universalized logic, though applicable to such practical skills as ship-building. Socrates by reply says only that these mathematics provoke derision from the crowd—as Plato later found out—but points out that despite this reaction something deeper is at work in people. So far Protagoras has not defended his curriculum. Socrates has made him show merely that he himself is wrong to reject what he rejects, so that, while he might be right that virtue can be taught, he is ignorant of virtue itself and of the means of teaching it. The variety of opinions about virtue, the fact that virtue cannot be pushed upon one, and our inward moral conflicts are reasons to think that we do not facilely gain or show off goodness. I comment no further on the degree or manner of Socrates’s rejection of the sophist’s art.

Much later in the Protagoras, Socrates, by maintaining that no person intentionally does evil, again suggests a profound operation of goodness close, in some way, to actual operation of nature. The opinion that moral actors have of the goodness of their actions is in truth, he says, perceptions of pleasure and pain. Socrates then subjects this level of understanding to a further subversion.<sup>139</sup> An explanation of any such innate connection of the operations of nature to pleasure and pain as we possess requires both ontology and moral psychology. Plato later devoted his normative theory in Philebus to the difficulties of giving this account. This link between the secondary topicality of pleasure and pain in Protagoras to its primary topicality in Philebus shows that enhanced conceptual complexity in knowledge of human behavior begins to create a problem for the ontological theory Plato sought as

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<sup>138</sup>Prot 319d6.

<sup>139</sup>Protagoras 353-356a ff.

the necessary foundation for the knowledge of virtue. It was a response more to the complexity of moral life and the inner logic of conceptual thought that caused Plato's Socrates to respond as he did here, more than it was the person of Gorgias or the company of Sophists.

#### G. Historical Time.

It is a less-traveled way of looking at The Symposium to view one of its chief concerns to be the transmission of ideas across historical time. The dialogue's philosophical weight falls on a doctrine that combines both the channel of transmission (eros) with what is transmitted, but tis is outside of my present scope. Plato's Socrates discusses the characters of the teacher and the learner, the motives for transmitting ideas, and the most cosmic function or necessities of the movement of thought from one person to another. Socrates's evaluation of the social event of the symposium unravels its denied and repressed meanings as well as its cosmic significance. Symposium parties were occasions of intense bonding of male friends and of plays of feelings either dramatic or comic but certainly free to a considerable measure from the obligations of ordinary life. They were devoted not to practical matters but to a domain of feelings of many kinds, including regard for others and regard for self, in which as much was avoided as was freed, as is usually the case when inhibitions are lifted. It is hard for us to say with precision what meanings symposiasts or their society in Athens defended themselves against, but virtually every dominant ideology of Western societies since that date has had innumerable resources for such denials. The Symposium is a remarkable testimony to the proleptic possibilities of Plato's work, without which our own imaginarium would be much the poorer.

Trans-generational philosophical and moral inquiry is a project in history.



Eros being the channel in which psychic and, pro tanto, intellectual instruction flows, one can think of the speeches in *The Symposium* as concerning the temporal span of the pedagogic role of love. Phaedrus's speech concerns reconstructing the original form of love.<sup>140</sup> Pausanias's speech is about restoring love to its correct codified courses.<sup>141</sup> Eryximachus's instructs the symposiasts on the reconstitution or preservation (*phulakēn te kai iasin*) of eros by a careful theory of how love comes from the harmony at one moment of things and persons that hitherto had been separate.<sup>142</sup> Aristophanes's speech is sheerly one of historical memory.<sup>143</sup> Because Aristophanes was a comic writer, some scholars are tempted to dismiss his speech as ironic. They might have forgotten that good comedy includes something very serious, grave, or profound. While the speech is mythic, and is humorously told, its theory is a perfectly plausible account of the genesis of sexual feeling—not literally of course but as an allegory of something that happened to each of us or perhaps to one and all of us, repeatedly or universally across the generations. Allegorically understood, it has struck readers this way for thousands of years and still does.

From the scene-setting moves at the very start, Plato presents the transmission of thought in historical time through *The Symposium*'s thematic devotion to the attempt to teach by one of the older, passing generation, and the attempts to learn by students of the younger and coming generation. One of Socrates's chief purposes is to refine our vision of this element (among others) out from within the strong forces of sexual love. When Socrates separates the good and the beautiful from the love Alcibiades has been talking about that jumbles them all up, he frees the channel of communication from domination by some of the particulars subject to time that

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<sup>140</sup>*Symposium* 178a-180b.

<sup>141</sup>*Symposium* 180c-85c.

<sup>142</sup>*Symposium* 188c2.

<sup>143</sup>*Symposium* 189c-193d.

interfere with the understanding of an old man by a young man.<sup>144</sup> This turns out to be a hard lesson for Alcibiades, that Socrates should have rectitude instead of passion along with a kind of care and empathy that young persons are not alone in finding disappointing, insufferable, confusing, frightening, or even cruel.

Martha Nussbaum has maintained that Socrates's self-sufficiency in his relation to Alcibiades, and to similar young men, adapts the vain complacency of the *éromenos* while Alcibiades's ardor is the aggressive desire of the *erastēs*.<sup>145</sup> An *éromenos*, however, does not lack desire. He is insufficiently motivated by one specific desire, we presume, that of being an *erastēs* at that moment. Receptive sexual desire strikes the heart as strongly as its counterpart. Similarly, learning from the past is not a weak or effete thing to do, nor is it a passive activity. It requires work, or usually does so. One's sense of needing to understand the historical past is of course due in part to the fact that it is part of one's present and of one's future, and the same is rightly said of a society's interest in its past. But transmission of ideas or knowledge from the past is some part of the living thing itself—not just a practical guide for us now, or even a wise counsel from elders, but also something congenial with existence. Thus teaching and learning of wisdom are trans-generational activities, deeply imbricated with the range of virtuous feelings the older can have about the younger as they watch them live with the glories that come easily to them and with the glories they have to struggle hard for. The aching and yearning Alcibiades is not vain or fickle, though people like to see him so. Rather, he is a powerful actor, heaving out a stormy attempt to come to terms with the vastness of what he—overwhelmed, unequal to what he fears the job will be—must learn from his teachers. This is so cogent and potent that it calls forth the prime teaching of The

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<sup>144</sup>Symposium 223c.

<sup>145</sup>Nussbaum (1986) pp. 188ff.

Symposium.

We have from Greek antiquity another text—fragmentary but a substantial 1,356 lines—from an older man passionately and earnestly thinking out how to convey important knowledge to a younger man he is in love with.<sup>146</sup> This is the case of Theognis, whose boy Cyrnus resisted listening to the moral, prudential, personal, and social advice Theognis addressed to him. In the poet's view, Cyrnus impatiently, foolishly won't sit still long enough to take in the worth of Theognis's values, which, as I mentioned above, are those of an earlier and hardier nobility. Theognis wants to teach Cyrnus what it is a good man does in his relations with others, what behavior makes for an honorable city, and how to be wily enough to succeed in a hostile world. Sparing few words, Theognis tells the reader that he feels the boy has rejected him, that he it has hurt him not to be able to save the boy's heart from being exploited or abused, that he has failed thereby to hold for himself something of the fresh glory and genius and beauty of life in its youth, and that Cyrnus will find society cold and trampling just as he himself has found it to be when it discarded the codes of honor and allegiance he grew up with. He wants to claw back some of this for himself in his last days, and he yearns to feel the pulse of life itself while protecting Cyrnus from catastrophic Necessity sweeping over individual hearts as well as vanishing social and moral dominions.

Theognis's set of moral values, as well as the relationships he had to Cyrnus and Cyrnus to him, existed in specific circumstances in historical time, but the poetry ascribed to him expresses the loss an individual person inwardly feels. It is regretful helplessness. It is desire he needs to fill. It is the realization that he permanently cannot do so. Which of his words describe his own and personal feeling, and which

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<sup>146</sup>Some of these remarks are based on a paper I wrote for Prof. Nigel Nicholson's literary theory course at Reed in 2010.

words are constituted by the conditions of his class, city, and point in time? Also, which words for Theognis's thoughts express the local values, and which words describe lasting wisdom? Which the tribal and particular, and which the universal and permanent? Like Socrates, he was trying to do what he thought right for some present posterity, for his sake and his friend's sake and the polis's sake and even in the light of chthonic, cosmic justice; and to try to do this while in the middle of beauty, desire, and affection. No person escapes conflict with the categories of goodness and justice, which are matters of individuals and groups and of universal good and plural goods in relation to the people, bioforms, machines, transports, and staffage that once raised dust and will once again raise dust in the spot on which she stands.

Plato considers these questions in *The Symposium*. Aristophanes's myth of the split nature from which our erotic desire arises questions what part of personal love is chosen by persons and what part is driven by the past. Then Alcibiades enters, bringing these questions to urgency. When Socrates tries to re-direct Alcibiades's attention from personal love to the love at the top of an ontological ascent, he vividly exposes the inward moral conflict between, on the one hand, love for particular persons (and groups) toward whom we try to act for the good and, on the other hand, universal non-personal love as set in the transmission of wisdom from one generation to the next. The issue of whether Plato's theory, following from Diotima's and Socrates's speeches, has room for the love of individual and particular persons or not, allowing only universal love as true and good, has been the object of a distinguished scholarly literature.<sup>147</sup> Besides the erotic relation, note the intergenerational aspect of the matter, which I also call the transmission of ideas in historical time. I do not have a view here toward settling this problem in the interpretation of Plato.

However, the question of particular and universal goods is a part of Plato's

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<sup>147</sup>Kurke (2011) pp. 315-316 n. 29 surveys the literature.

lecture on the Good. Recall the two questions I posed about the doctrines in the lecture:

1. what is the relation between the set of topics Plato discussed and his statement on the Good?; and
2. what is the theory of normative ethics suggested by Plato's statement that the Good is one?

The first concerns the relation between the highest universal wisdom and particular bodies of knowledge or activities. The second concerns the relation between the Good itself and particular goods. In *The Symposium*, Plato tells us that since true knowledge of these matters can be taught, it exists in time, and that the way of teaching conforms somehow to the universal and atemporal nature of true knowledge. It lasts even when hearts are broken. It gets through even though nothing on earth is permanent.

#### H. Meta-Ethical.

In modern normative ethics, these issues are discussed under the topic of moral partiality and impartiality. The discussion grows in the gap between the universal character of moral law—for a law is a law; it is what Kant called categorical—and the local goods we humans try to follow and fulfill. In Bernard Williams's memorable phrase, these are our "ground projects"—our interests in other individuals, family ties, politics, business, private pursuits, etc., without which life hardly seems worth the trouble. Most of this discussion is played out in the irreconcilable gap, in which, for example, one argues persuasively that friendship is a moral hazard and the next one argues on different aspects of the same matter with equal persuasiveness that not having friends is a moral hazard.

The problem of moral im/partialism is a fundamental part of Plato's normative

ethics.<sup>148</sup> The form it requires in the Platonic setting is different from the form it has taken in the academic discourse of professional philosophers in the last four decades, which has impoverished a core part of normative ethics. Here are two examples of the issue as I will use it in the following pages.

The first is this. When I buy a bagel at breakfast time at Reed Commons I put on it the amount of cream cheese I like to eat on my bagels, scooping this amount from one of the several large bowls of cream cheese to be taken from by the customer according to taste. One day after preparing my bagel the cashier asked me if I was ever charged for the extra cream cheese I took. I said that although I had no idea if I'd ever been charged or not, it had never occurred to me that the amount of cream cheese I habitually took was “extra.” The amount of cream cheese I had on my bagel is the appropriate and normal amount of cream cheese for a bagel according to my lifelong experience of bagel-eating. So clearly my experience of the norm in this matter differs from that of others, raising the thought that I might err not only as to what tastes good in bagel-eating but also as to what is right as to my own health and as to matters of justice, especially in a common non-profit project.

In Greek life, according to recent scholarship, food was divided between bread as the essential thing on the one hand and fish, cheese, olives and other “toppings” as delicious but inessential things.<sup>149</sup> They called these desirable “extra” foods the *ópson*. This moral scheme is built up like a *hors d'oeuvre canapé*, with survival as the basis (*canapé* itself means “sofa”) and every pleasure, *desideratum*, or interest as moral hazards piled upon the basic necessities. Tolstoy, for example, firmly maintained that a person can live on bread alone, since the hardest-working laborers do, and that we must do so. This notion of moral obligation is obstructed by nothing on the way to

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<sup>148</sup>Gerson (n.d.) is one of the few to take this issue up explicitly in connection with Plato.

<sup>149</sup>James Davidson (2011) pp. 3-35.

martyrdom. It makes a supererogation always and everywhere required of moral agents. Few people follow this path, and yet to argue a conscientious way of modulating the ultimate demand is a matter of the greatest difficulty in the actual emergencies of moral life. It has been heavily controverted in the entire range of philosophical, religious, and political normative ethics in the West.

Think of this as the vertical range of the impartialist issue, in that its scope is self-regard and its content includes moral prescriptions from the highest divine to the basic physiological. It corresponds to the first of my questions about Plato's lecture, as to the relations between particular activities as I know them and the good in and for all things at the highest spiritual level, called the Good itself. If we think of the connection between the topics and the words cited from by Aristoxenus in his account of Plato's lecture as being both an ontological relation and also a structure of teaching, learning, showing, and knowing, we see that Plato's use of what we now call moral impartialism is in the first of its two aspects an expression of the difficult way of personal self-care in the lights of both universal moral prescription that does not spare one's self and of the skills and projects that one has chosen to equip one's self for and then undertake.

The second example is this. In the decades leading up to World War I a man with a mysterious background named Basil Zaharoff (1849-1936) became the world's most prolific salesman of military weapons. He supplied anyone who paid, including all sides in an active war. Conducting arms races as a matter of profit, he became fabulously wealthy and a caricatured symbol of a nascent international military-industrial complex in control of great nations. However, after World War I, though he continued to be a predator, he funded, and rounded up political support for, the war by the Greek state under Venezelos to incorporate Turkish coastal lands with ancient Greek communities. Not all his reasons are known. However, among them a

firm national loyalty showed for the first time in his career. In doing this, which led to disaster for Greeks, he took extreme measures of deceit, theft, and exploitation on an international scale; but he said of the morality of his actions that, “Patriotism which boasts of principles is no patriotism.”<sup>150</sup>

His sentence is a nearly perfect statement of the conflicts of particular loyalties with other particular loyalties and with universal moral principles. The problem it poses is that if one is fully committed to a very great moral good, if not a supreme project of moral life, one might, and usually does, act contrary to other important moral obligations, virtually always including the general one of respecting the rights of others. *Fiat justitia ruat caelum* is rough enough, but at least the highest good in this case is justice; yet what other moral claims may the pursuer of justice rightfully ignore or traverse? If we honor as justice something like love of country or group, in which very many innocent lives as well as the salubrity of intangibles that have long stood among the deepest motives of moral choice is at stake, any principle that would be tripped up by other commitments, no matter how decently principled, might seem a very wan and purposeless moral phenomenon.

Think of this as the horizontal range of the problem of moral impartialism. It includes the kind of conflicts encountered in care, concern, and regard for others, such as family, society, nation, and civilization or such as teams, brother- and sisterhoods, religious fellowships, and action projects for indisputably good ends. My second question about the lecture doctrines concerned what theory of normative ethics the text might yield us as likely to be Plato’s (viewed in concert with other dialogues). Is there one good that makes sense of other seeming goods or that guides us to decisions in moral dilemmas? What would be the nature of this foundational

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<sup>150</sup>Richard Lewinsohn, *The Mystery Man of Europe: Sir Basil Zaharoff* (London: Lipincott, 1929) p. 181.



good which all other principles stand for or fall in front of? Our need to reconcile goods can be resolved, in Plato's view, only by understanding what makes a good thing—that which itself is good or diffuses goodness. Here again, Plato's terms address both an ontological issue and the question of how we know the truth in these matters.

### I. A Synoptic Principle.

Regarding these issues as problems concerning the transmission of wisdom from person to person and through historical time, they are questions to be asked of the developments Plato seems to have made on Socrates's original pedagogical, spiritually inspired questions. Plato stated the metaphysics with which he supported his ideas in the middle period of his development in *The Republic* and elsewhere. In the *Theaetetus* he shows us Socrates teaching it by teaching geometry, astronomy, harmonics and arithmetic to Theaetetus.<sup>151</sup> From this Theaetetus learns that there are two ways between which all things naturally choose, the one divine and happy and the other quite the opposite.<sup>152</sup> He learns further that a person has agency in choosing between them.<sup>153</sup> That we err in just these judgments of natural morality is taken as a proof of our power of choice.<sup>154</sup> Socrates tries to explain the dual position of intelligence with respect to nature, being both in it and out of it, a kind of having and not having.<sup>155</sup>

This dual position of a Form both outside Being and constituting Being corresponds to the duality of impartiality and partiality in ethics. They both are

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<sup>151</sup>Theaetetus 145c-d.

<sup>152</sup>Theaetetus 176e3-177a7.

<sup>153</sup>Theaetetus 186b-d.

<sup>154</sup>Theaetetus 189c.

<sup>155</sup>Theaetetus 197c-e.

problems of the one and the many. In the explanations of the knowledge of the Form of the Good and the transmission of virtue in *The Republic* Plato uses a metaphysical notion I shall call his “synoptic principal.” In the sixth book, Socrates says

When truth led, we could not possibly say, I imagine, that a chorus of evils followed.<sup>156</sup>

The synoptic principal is the affirmative form of this. It is Socrates’s conviction that truth leads to the good and that knowing the truth leads to goodness. The opposite is impossible or, at minimum, very terrible, in the eyes of Plato’s Socrates. It cannot be that if we find out the truth we shall not also find out what is right and what is wrong. If we discern reality with the utmost honesty, we consequently must know the next right thing to do. I use the term synoptic because, first, it includes in its scope both the Good and Truth or Being, the Beautiful being consequent to these; second, because the principle is true of the highest intellection and of merest sensation, and true as well of all entities (especially in the later Plato); and third, because it is a single basis for both metaphysics and ethics. By “principle” I mean a principle of explanation.

It leaves a lot unexplained, of course. But for us it is a step toward clarifying the famous problematic claim in *The Republic*, that “the Good is beyond being.”<sup>157</sup> The esotericists, and the neo-Platonic tradition generally, read this as a Good itself that exists outside the universe; and others regard the Platonic Good itself as immanent in ways variously explained. In *The Republic* and elsewhere Plato provides lots of testimony for either approach, though the strictly evidentiary balance is probably against holding that the Good is outside of Being.<sup>158</sup> The synoptic principal, however, puts the matter on a different footing. The question is not one of

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<sup>156</sup>Republic 6.490c2-3.

<sup>157</sup>Republic 6.509b

<sup>158</sup>See Baltes in Joyal, ed.

inside versus outside or of above versus below. It is, instead, synoptic in the senses I describe above. It enrolls Good and Being under Truth. The proximity of Good and Being is then manifested by the identity of the inquiry as to what is true with the transmission of what has been found to be true, whether by discourse or by love.

The synoptic principal justifies the pattern of life the philosophers follows and recommends for others. The synoptic principal is also justified by what the philosopher does.<sup>159</sup> Plato expounds this nexus between the love of wisdom and being good by describing the difference kinds of knowledge in the upper half of the divided line and the knowledges in the lower half. The difference between the two kinds of knowledge in the upper half is the difference between the domain of images, the prior section of the divided line, and the domain of actualities natural and artificial, the posterior section. What I am calling actualities prove the images by virtue of being more truthful and therefore more real. In the posterior, or better, half of the divided line, knowledge of pure forms is proven, or resolved, or given meaning, by the highest form of knowledge.<sup>160</sup> Plato has stated his view of the highest kind of knowledge in its final form for The Republic before adumbrating it by the example of divided line. In his view it is knowing

...this thing which gives the things which are known their truth, and from which the knower draws his ability to know, is the form or character of the good....<sup>161</sup>

Note that the highest level of knowledge is the shortest part of the divided line. This directly indicates the existential and moralizing character of true knowledge. The fewest attain it.

Since the synoptic principal links the Good with the True, and since the True

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<sup>159</sup>Republic 6.500d.

<sup>160</sup>Republic 6.509d-511d.

<sup>161</sup>Republic 6.508e1-3.

is all that which is, one must, accordingly, find goods of some sort in less perfect being in so far as it can be truly understood. One of the reasons for an explanatory principle is that it services all the range of existence Plato devised it to service. It applies in appropriate measure not only to the Good and to Being but also to spiritual attainment and to physical sensation.

He addresses the ninth book of *The Republic* to this matter. There Plato iterates the synoptic principal in the long argument about pleasure and wisdom in terms of goodness as true pleasure or happiness: the wise man gets the most of this.<sup>162</sup> Socrates began the ninth book by generalizing desires into the problem of pleasure. He takes us behind compulsions, behind obsession, and behind the apperception with which persons inwardly normalize these behaviors, by directing attention toward dreams, that is, the non-propositional.<sup>163</sup> He rapidly moves from mere desires to madness. From about this point on, as Socrates begins sorting out victors, Plato gives a series of metaphors to help us situate happiness in a kind of mental or spiritual activity (called wisdom) that is, like the Good itself, higher than other experiences but similar to them. It is fullness where they are emptiness, white where they are black and grey, atop where they are athwart.<sup>164</sup> Similarly in *The Symposium* Diotima describes harmony as something apart from base and treble though composed of them. The relation is not so much that of part and whole as it is that of pursuit and possession: wisdom is a pleasure we come to possess by pursuing it, because the good comes along with the true.<sup>165</sup>

Plato was not comfortable with a perfect rejection of pleasure. In a symposium, one imagines that he, like Socrates, saw both the good and the bad

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<sup>162</sup>Republic 9.582c7-9.

<sup>163</sup>Republic 9.571e-572b.

<sup>164</sup>Republic 9.584a-b, 585a, and 586a.

<sup>165</sup>Republic 9.586d-e.

revealed by their friends and was conflicted as to whether the good things in life must, in due time, always hurt us, as they seem to; whether reason has the sway to figure his out, or whether reason itself was at stake in the conflict, such that it was merely embattled in the fog of war and not the decisive, active Pallas Athena, certain of victory; and what interpretations of our sensations then are truthful and what ones are false and wrong. He imagined a complete knowledge that strained always to fulfill apperception of eternal truth but was also, or at least akin to, the most productive kind of knowledge we are already familiar with. This vision, or hope, of truth did not settle the conflict. There is something about our selves that does not mix with passions, though we'd all much prefer not to have trouble from this quarter. This something also is a weed of care: what if, just because our own passions are irrational, the truth does not always lead to the good? But the truth must do so, if the world as Plato saw it is to stay jelly-side up. Reason, within the logic of *The Republic*, can lead Plato to no conclusion other than this as to its own goodness. In the ninth book of *The Republic*, the recursions of desire do not stain the recursion of reason.

#### J. Normative Ethics.

Plato's Socrates posits the synoptic principle by providing the answer to the question that guides the dialogue from the beginning and specifically from the story of the Ring of Gyges in book two. Gyges, a poor shepherd exploring a cave, finds a ring that, like rings in many myths, gives him the power to act without having experience of those events consequent to his acts that he does not wish to have. Without ado, he gets to have those effects of his acts that he chooses to have. Those he does not choose to have are those consequences to himself and to others that we call punishments according to the harm caused by his acts, or retributive justice.

Some of the consequences of his acts might be good for others in the view of those upon whom they fall, but this is not controverted by Plato as a moral problem. Gyges gets what he wants, including consequences to others that they do not choose. He need not lie by calling his acts good—the smallest, and most common, gesture to convention. Gyges's ring does not protect him from the Good, nor has it any power over the Good, neither fearing nor avoiding it. Justice is what Gyges seeks to escape. In the myth, the moral life the ring gives its possessor is one that would be, were the myth true, separate from the reality in which justice exists. Both the reality governed by justice and the reality void of justice exist by myth in the same places at the same time. While Gyges is unpunished, others who do wrong are punished, some perhaps by Gyges, though his motive is not likely to be that of a just actor. The one who uses the ring's power just has no interest in the reality with justice. He is disinterestedly disengaged from that reality at all points and in all respects. He neither seeks counsel nor fears judgment. Socrates and his companions consider whether or not anything requires Gyges to choose to act justly and not to act unjustly.

The answer Socrates gives in Republic 9 is that any person disinterested in justice does not in fact live in a reality in which justice does not determine his or her own happiness. Gyges's ring is not real; there is no such power, though one might escape punishment by luck or strength or caprices of the gods or by dying in the nick of time. Even such a person is nonetheless subject to a power that alters his or her life, doing so in respect of happiness. Full and utter unjust living causes one to be 729 more unhappy than he or she can otherwise be. One who lives a wholly just life is 729 times happier than he or she could have been. The sphere for retribution is the happiness of the agent. Within this sphere justice is a competent and complete retributive force. In this sense, then, the moral agent may remain entirely focused on self-care and need be interested only indirectly by what happens to others. In The

Republic, retributive justice seems to be a causal force with 729 units of energy.

It is, however, non-material. This means that its effect on personal happiness is not physical or quantifiable. To whatever extent Plato's notion of the soul in The Republic is of a super-sensible and undecaying entity, no mechanical power can affect it. Socrates's quantified happiness is a metaphor, as unreal in its way as the cave with the dead king whose finger bore the ring Gyges stole. Socrates arrives at 729 by taking the number three as the number of plurality and cubing its cube. "Taking the number as" means to express something by a metaphor using number. Cubing the cube of the number is a tidy adumbration of the metaphor, looping the ornament within its tropic period. It ought to be taken to indicate a distance that might as well be infinite. For as odd as it seems to claim the unjust person is literally and exactly 729 times more miserable than the just person, what sense can it possibly make to claim that the perfectly just person is either 1/729th less miserable than the unjust person or that the perfectly just person possesses one full unit of happiness? One full unit might be a completely happy life, but what force brings this about? What efficiently pushes that which is attractive about happiness into the events of moral experience?

Analogical argument is an argument that uses likeness to verify a claim. If Socrates's calculation were a form of analogical reasoning, then the process of calculation would be definitively similar to the process of living justly or living unjustly and the product of the calculation would be definitively similar to the just or the unjust life. Metaphor, although it is generically analogical, presents the way to understand the truth of a claim by executing a mixture of likeness and unlikeness that suggests the limits of a claim rather than verify the claim. Analogical argument is part of the claim itself; metaphor is not. Metaphor does not claim to do anything, whereas analogy, like a gadget, fulfills its mission by calculated, quantifiably tracked

productive relationships. Metaphor points to the way in which the object of thought develops as far as we can see it; it suggests the germ within or the hand of God. In Plato, numbers are not executant entities or accurately corresponding symbols. They are, in my view, much more like enigmas or metaphors. Plato uses the prime tool of analogy as the image in his argument by metaphor. His numbers are not analogies, not hypostatized, and not idealized. But it is easy to take Plato's use of them as relying on their precision, since precision is of the rhetorical and practical essence of number. Also inductive analogical reasoning is one of the great engines of human thought. But for Plato the relation of goodness to being is not an analogical understanding the former by progression from the latter. Their synoptic connection cannot be represented except by metaphor.

Plato uses the metaphor of number to represent rationally something inexpressible and incommensurable: the relations of the pleasure and pain. Pleasure and pain are things that take us to a domain other than the domain of rational control. They belong to the class of desires. Plato is concerned with what drives everyone crazy about desire: how it is that desires that desires run out of rational control. A desire grows by following upon itself or upon another desire, as a son follows his father's folly.<sup>166</sup> The growth of virtue and unvirtue, or wisdom or unwisdom, is temporal, like history, which is both the medium and the contents of the medium in which one part of life communicates itself to a successive part of life. One can account for the actual instants of growth by metaphor solely, of transmission by metaphor solely, and of diachronesis by metaphor solely:

Socrates: And when the other appetites, buzzing about it (the soul), replete with incense and myrrh and chaplets and wine, and the pleasures that are released in such revelries, magnifying and fostering it to the utmost, awaken

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<sup>166</sup>Republic 572d8-9.



in the drone the sting of unsatisfied yearnings, why then this protector of the soul has madness for his body-guard and runs amuck, and if it finds in the man any opinions or appetites accounted worthy and still capable of shame, it slays them and thrusts them forth until it purges him of sobriety, and fills and infects him with frenzy brought in from outside.

(Adeimantus:) A perfect description of the generation of the tyrannical man.<sup>167</sup>

A person already worn down (*kēphēn*) is the product of previous actions upon him that now are repeated. Plato can no more factually describe the transition from state zero of moral wear to state 1 of moral wear than he can describe the movement from state 1 to state 10. Instead he uses abstract notions to complete the thought begun by the metaphors of the drone's ravishments and stings. *Epì tò éschaton aúxousaí te kai tréphousai*: this phrase has the highest significance. It tells the story of how the desire in the desirous person grows upon itself and grows up to the highest degree of what it is. Thus it also stands for compulsion and addiction, which is in the kind of the recursive nature of consciousness. Self-replicating thought counts but cannot be counted. It does not cease even with personal death, because it has already spread its fractal spirals to the lives of living persons.

The soul of this sort, tyrant to itself and perhaps to others,<sup>168</sup> is inestimably miserable. One pleasure is too many, and a thousand is never enough.<sup>169</sup> Pleasure is then always accompanied by pain, as pain is by pleasure. These are not separate entities but one pleonectic system spiraling through the hours and the millennia. They work together in the system's monadic structure as beginning and end, full and void, integral and recessive. But the result of the system if uncontrolled by anything else is always moral pleonasm. In Republic 9 Plato maintains that these two things, pleasure

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<sup>167</sup>Republic 573a4-b5.

<sup>168</sup>Republic 9.578c1-3.

<sup>169</sup>This is a line from Twelve Step literature.

and pain, are not intelligible as the sum of the events that produce them. He regards them as wholes that are more than the sum of their parts, just as in *The Symposium* he considers harmony to be more than bass plus treble.<sup>170</sup> This directly conducts us to the ontological stage of the argument on the next pages, which finally ends with the quantification of misery and the metaphor of species.<sup>171</sup>

The self-replicating recursive action of intelligence can lead to freedom and love of wisdom, as Plato says in *Theaetetus*, using the same verb (*trephō*) in connection with education (*paideía*).<sup>172</sup> But Plato's vision is that of an intellectual process so sufficiently separate from both the recursive *nisus* of desire and the recursive harmonizing activity of the Forms, which we discover by inductive analogy, that, as a result, we can know what and why the Good itself is. Without this intelligence, the Forms seem to be functional entities, however honorifically Socrates describes them. These honors would be metaphors as well, making partially clear what cannot be demonstrated. Through many dialogues Socrates has used analogy to prove his claim of the pure and good existence of the Form; but their creative function, and the way in which lesser entities participate in them, cannot be confined to what we analogically understand. To all the well-known problems that ambiguate the ontological level of the Forms we must add one more version on the ethical level: that the recursive function of personal desire and rational inquiry does not support the transmission of wisdom. The guardians in *The Republic* are in need of a non-recursive knowledge in order to fully manage virtue and justice.<sup>173</sup> One might think that the Forms, being purely and eternally good, suffice to give knowledge necessary to good action. But Plato's analysis of pleasure and pain has contradicted any such

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<sup>170</sup>*Symposium* 187b-c.

<sup>171</sup>*Republic* 9.585ff.

<sup>172</sup>*Theaetetus* 172d, 175c

<sup>173</sup>*Republic* 6.506a4-7.

hope. Pleasure and pain reveal to us the recursive nature of life and of human intelligence supremely because it is the paramount existent knowledge. Self-replication can limit good action, being functional merely in respect of itself diachronically. The Forms too are limited if their business is to replicate themselves weakly in spatio-temporal substance. Transmission of the knowledge of the good in justice, in virtue, and in desire, requires an object of knowledge distinct from the domain of the Forms just as it is distinct from the desires, since both require recursive and therefore potentially unending operations with indistinct and inadequate results.<sup>174</sup>

Because Socrates in Republic 6 says that he cannot explain the Form of the Good,<sup>175</sup> the discussion of pleasure and pain in Republic 9 ought to be seen as conceding this. The result of the discussion does more, however. The philosopher tries to compensate for the unexplained Form of the Good by thoroughly realizing the isomorphic psychic and political principles of justice argued from the moment Socrates and companions start walking to Piraeus. When Plato confines the multiple conflicting realities of pleasure and pain to a general theory according to their common solution, self-rectifying balance, the realities will not stay settled. They reveal deep discontinuities in the action of the Forms over time as well as in their own courses. The solution of Lloyd Gerson, and of others, is to regard the Good as “self-diffusing.”<sup>176</sup> We can justify this by quite a number of passages in late Plato if we chose to use this word in interpreting them. But self-diffusion does not explain the mystery of the recursion of consciousness. It only re-states it. In particular, it does not explain the passions, such as anticipation, that contribute to running the hamster-wheel in our heads. It does not answer the problem of moral impartiality

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<sup>174</sup>Cf. Santas (2001) pp. 155, 187ff.

<sup>175</sup>Republic 6.506d6-e; cf. 611.a9-b7.

<sup>176</sup>Gerson (2011) p. 7.

that desire raises for us.

The question of whether the Form of the Good is within being or outside of Being is not fully explained when construed as an ontological question, nor is it precisely a question of moral psychology. It describes some activity of the Good itself that is not amenable to description by ontological locators. If it were, the great questions of life might be simpler than they are: we just transcend life or live life directly guided by nature, as if this were a knowable thing. In any case, the Good's relation to all other things and in particular its presentation of itself to us is always disunified by our multiple desires. This might seem to offer little prospect of progress in moral life. But consider the modern construction of the matter: that there is categorical, endogenous, autonomous good on one side and contingent, exogenous, heterogenous goods on the other, with freedom at stake between them. If Plato can construct a notion of the Form of the Good itself that is not intelligible by analogy nor analyzable, he would have something the nature of which is to be unaffected by the multiplicity of time and which therefore abides in every temporal transition.

I have addressed these remarks to a certain aspect of *The Republic* that seems little-noticed: Plato's concern with history, regarded as the transmission of knowledge and wisdom, is activated by the issue of desire, among other things. I suggest that over time Plato concluded that the direct analogy of ethics to metaphysics—the proof of ethics by means of metaphysics—was an incorrect relationship. A thinner and freer relationship is required. Yet the relationship of the moral agent to history suggests that the historical world of objects and events is also inadequate. The primary reason for this is the recursive and aggrandizing nature of power. We have already seen this reason. As Aldous Huxley said, in the spirit of many others:

Of all social, moral and spiritual problems that of power is the most

chronically urgent and the most difficult of solution. Craving for power is not a vice of the body, consequently knows none of the limitations imposed by a tired or satiated physiology upon gluttony, intemperance and lust. Growing with each successive satisfaction, the appetite for power can manifest itself indefinitely.... Moreover, the nature of society is such that the higher a man climbs in the political, economic or religious hierarchy, the greater are the opportunities and resources for exercising power.<sup>177</sup>

The recursive nature of logical thought mimics, or is identical with, this part of human behavior. The relation of the Good itself to rational knowledge is the agonistic answer the lecture bequeaths us. The problem has never yet gone away. Old answers, such as theodicy, and new answers, such as evolutionary biology or neuroscience, and dissents of all kinds flourish because the problem is the core of normative ethics.

On this basis I argue that Plato's thought did undergo a substantial change after his middle period. This is heavily controverted. As a change in Plato's ontology, I think Kenneth Sayre's solution is about the best.<sup>178</sup> But I do not think the issue, or the result, for Plato was primarily ontological. The lecture on the Good helps to show this, because the purely ontological approach to Aristoxenus's anecdote does not help us to understand its peculiar rhetorical circumstances. This historical fact in Plato's development remains unclear under the ontological approach, because the line of thought Plato, and anyone else, must honestly follow is moral rather than metaphysical. On the other hand, looking at this in the framework of moral psychology, as many Anglo-American scholars of the past half-century have done, leaves us with no normative ethical theory, though this was clearly one of Plato's

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<sup>177</sup>Huxley p. 121

<sup>178</sup>Sayre (1983) pp. 168-186.

purposes in doing philosophy. Looking at this in the aporetic framework of dialogue avoids the historical circumstances, both material and intellectual.

These considerations put the form and doctrine of the lost lecture in a quite full new light. Plato turned to the relations of moral agents to one another, communication among whom exemplifies the teaching of virtue, the founding notion of his philosophical experience. He observes their communication about ontology in order to clarify and modify his ontology. As I have tried to show, communication is a more substantive issue than that given us by regarding aporias as ends in themselves. Plato's concern with teaching is in part a concern with history, something one rarely associates with him. Teaching virtue requires more than a succession of moments in time.<sup>179</sup> On Platonic metaphysics it requires, at least notionally, something out of time, since time but feebly exists. It requires, Plato's Socrates tells us, something of our innermost selves, as when he says in the *Philebus*, that when a person thinks by herself (toũto taũtòn pròs autòn) about something hard for a long time (dianooúmenos...pleíō chrónon)<sup>180</sup> his soul "is like a book":

Memory unites with the senses, and they and the feelings which are connected with them seem to me almost to write words in our souls; and when the feeling in question writes the truth, true opinions and true statements are produced in us; but when the writer within us (hēmîn gráphein) writes falsehoods, the resulting opinions and statements are the opposite of true.<sup>181</sup>

The *Philebus* is devoted to explaining this process of normative ethics.

#### K. The *Philebus*.

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<sup>179</sup>McCabe in Reis, ed., pp. 77, 89, 97.

<sup>180</sup>*Philebus* 38e7-8.

<sup>181</sup>*Philebus* 39a1-5.

Plato's lecture has long been associated with Philebus. They probably were roughly contemporary, and they both concern the Good itself. Both are devoted to the moral enterprise called the examined life, understood as a search for understanding the Good itself and also as a way to conduct correct moral deliberation and choice. And both are peculiar episodes of communication about ideas. Apart from the historical connection of the two works, when I say they are thematically connected I am already presumptuous in my claims. Work on Philebus in the last century or so, and particularly in the 1970's and after, has selected one or the other of two ways of reading the dialogue as its chief focus: either as a specimen of Platonic ontology, whether or not regarded as innovation or continuation of the author's earlier work; or as an essay in moral psychology.<sup>182</sup> Many scholars pay some attention to the approach other than the one they have chosen as their principal interest, even if only to wave at it.<sup>183</sup> Others fully deny any "so-called ontology" in the dialogue or regard the dialogue as concerning itself exclusively with logic and ontology, the moral bit being mere example or even unintelligible. One believes that the work is an incoherent pastiche of distinct dialogues on ethics and on ontology.<sup>184</sup> Another claims it is a re-write of Republic 9.<sup>185</sup> With its spectrum of suggestive topics and its leopard-spot patches of difficult argument, it is provoking a literature growing slowly but steadily enormous. The longest modern commentary on Philebus was published

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<sup>182</sup>The account of the ontology in Philebus that makes the most sense to me is Sayre (1983) and therefore I adopt it as my background frame in this paper on these issues in Philebus. The account of moral psychology in Philebus that makes the most sense to me is Frede (1985) and therefore I adopt it as my background frame in this paper on this aspect of Philebus. I am persuaded by her view that the falseness of false pleasure is explained by the temporality of anticipation and disappointment.

<sup>183</sup>For example, Benitez (1989) p. 129. Hampton (1999) claims to integrate equally the two aspects. Harvey (2009) views the dialogue as medical advice.

<sup>184</sup>Dancy (2007).

<sup>185</sup>Murphy (1938).

in 2006.<sup>186</sup> Just last year (2011), an annual international Plato conference was organized around *Philebus* and published scores of papers. One of the authors said, “We are dissecting this dialogue with more precision than has ever occurred before in the history of scholarship.”<sup>187</sup>

However that may be, *Philebus* has had a very distinguished lineage of commentators.<sup>188</sup> My own approach is inspired by Marsilio Ficino, who also attempted to re-construct Plato’s lecture “On the Good.” His attempt is lost along with the last part of his commentary on *Philebus*, in which it was included. Ficino saw these two work as Plato’s capital attempt to understand the Good itself as both ontology and morality.<sup>189</sup> Ficino again and again drives his commentary down toward the tap-root at their common core, each time falling short of perfect precise conspectus—by just a little distance, but in another sense by quite a lot. I propose that the way to understand *Philebus* is to do what Ficino aimed to do but to do it by regarding the dialogue as an inquiry into normative ethics. This means regarding its claims as neither primarily ontological nor psychological but to put them on a basis separate from both. Normative ethical theory is independent of both as well, but the relationships are complex. *Philebus* helps us to see this issue better than much of our contemporary ethics does. However, some of the concepts from modern ethical theory are useful here; and in my opinion the whole solution, far beyond the scope of this inquiry, lies in bringing into moral thought a great many parts of modern philosophical anthropology, or notions of the human and of the person that philosophical ethics generally neglects.

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<sup>186</sup>Delcominette (2006), followed in bulk by Migliori (1993).

<sup>187</sup>David T Runia, “Didactic Enumeration in *Philebus* and Other Writings,” in Dillon & Brisson, eds., p. 104.

<sup>188</sup>Including Galen and Lutosławski. See Hampton (1990) pp, 4, 10, 14.

<sup>189</sup>Allen (1977).



Reading Philebus as normative ethical philosophy produces, as I show below, some very heterodox readings, for example, as to dialectic. My reading here, also, will not attempt to handle, much less thoroughly handle, all the many intricate problems Plato devises in Philebus. My presentation is shaped by the lecture, which is the final object of this inquiry. In a sense, I read Philebus as if we knew the lecture well enough to use it to explain Philebus, and I read Philebus as definitively as necessary in order to help illuminate the lecture. Lacking a limb, one alternates which crutch to stretch; building a raft at sea, one grabs on to each floating bit while linking the next one to the others.

This presumes an a non-aporetic approach to Philebus. It is, as Lloyd Gerson says, the most non-aporetic of dialogues.<sup>190</sup> Only the lecture itself among Plato's works is less aporetic (setting aside the Letters). But I do not mean to exclude everything that the aporetic approach offers in interpreting Plato as a whole. Philebus is also Plato's most extensive work on the soul. Plato applies a doctrinal approach to the difficult matter of bridging psychology and ontology, reality and truth. This was in a day's work for Plato. But for us these facts indicate a topic of supreme importance, stated with conclusions, in a manner specially thought through. Plato's aim always was to argue that the life worth living is the good life, and that this come from rational deliberation and self-examination. The lecture and Philebus are an effort to build a true normative ethics, not descriptive yet independent of ontology, to which he turned prompted by the necessities of his ontology and for which he was slowly devising a special form of discourse.

Plato's topical concern from the start of the Philebus is the unity of the Good.<sup>191</sup> By this I mean that he sees our thoughts and pleasures lead us in different

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<sup>190</sup>Gerson in Brisson & Gill, eds.. Cf. J.-F. Pradeau's essay in the same volume.

<sup>191</sup>Hackforth (1958) p. 12.

directions, so that if there exists something that reconciles any and all such conflicts it must be something that does not have conflict; and, it is morally necessary to explain and to understand its occurrent unconflictedness. Plato also says that this principle is also incapable of conflict, but this ontological claim is subsidiary to the main direction of the dialogue. Even if nothing of this principle other than its having no conflict is intelligible to us, we, by knowing only that this predicate is true of the principle, will be in possession of the necessary explanatory principle of normative ethics. Our possession would be partial, necessary for moral judgment, sufficient only to serve this necessity by impressing it upon us, necessary for our limited powers of moral judgment, and insufficient to the full cosmic presence of the explanatory principle, the Good itself.

This is quite clear in the terms of the discussion Socrates establishes with Protarchus in the first exchanges between them, save for the appearance of the interlocutor Philebus. Socrates says that Protarchus and he will discover what inner structure and line of development (*éxin psuchēs kai diáthesin*) of the soul leads to happiness<sup>192</sup> from among the many opinions we have from time to time about what makes us happy.<sup>193</sup> That the discussion begins with Philebus's recommendation of hedonism is a clue to the normative basic character of Plato's search. Philebus himself quickly withdraws as a debater, though he remains as an exemplar and in another way that we shall see later.<sup>194</sup> Hedonism is on the menu because it is the principle by which most people act.<sup>195</sup> It is therefore useful not only as common intuition but also because it is used by all sides in partialist moral conflicts. In fact, people take it as an intelligible, functioning resolver of moral conflict. But it is

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<sup>192</sup>Philebus 11d4.

<sup>193</sup>Philebus 11b4-c1.

<sup>194</sup>In Chapter 3.M.

<sup>195</sup>Philebus 14c.

completely congruent to the conflicts it is supposed to hide. Nonetheless, people take it as doing what a truly unified Form of the Good can do. That the dialogue is not fundamentally a piece of metaphysics is clearly established when they agree to look for what makes a happy life possible (*dunaménēn...paréxein*) for all persons. Nor is the discussion Socrates begins principally a matter of moral psychology. By divinizing “pleasure” as “Aphrodite,” Plato very quickly turns from hedonic doctrine as the explanatory key to moral conflict. Socrates says that the name Pleasure is a name that pleases Aphrodite but that her pleasure in a name, and all the gods’, is “beyond the greatest human fear.”<sup>196</sup>

After mocking simplistic relativism,<sup>197</sup> Socrates states the problem of the unity of the Good:

Now what is the identical element which exists in the good and bad pleasures alike and makes you call them all a good?<sup>198</sup>

In the matter of pleasures the quality of unlikeness (*anomoious*) does not suffice to negate every possibility of identity.<sup>199</sup> If unlikeness were a sufficient criterion for explaining pleasure, its principle would apply to knowledge in such a way that *ho lógos* will be lost. Under the synoptic claim we should then have no way to the Good and will have lost it even were we to have the truth.<sup>200</sup> Note that this is the concern Plato expresses in the passage from *Politicus* cited at the head of this chapter, itself a notable echo of *Sophist*. In *Philebus* he is less concerned about scepticism than he elsewhere is, but pleasure presents such a challenge on both fronts to the synoptic principle that Socrates calls the inquiry a fight (*summacheîn*) for “the most truthful”

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<sup>196</sup>Philebus 12c1-3.

<sup>197</sup>Philebus 12e3-a4.

<sup>198</sup>Philebus 13b3-5.

<sup>199</sup>Philebus 13c3.

<sup>200</sup>Philebus 14a1-5.

(alēthestátōi).<sup>201</sup> Victory in this fight is not confined to moral psychology, which Protarchus and Socrates agree can never overcome particularity;<sup>202</sup> on the contrary, victory will be universal, at least on the human level. Socrates twice says we must not overlook the fact that the good to be grasped is the good for all men.<sup>203</sup> In the first reference it is connected to the even higher-level idea of power of possibility. He uses the same verb in both passages (paréxo), signifying success in the first case and adversity in the latter.

In the next passage Socrates specifies the questions about unity that he is going to ask, giving the example, whether the good is one.<sup>204</sup> His general statement of the questions is one of the most heavily controverted sections of this dialogue.<sup>205</sup> Whether the questions are one, or two, or three in number, they all have the same character: they are questions of ontology triggered by discussing pleasure. Furthermore, Socrates takes firm hold of the subject, refusing to allow it to yield either no result or overdetermined results, or indeed any form of “freshman” skepticism or moral nihilism. Once again, deliberation on the synoptic principle is sharply distinguished from recursive thinking. Plato’s description of recursion in human thought is brilliant, perhaps the earliest and still one of the best comments on the matter.

Socrates: We say that the one and the many are identified by reason, and always, both now and in the past, circulate everywhere in every thought that is uttered. This is no new thing and will never cease; it is, in my opinion, a

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<sup>201</sup>Philebus 14b7.

<sup>202</sup>Philebus 14a6-9.

<sup>203</sup>Philebus 14c7-10; cf. 11d4-6.

<sup>204</sup>Philebus 15a5-6.

<sup>205</sup>Philebus 15b1-8. Hahn (1978) pp. 159ff. has a good overview of opinions to date. Mirhady (1992) thinks the passage is a joke by Plato.

quality within us which will never die or grow old, and which belongs to reason itself as such.<sup>206</sup>

For before he leads to the series of attempts to substitute a better way, Socrates describes it as a “deathless” (athánaton) inquiry that traps us into moral immaturity. Its consequence is not merely to trap logic but also block moral understanding. If our inquiry into truth were not to lead to the Good, it would end in trackless (apasías) aporias rather than to our answering to our first duty by reasoning through euporias.<sup>207</sup>

Having dismissed the more facile challenges to the project of knowing an unconflicting explanatory principle of normative ethics, Socrates undertakes to explain a method that might work, generally referred to in the literature as “the Heavenly Method.” It takes some trouble to note that Socrates is not fully committed to it when he introduces it.<sup>208</sup> He points out that it doesn’t necessarily work, but the bigger clue lies in the fact that Socrates introduces it by a fable as a gift from Prometheus. Finally, his claim for it is not that it will give the affirmative truth, but that it will inhibit binary and categorical thinking, surely as inappropriate to understanding pleasure as to anything. Its value is prophylactic rather than constructive.<sup>209</sup> It prevents one from becoming non-rational and unfocussed (ouk ellógimon oud’ enáarithmon) in the search for truth.<sup>210</sup> And right here Socrates tries the method again, but ends up in anxiety (elleípetai) because the answer is nearby but ungrasped,<sup>211</sup> posing anew the basic question about unity. Their bafflement is

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<sup>206</sup>Philebus 15d4-16a3.

<sup>207</sup>Philebus 15c1-3.

<sup>208</sup>Philebus 16bff.

<sup>209</sup>Philebus 17a1-5.

<sup>210</sup>Philebus 17e4-5.

<sup>211</sup>Philebus 18d5.

important not because it concerns number or because it concerns just any sort of thing but because it concerns unitary understanding of the Good itself comprising both wisdom, as the one, and pleasures, as the many.<sup>212</sup> By now Protarchus recognizes the pattern of recursion.<sup>213</sup>

This bafflement suggests the limits of dialectic, at least as hitherto defined here.<sup>214</sup> Socrates first states this concept in an indirect manner, by referring to another kind of knowledge, something like memory but more deeply-rooted, leading to knowledge of a “third thing,” the most complete, the most sufficient Good (tagathón).<sup>215</sup> The Good itself is included in a great many things, and yet it differs from each of these things, for they are contingent and the Good itself is not.<sup>216</sup> Socrates then tries the method of division again, and again it leads to infinite divisibility rather than to unity.<sup>217</sup> Collection and classification produce true knowledge of the kind Plato will here associate with the Forms, but they do not give us knowledge of a particular sort of unity.<sup>218</sup> For Plato, the question of unity is not the same for just every kind of thing. Pleasure and pain, or desire, explains partiality into moral life, making contrary things both seem to be good or just. Pleasures and pains are unlimited in number, unlimitedly analyzable into moments of feeling, or sensation, and unlimited in conflict with one another because they form a dialectical system. Furthermore, pleasures and pains are not like every other kind of thought, or feeling, or sensation, or experience that people have. Instead, they are the

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<sup>212</sup>Philebus 18e6.

<sup>213</sup>Philebus 19a3-5.

<sup>214</sup>Philebus 19a-20a.

<sup>215</sup>Philebus 20d4.

<sup>216</sup>Philebus 20d-e.

<sup>217</sup>Philebus 24b4-5.

<sup>218</sup>Philebus 25a, 25e.

considerations that chiefly motivate most people most of the time. The unity of numbers is important not because numbers are important but because unity is important and unity is clearly seen in numbers. Unity itself is important for the sake of one singular thing, not just any of the things that are or any of the things that number applies to. Each special good has the Good itself cooperating with it (apergasménōn).<sup>219</sup> The deepest analytic knowledge does not suffice, and experience also informs us of the infinite complexity of things when looked at as particular pleasures, no matter how keen we feel or study them. Socrates says this is a way of hiding, or “sealing away” (episphagisthénta), moral truth, at the same time that it stamps shape & accuracy onto our observations like a dysfunction defensive adaptation of the psyche.<sup>220</sup> To this disappointment of hopes Socrates himself raised, Protarchus is open-mouthed in amazement: o thaumásie!

Although it is a vast domain with many allegiances, pleasure is not the chief object of Socrates’ analyses in the bulk of the dialogue. It is a mistake, I think, to regard the dialogue as “Plato’s examination of pleasure,”<sup>221</sup> although Plato does extensively examine pleasure in the bulk of the dialogue. Each phase of the examinations stress-tests the method of dialectic Plato advocated in earlier works. Each phase adds tension by adding another failed version of the division-and-collection forms of dialectic. But to understand Philebus is to see it as an inquiry into normative ethics. In so far as this is true of Philebus, it follows that pleasure is a stand-in for something else. It is chosen because of its popularity, but this indicates Plato’s interest not in pleasure itself but in the normative ethics. Pleasure is a representative of the ontological category of the Many. It is deputed, as it were, by ontology to normative ethics. One might also that it is deputed from moral

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<sup>219</sup>Philebus 26d9.

<sup>220</sup>Philebus 26d1.

<sup>221</sup>Hackforth. See also Riel (2000) pp. 7-8 and Hampton (1999) p. 69.

psychology in the same direction, but it raises singular trouble for any normative ground. In terms of Plato's middle, or "standard" ontology, it is a many that so deeply grips human understanding that one finds one cannot follow truth to the Good itself because pleasure and pain and desire in general are involved.<sup>222</sup> The synoptic principle founders on these matters. It founders as well on an ontological issue, as I will show. But it founders in general because nothing is more important than the Good itself.<sup>223</sup> No knowledge can be wisdom without it, nor will any life be good, nor any action just.

#### L. The Philebus, continued.

Socrates maintains, here and elsewhere, that no one does wicked acts without having at least partial knowledge of what is good and intending to act for the good according to the degree of knowledge the agent has. If this was charity on the part of the historical Socrates, it was the consequence of a profound metaphysical orientation on Plato's part. Feelings, like pleasure and pain, can be false, just as thoughts and opinions can be. As to pain the possibility of error is, speaking generally, a good thing, since most people in pain would be glad to be rid of the pain or to feel better by an open-minded liberation from prejudgment of an experience—as for example when in one's view sexual pain turns into sexual pleasure; or when we take the long view of a painful experience that has a pleasurable outcome we commonly minimize or dismiss the pain we had felt. False pleasure, on the other hand, is a clear danger. The sensation of pleasure is not misprized, but when the understanding of the experience

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<sup>222</sup>Donald Davidson (1979) suggests that Plato's Good itself has "weak causality" but "strong potency" (p. 262) and that this peculiar ontology is based on the Good's "permanence of some sort" (pp. 412-413)—showing that in his view of the logical weakness of the dialogue he caught something of the mystery to which it points.

<sup>223</sup>Hampton p. 83.



in its full truth is misprized we call the pleasure a false one. When we act wickedly, we nonetheless have or can have possession of some portion of the truth that, clearing our head, will show us the good. If we were to credit a false pleasure as pleasure, the fact that it is false means that the truth ceased to be a conductor to goodness. But Being has not failed in its permanent, indefeasible comprehension of the Good.<sup>224</sup>

In such reflections as these one may find the first stirring of a Platonic claim to the inherent goodness of perfected being for all things. Some see this as the doctrine of the *Philebus*. It became the powerful constitutive tenet of Stoic normative ethics. It has returned in our day as “naturalized ethics,” in which Nietzsche’s rejection of the historically conditioned conscience is employed in stronger or weaker forms. An example of the latter is Bernard Williams’ urging us, at the pinnacle of his ethical system, not to have “one thought too many.” But Plato is far more cautious. He’s not about to break the synoptic explanation and leave truth, in the form of thought, in opposition to unself-conscious being. Again and again in the *Philebus*, Socrates with great certainty puts on show a faculty of deliberation capable of reflecting on all action in terms of truth. He never disconnects Being from reflective truth. And he always defines this thoughtful way of getting at the truth as leading to knowledge of the Good. He refers to the saying of the old wise men, “that mind always rules the universe,”<sup>225</sup> and proclaims “the presence of another workman (demiourgos) in our souls<sup>226</sup> like the “inward writer” of *The Republic*.

The self-examining mind holds our capacity to distinguish true pleasure, which, being true being, conducts us to the good. This is one of the reasons Socrates criticizes “the enemies of *Philebus*,” the *duschéreis*, who were puritanical sourpusses. By recognizing no pleasure as good, they were not so much playing the part of neo-

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<sup>224</sup>False pleasure is also discussed in *Gorgias* 499-500 and *Republic* 9.584-585.

<sup>225</sup>*Philebus* 30d.

<sup>226</sup>*Philebus* 39b3.

Platonic ascetics as they were, within the Academy, denying the fullest powers of mind in analyzing the complexity of experience. Even pain admits of limit, and therefore there must be true and good pleasures.

Plato's goal in moderating false claims on behalf of mind (or intellect) as against pleasure (or will) is not only to establish the meliorism with which the dialogue ends.<sup>227</sup> Here again he follows the Socrates of the early Dialogues but with a more comprehensive aim. Socrates used to ask everyone who responded to his questions to say what he really and truly thought about the matter. In the *Philebus* he asks persons to pursue inquiries with the utmost rigorous honesty, contenting themselves with no snap judgments, prejudices, shortcuts, or sweeping universal claims. He asks Protarchus to examine with him

...that faculty of our souls, if such there be, which by its nature loves the truth and does all things for the sake of the truth and say whether it is most likely to possess mind and intelligence in the greatest purity, or we must look for some other faculty which has more valid claims.<sup>228</sup>

The decision is in favor of deliberation with our innermost selves, where complete honesty is recognized as purity:

The nature of the good differs from all else in...that whatever living being possesses the good always, altogether, and in all ways, has no need of anything but is perfectly sufficient.<sup>229</sup>

Plato is speaking of living beings (*zōōi*) and at several points contemplates good judgment in terms of health, taking this as both organic and psychic.<sup>230</sup> He concludes, by the end of the dialogue, that we are all “wine-pourers”—i.e., those who mix water

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<sup>227</sup>Philebus 64- 65.

<sup>228</sup>Philebus 58d3-8.

<sup>229</sup>Philebus 60b10-c4.

<sup>230</sup>Hackforth (1958) p. 41.

and wine to the taste of drinkers and for the success of the drinking-party<sup>231</sup>—trying to mix pleasure and intellect in the way that leads to the good, because if a mix of the two is good then it has the Good itself in it. Good is present in the goodness, or right measure of the mix. This is part of the normative ethical theory of the *Philebus*, and it corresponds well to our Aristotelian notions of how personhood and well-being, or virtue, were conceived among the Athenian Greek philosophers. But Plato, when he criticized the hedonists for not recognizing false pleasures and the *duschéreis* for not recognizing true pleasures, and made deliberative moral agency the judge of goodness rather than of anything lesser, was up to a deeper game.<sup>232</sup>

Socrates cracked open the issue of false pleasures by insisting on one particular point: that sensations, and life itself, take place in time. He makes this point in several ways, pointing forcefully to the roles that anticipation and hope play in making something feel pleasurable. Furthermore, every impression is given duration (*boulómetha kaleîn tēn aísthēsin*),<sup>233</sup> which in turn depends on recollection.<sup>234</sup> The faculty of recollection works on the synoptic principle in a high degree, by cutting back through time to greater truth about the Good itself. Plato's reliance on it demonstrates a tension between diachronesis and the Good itself, because we seem to have to struggle with a special vast quantity, or strange dimension, of what is true, Being, both accumulating it and fighting through it in order to apprehend the Good.

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<sup>231</sup>James Davidson (2011) pp. 36-72.

<sup>232</sup>Bobonich pp. 163-179 (2002). Irwin (1995), pp. 324-326, says that Plato closely connected taxonomic and normative "limits," where I see them as quite separate. He finds, as a result, that Plato should have committed himself to virtue ethics (pp. 334-335) but did not. If this is the case, then why would Plato have adequated taxonomic and normative "limits?" and why did he distinguish between taxonomic activity and the pursuit of goodness and even of truth?

<sup>233</sup>*Philebus* 34a7-8.

<sup>234</sup>*Philebus* 34b.

This requires a discussion of “the nature and origin of desire,”<sup>235</sup> a class of diachronic events requiring memory of the past and anticipation of the future<sup>236</sup> in both its true and false and in its good and bad forms, as the discussion shows. Plato has his speakers hunting for the good amidst opinion (*dóxa*) and temporal objects and events, amidst all that which is the partial and changing, infinitely various and infinitely analyzable.<sup>237</sup> He has turned to the world of genesis and *gignomena*, usually translated as “creation” and “created things,” but which I shall translation as “production.”<sup>238</sup>

The world of production is “what we call the cosmos.”<sup>239</sup> The cosmos is sufficiently caused (or produced) and has therewith its sufficient nourishment (fire) from which each produced thing within it, including organisms, receives its full complement of physical nourishment.<sup>240</sup> Production is a combination of these sufficient bodily elements, derived from universal fire.<sup>241</sup> But these elements though sufficient are parts of non-material elements that are necessary to production. The class of cause (*aitias genos*) is wisdom, mind, or soul that regulate the production.<sup>242</sup> Production therefore requires understanding of the correct amounts of raw materials, which is known to mind (*nous*), and *nous* therefore has cause, or coming-to-be and passing-away, as one of its objects. To account for production Plato enters it into historical time, just as he entered pleasures and pains into mind in order to provide

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<sup>235</sup>Philebus 34d1-3ff.

<sup>236</sup>Philebus 35d1-3.

<sup>237</sup>Eg Philebus 42b. The passage on the ridiculous, tragedy and comedy is 48a-51b.

<sup>238</sup>Beginning in Philebus 26e

<sup>239</sup>Philebus 29e1-3.

<sup>240</sup>Philebus b 29c5-9.

<sup>241</sup>Philebus 29e5-7.

<sup>242</sup>Philebus 30c-d

the knowledge necessary to discern what is true and what is false in them.<sup>243</sup> But they both enter into historical time not as into that which is unstable and transitory, but as that in which they find some measure of permanent truth. Memory fights through time to recollection; production fights through causality to completeness; both subjects of struggle point by their imperfection and dimness to a source perfect and illuminated in full. Pleasure is far away from this source because it can never be fully grasped due to its infinite relativity.<sup>244</sup> Mind is closer to cause—Socrates says it is congenital (*suggenēs*) with cause<sup>245</sup>—and has a creative function. Production is therefore linked with the Forms, of which mind can gain true knowledge and which mind is very much like. This view of things is said to claim that the Forms have a sensible nature, at least in part; and surely it does describes the participation of produced things with their Forms, in so far as they have rational structure and content.

As I said above, in terms of the study of Plato's later ontology, my exposition of dialectic, pleasure, production, and cause in the *Philebus* supports a version of the “developmentalist” view centered on his normative ethics. The suggestion that Plato took his theory in the direction sought by the neo-Platonists, and attributed to Plato by the esotericists, does not exhaust Plato's attempts to enrich his ontology. This may have been one of his attempts, but he seems to have tried a number of directions, seeking not so much to solve problems conceived along logical lines or on the model of hierarchical spatial relations, as instead to deepen and enrich the understanding of reality of which the theory of Forms is capable. In the manner of Socrates, Plato did not establish precise definitions of terms as the goal of philosophical enquiry, and this manner became a more pronounced and prominent feature of his later work. On the

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<sup>243</sup>Hackforth p. 57.

<sup>244</sup>Wersinger in Dillon and Bresson, eds.

<sup>245</sup>*Philebus* 31a8.

other hand, his notions of the maieutic and protreptic purposes of philosophy did not require the dogmatically non-dogmatic approach required by theories of aporetic reading. By thinking through one or more notions of immanence for the Forms, Plato seems to have sought to lose as little true doctrine about reality and to have retained as much awe and wonder and humility as possible. He sought at least an equal exchange, as Sayre suggests, in trading away the separation of being from becoming, eliminating redundant and inutile concepts, for a better account of non-material forces. He sought, I think, more than we now can distinctly conceive, and this like many of those who followed him in Occidental philosophy tries to reach past the edge at which reason is unwound by recursion.<sup>246</sup>

The Philebus is a specific way of doing this. One may work this out as a matter of ontology, by way of immanence; or as a matter of moral psychology, by way of a “compromise” Plato makes with our mundane natures by conceiving of the “mixed way,” in which more of our psychic faculties are exercised in understanding the universe, and living well in it, than our analytic and taxonomic skills use; and more also than the thoroughgoingly abstract manipulation of pure and universal concepts such as numbers does. He did these things in Philebus, but he did something more too. This is the creation of a theory of normative ethics.

The means by which he accomplished this is the concept of the limited (*péras*) and the unlimited (*ápeiron*)—one of the oldest ideas in Greek thought and the philosophical heart of the Philebus.<sup>247</sup> Under this scheme, the unlimited is the many: that which can be infinitely subdivided and which is related to each of the infinitely many other unlimited things in so many ways that its reality is never stable, bounded, and shaped. The limited is the one: the principle of unity by which each thing has

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<sup>246</sup>Cf. Damscius (1959) p. 77, sec. 36-8 on Philebus 20c8-d10, who says that in Plato perfection superimposes itself on completeness.

<sup>247</sup>Hackforth pp. 9, 103.

such stability and truth as it has. Taken together as an explanatory principle, the limited and the unlimited are today called, as they were called in neo-Platonism, the Indefinite Dyad. Material reality is compounded of variable properties, such as magnitude, and a principle of unity. The action of unity is not unlike that of the principle of sufficient reason developed by philosophers two millennia later, in which everything makes just enough sense to be what it is by being what is and not a bit more sense than must be accounted for by its existence. There remains an extensive controversy, with intense philosophical as well as philological and historical dimensions, as to the origin, use, and final meaning of the Indefinite Dyad.<sup>248</sup>

But if the question is not a detached matter of physics or ontology but is instead why we ought to leads examined lives, then expounding the ground of what we now call normative ethics was the chief among Plato's purposes in the *Philebus*. For this purpose, I suggest that we regard *peras*, the limited, as moral partiality and *ápeiron*, the unlimited, as moral impartiality. In this case, the many goods that are the phenomena of moral life, including the good of the existence and survival of each living thing, and the conflicts among them, which also in the end demand the question of existence for each living thing, are put into a definite and intelligible connection to the one good that moral agents strive to understand, however feebly and failingly, in moral choice. But even these notions, drawn from the vocabulary of im/partialism that I borrow from modern normative theory, are inadequate. They are constructed so as to cage the dialectical relationship between the two poles and also within physical reality. For Plato in *Philebus*, however, the one good, or the Good itself, is immanent in the sense that it is apprehensible and that we may, with a great many zig-zags and compromises, realize in our actions, but in its entirety it is beyond our reach.

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<sup>248</sup>See Hampton (1990) p. 100.

Modern normative theory came into being in part in response to the objection that referring the solution of any binary conflict to a concept is in reality substituting a word for a thing, creating thereby a third thing, or the Third Man. Socrates does in fact refer to the “third thing we talk about” in this dialogue. But Plato asks us today to think about the Good itself not as a matter of ontology nor as a matter of psychology.

Why should we not consider it a matter of materially variant moral psychology? Apart from the fact that it is by no means clear that the variations of human psychology prove that nothing other than empirically verifiable activity exists in or along with the brain and the social mind, I shall answer on behalf of the Platonic concept in *Philebus* that its analysis of pleasure includes all forms of motivations and desires in the partial, unlimited, and many.<sup>249</sup> As a result, the one Good itself (or Form of the Good) is a “Third Man” only in the sense that it is the real ground for moral reasoning and for apprehension of goodness. The Third Man is no danger in itself; the danger is in the infinite regress. In terms of the Indefinite Dyad there is no further vicious conceptual regression or recursion of thought.<sup>250</sup>

Why should we buck the pull of the long history of ontology and think of ethical normativity as not requiring from ontology some kind of limiting ground on a basis of causal necessity but some ground if and only if that ground furthers our grasp of the Good itself? Socrates’s specific claim here is that because we cannot fully grasp the Good itself, but only hunt for it, we have not established any regress. The concept of the Good itself is not itself regressive but immanent, and nothing in the Third Man argument will apply if a Third Man is not in fact fully developed. Beneath this lies the claim that in the long run goodness is more important than precision or

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<sup>249</sup>*Philebus* 47d, 48c.

<sup>250</sup>Cf. Hackforth (1958) p. 123 and Merlan (1960) p. 165.



clarity, or even that the Good itself is a kind of truth more important than those kinds of truth on which our busy recursive minds fix our gaze. Ontologists can knock themselves out trying to pin the Good itself into precise and clear terms. Empirical scientists can too, as they regularly do today in their disastrous attempts to naturalize goodness or justice. In the end the purpose and measure of philosophy is the good for all living things.

Some will regard this as an unacceptably lax stretching of the conceptual bonds of this dialogue. But reference to moral good is something philosophers of all kinds do every day: the deep concern for morality, for what helps or hurts, for suffering and for justice, lodges fast below the surface of all work in logic, however mathematical or scientific its topic, as well as beneath most all human endeavor, just as Socrates and Aristotle pointed out. From his first accounts of the words and deeds of Socrates, through the mighty edifice of *The Republic*, Plato inquired as to why we should be good and how to explain this to the others of our communities present and future. This is the point of his discussions of cosmology and ontology, physics and psychology and anthropology. All of these are among the many topics Socrates and Protarchus tack through, to and fro in *Philebus*, which is a supreme display of Plato's glissando from the furthest to the nearest objects of human reflection. To focus this inquiry on the mixture that is life—its tragedy and comedy, as Socrates says, its mix of higher and lower, and of pleasure and thought in every degree—is to improve the search, broadening and freeing it. At least, Plato thinks so, though this can be hard for others to understand in his day and ours. Plato does not hesitate to have Socrates distinguish a higher, more indefinite but more profound kind of understanding on every topic from lesser though lucid and truthful understandings of every topic. He further distinguishes them as knowledge for production (*demiourgos*) and as

education (paideia) and “to nourish” (trophēn),<sup>251</sup> or, again as the “arithmetic” of the many and of the philosophers.<sup>252</sup> The basis of this is distinction in two kinds of being or two parts of existence.<sup>253</sup> But the end of is a kind of learning that always accepting its limits never ceases to seek to know what is good in itself and what is not. This is not vicious regression. It is the search for what is important and lasting among what has past and exists within our own limits. The good is to be found and taught in these things, but it is no contradiction when Plato says that in addition

...whatever living being possesses the good always and altogether and in all ways, has no further need of anything, but is perfectly sufficient.<sup>254</sup>

The language early in the dialogues refers often to connecting and gathering, but the language at the end refers instead to seeking amidst the jumble (en tōi miktōi) of life.<sup>255</sup> Socrates also calls this the “vestibule in the dwelling-place of the Good.”<sup>256</sup> He concludes by describing the hunt for the Good (thēreûsai).<sup>257</sup>

#### M. Indirect Communication.

Philebus begins as if it were a turn in a conversation that had been going on for some time between Socrates and the young man Philebus. Philebus has been holding that the good is pleasure and pleasure the only good. Quickly, he turns the defense of his belief over to Protarchus, who is, as we later find out, the son of the man at whose house Socrates’s epic debate over pleasure and virtue took

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<sup>251</sup>Philebus 55d2-3.

<sup>252</sup>Philebus 56d4-6.

<sup>253</sup>Philebus 54a c-d.

<sup>254</sup>Philebus 60c2-4.

<sup>255</sup>Philebus 61b6-7.

<sup>256</sup>Philebus 64c1-3.

<sup>257</sup>Philebus 65a1.

place—Callias, richest man in Athens for a spell, who hosted the Protagoras. From this moment on Philebus interjects comments only eight times, the last coming before the first quarter of the dialogue has ended. We may hear his speech as joshing or as overtly angry, but one can have little question that Socrates and he have a friendship conflicted by distrust and desire. “Philebus” means “loverboy”; no one in Greece was named Philebus, to the best of our knowledge, and only one other character in Greek literature has this name.<sup>258</sup> The character here is one of the young men who, Xenophon tells us, Socrates patiently and kindly persisted in debating when he felt them to be sincere and intelligent.<sup>259</sup> Protarchus takes on a good deal of dimension as a result of Philebus’s recession and is a strong partner to Socrates, while remaining Philebus’s friend to the end.

Philebus has been taken to be weak or stupid or bored by the debate, to be distracted, self-involved or insignificant, and as being the clue that the dialogue is wholly concerned with pleasure and disinterested in metaphysics. Though some of these attributes attach to his personality, Philebus’s primary role in the dialogue is not that of standing for any of these things. He is in fact Socrates’s audience and the object of his persuasion. In the narrative of the dialogue, he acts as a kind of preface: something outside of the text that, by its presence, seem to deny the need for the discourse that follows it.<sup>260</sup> He tries to negate Socrates’s arguments by withdrawing from the discussion. His chief claim is from silence, that Socrates’s entire discussion is illegitimate. At first, he does seem to think that making intellectual complications is annoying and irrelevant to his life, a far more astringent chore than a gorgeous, smart, willing and rich young man cares to be bothered with. At this early point, he

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<sup>258</sup>In Apuleius’s *Metamorphoses* 9.10 the other Philebus is a busy member of a love triangle.

<sup>259</sup>*Memorabilia* 4.6.1.

<sup>260</sup>This notion of the preface is Genette’s (1997) pp. 161ff., though he develops from modern texts because the preface did not fully emerge until the nineteenth century.

is the exemplar of the problem for hedonists, that defending hedonism is an activity contrary to the claims of hedonism. As others have pointed out, Plato's narrative assertion of Philebus's position is the first instance of this criticism of hedonism.

Philebus does not completely disappear. The dissident character also argues for hedonism by inflaming his relationship with Socrates. He seems to want to make sure Socrates gets no fun or satisfaction out of the discussion and perhaps also out of the hours spent with Protarchus. To Protarchus he is at once dismissive and attentive. He's a tease. His movements show envious desire, expressed in deniable aggression against both Socrates and his friend, jabbing in two places with each swipe. Philebus in this sense dominates the dialogue. He is a ghost, but he is also a fencer just out of sight on the wing of the stage, tautly posed with his weapon, anxious for a moment to strike. He alienates himself from the discussion but then starts to participate<sup>261</sup>; once, he tries to naturalize ethics; then he tries to relativize it.<sup>262</sup> In chief, he rejects Socrates's kind of discourse as hypocritical because everyone, including Socrates wants pleasure, which is everywhere.

Philebus: Yes, they [pleasure and pain] are among those [things]<sup>263</sup> which admit of the more [and less]; for pleasure would not be absolute good if it were not infinite in number and degree.<sup>264</sup>

Much could be said about this argument, but it is followed by an even more curious statement, for Philebus the hedonist says that Socrates's desires—for recognition, authority, power and pleasure—have spun out of control.

Philebus: Oh, Socrates, you exalt your own god.<sup>265</sup>

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<sup>261</sup>Philebus 12b, 18a-e.

<sup>262</sup>Philebus 22c.

<sup>263</sup>Phb

<sup>264</sup>Philebus 27e.

<sup>265</sup>Philebus 28b.

The discourse itself, Philebus claims, is an example of desire, in the guise of logic, aggrandizing itself beyond what we would presume to be Philebus's notion of good measure. Even when he turns his back, he is thinking. Socrates has a good time of it with Protarchus, leading him in a hunt for the Good itself. But his eye is on Philebus, and his hand reaches back for him. Philebus is both a free-thinking universal hedonist and a privileged brat. Plato takes on his criticism of Socratic dialogue and Socrates' complicated, fraught friendship with him, certainly nothing new in the experience of "Socrates," in a new way.

Plato here uses "indirect communication." Gadamer and some others have used this phrase, taken from Kierkegaard, but no one to my knowledge has yet clarified its meaning or thematized it in the development of Plato's style of philosophy. As a general matter, it is one of the blockages and feints that fiction writers used to establish a *mundus fictus*.<sup>266</sup> Although it is found in Kierkegaard's major books, Kierkegaard's only consistent exploration of it (indirect and incomplete, of course) is in his little book entitled *Prefaces of 1844*,<sup>267</sup> his most important year of work. It comprises eight "Prefaces" for books and a journal that never were to be written by the author of the prefaces, Nicholas Notabene. Notabene talks himself out of writing each book in his preface to the planned book. He is a fool but also wise. As a pseudonymous narrator for an ironist, he is both right and wrong in the same words.

A preface is itself concerned with indirection. Notabene wants to be an author, but his wife opposes this aim because she believes he will be a worse husband if he is an author. She, too, is both right and wrong, selfish and wise. From the start her position poses the first condition of indirect communication: an obstacle to the

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<sup>266</sup>Schaeffer pp. 31-40 and 61-81.

<sup>267</sup>Kierkegaard, *Prefaces* (1997).

project of verbal communication itself. This is not simply someone or something that is troubling or hard to persuade. Rather, it raises a profound question about reason itself. Notabene's wife, and his possible readers, and Notabene himself are obtuse and defiant. What then can reason and philosophy do?

...(either) it must surely be an easy matter for philosophy to bring me to wisdom, inasmuch as it is understood that wisdom has in itself an imperative that is superior to the will's defiance.... (or) there is indeed a power superior to knowledge, a power superior to knowledge's imperative.<sup>268</sup>

The author, however good, is no god, and because he is just a human person he cannot think anything about his readers until he has already written.<sup>269</sup> Unless reason is a force that shoves people into conviction, it is powerless against the cranial and spiritual confines of any human person.

...there must continually remain a confinium [boundary] between philosophy and the doctrine in which the rest of us seek refuge, and in this regard philosophy could be of assistance to us, if in no other way than by thrusting away.<sup>270</sup>

This limits any aim to persuade by systematic logic or indeed by any persuasive force. The omnipresent condition of Kierkegaard's authorship is that he rigidly and consistently not trespass on the autonomy of the reader even by means of the force of persuasion; he must instead communicate capability of change rather than conclusions of reason.

Kierkegaard's notion of indirect communication attacks what we commonly call transactional authority: the pressure exerted by one seeking to persuade, based on his or her coercive power over others, whether this is obvious or concealed. His idea

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<sup>268</sup>Ibid., VIII pp. 61-2.

<sup>269</sup>Ibid., VII pp. 42-44.

<sup>270</sup>Ibid., VIII p 65

is akin to broad definitions of violence that come today from such different thinkers as Slavoj Žižek and Simone Weil, or Foucault and Gandhi. “Each person is assigned only to himself,” Kierkegaard says. This is a spiritual principal in some ways contrary to our concern for others. It would not be Plato’s view of the matter. Part of it, though, is a profound concern for the moral autonomy of others. It denotes “direct communication” as the effort to overcome the autonomy of others, however friendly the manner or worthy the goal. The dialogic Socrates of the early and middle dialogues should be seen as a direct communicator under this view. Despite his irony and allusiveness, this Socrates used the elenchus in strenuous contention for the truth from the persons and of other persons. To this extent Professors Kurke and Lincoln are right. Plato’s “hunt” was a battle before it became a hunt. Alexander Nehamas puts it this way:

The difference between Socrates and the people with whom he was often and not so unreasonably confused is ultimately a difference in purpose, in the sort of life he chose to follow. Unfortunately, however, this approach cannot possibly distinguish philosophy, as Plato eventually comes to conceive it, from sophistry. For Plato became convinced that, in contrast to Socrates, he did know what virtue is and undertook to teach it to others: he came to the conclusion that virtue and happiness consist in the life of philosophy itself. But Plato's ambitious and controversial conception of the nature, function and value of philosophy, articulated in detail in the Republic, creates a new problem for him. If philosophers aim to teach the true art of virtue (that is, philosophy itself) then their purpose appears to be at least superficially identical with the purpose of many of the sophists. Plato's magnificent solution to this problem was to press relentlessly the conceptual implications of the term "superficially" and of the whole family of distinctions it brings in

its train.<sup>271</sup>

Unlike these scholars, I suggest that the ambiguity of Socrates's relation to the Sophists is not only a problem Plato set himself to solve, but rather that it was set in a wider graphic philosophical tradition, out of which Plato accumulated the force of insight that produced not only his far-sighted statement of the problems of recursive thinking but his successive essays at solving it, of which the doctrine of the lecture, as I interpret it, is perhaps the last and the strongest. In this case, Plato did not create a defensive masquerade, as these scholars have suggested, but saw straight through to the heart of the problem posed by his early and middle work replacing them with both a doctrine and a format we recognize as the beginning of philosophical ethics.

In his later work Plato sets aside the power of transactional authority and substitutes for it indirect communication.<sup>272</sup> This is both a liberty he gave to his thinking as he turned from the trammels of recursive thought to something more mysterious and is also a gift to his audience. He gives his auditors liberty to reject him when he ignores his direct audience. Instead of arguing it to the last breath, he tells long stories or gives long blocks of disquisition on logic and on laws. At this point he grew less concerned with direct persuasive force. He seems to have "withdrawn," speaking without regard to the obtuseness of the audience, crafting long prose pieces to convey just exactly what he wants to say, whether by far-fetched myths or by ceaseless explanation. I think it is not withdrawal but a way of being braver and more steadfast in the face of an audience containing friends, enemies,

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<sup>271</sup>Nehamas (1990), p. 11.

<sup>272</sup>I leave these conclusions to stand on the lines of though I here pursue, making no reference to or claim with respect to investigations into the chronology of Plato's works. The history of this large area of research is well detailed recently by Charles Kahn, "On Platonic Chronology" in Julia Annas and Christopher Rowe, eds., *New Perspectives on Plato, Ancient and Modern* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), pp. 93-128. See also Tarrant (2000).



family, and lovers. He had been compelled by the intensity of his vision, itself compelled by fear of the collapse of the metaphysics necessary for ethical thought. It would be strange to deny that this did not dawn on him at least as impressively as a problem in ontology. In *Philebus*, Socrates now leaves *Philebus* alone, barely taking his bait. Socrates indirectly communicates to him. And thus, when Plato lectured, as he did on the Good itself in Piraeus, his “withdrawn” quality was not forgetfulness, or unmindfulness, but the drive to put critical ideas squarely before his listeners.

#### N. Conclusion

Currently the most common account of Plato’s later ethics is that given by the movement in virtue ethics, a neo-Stoic point of view. Under this point of view, the Form of the Good was devised to fill a logical function in *The Republic*, fitting, as it were, an hydraulic or mechanical necessity required for the efficient functioning of the Forms. Later, Plato found that he could not bridge the transcendence of the Good itself with the participation of lesser degrees of reality in the Forms. In fact, the immanence of the Forms became similarly inexplicable. As a result, in *Philebus* Plato abandoned the *summum bonum* for the overridingly available good, bringing ethics “back to the world of space and time” and making of the Good itself a life well-lived according to prudence and virtue and therefore a happy life. Wisdom, or knowledge of the truth, Plato concluded, does not lead to the Good, but a practical prudential knowledge of pleasure will do so.<sup>273</sup> The doctrine of the lecture as I read it suggests a view largely opposite to the account inspired by contemporary virtue ethics, although the seeds of Stoic ethics are unquestionably to be found in later Plato, an opposed as well as to such other traditions of interpretation as that inspired by neo-Platonism.

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<sup>273</sup>Deveret pp. 32-34, 98-101. Cooper (1999) pp. 151-164 gives an account of *Philebus* strictly according to modern virtue ethics, inspired by Julia Annas.

Plato might have “invented” Stoicism and neo-Platonism, and seen them germinate in some of his pupils, but we cannot say that he was a Stoic of any sort or a neo-Platonist of any sort.

1. While Plato thought mathematics could correct and protect knowledge from the instability of the contingent world, he thought that intellectual activity cannot adequately protect us as moral agents from the instability of desire, which affects intellection itself.

2. Our philosophical self-understanding, which is supposed to guide moral agency, explores questions by seeking to understand the Good itself, because the Good itself is stable and therefore ascertainable in a world in which moral choice is always imperfect.<sup>274</sup>

3. The understanding of the Good itself means that the jumble of the world—object, events, our narratives of them, history itself—is not blocked by the intellectual attractions of the Forms but, instead, is the site in which moral agents gain knowledge of the Good itself, especially in transmitting or communicating conceptual thought about parts of the jumble as they become the occasions of deliberation.

4. However difficult and distant moral wisdom seems to be, it still seeks the Good itself and in fact cannot do otherwise. Those who do not interest themselves in the Good itself also cannot avoid it: whatever else be true, the Good itself is, by virtue of being one, always a part of moral life. We should read the phrase *tò péras* in Aristoxenus’s account as also, whatever else one tries, the Good itself is also one; as nevertheless, despite the rest, the Good itself is one.

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<sup>274</sup>Prof. Nussbaum: “In fact, the marks that separate true from apparent value bear a striking and non-coincidental resemblance to the marks that separate forms, as objects of knowledge, from other, less adequate objects;.... The *Philebus* supports and expands this account of value....” (p. 149), citing in fn. 36 work on this notion of “form-properties.” See also pp. 161-162.

5. Plato's philosophical progress was part of an established graphic base of verbal conceptual thought that at the time of Socrates's maturity is likely to have been much larger than we now commonly think it was, to which many points of view and influences from other cultures contributed.<sup>275</sup>

Plato tried out one or more new versions of his ontology in his later period in order, altering the theory of Forms of his middle period in order to try to solve perennial and fundamental issues in moral thought that no one before him had quite fully conceived in philosophical discourse. His attempt to graft philosophy in all its branches onto this root, an attempt ignited by his exploration of the extent and limits of conceptual thought, is wholly defensible, not least by pointing to the many ways philosophy has since then tried to deny the problem in frustration over the difficulties each proposed solution has encountered. That story could be the basis of a history of philosophy or of a form of the intellectual history of the Occident.

The *Philebus* is a determined, rather wearying though genial and occasionally jovial, journey within the tension between the distance between the Good itself and us and its presence in the jumble—between *cosmos* and *mundus*, between *sapientia* and *scientia*—hunting it through a long path of near misses. Plato's lecture *On the Good* seems to be a synoptic view of this tension in nuce, leaving all the obscurities and inadequacies of the foundation of moral life in place while stating its necessity and indefeasability. This suggests that the way to deliberate the two questions I posed about the lecture, which are the pattern of the chief controversies in moral philosophy, is through obligation rather than value.

Marsilio Ficino in his interpretation of *Philebus*, now partially lost, repeatedly tracks over this most difficult conjunction. It is the spot at which metaphysics founders, whether breaking on belief or on unbelief; and, curious to note, Ficino's

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<sup>275</sup>Kahn in Yunis, ed., p. 151.

manuscript breaks off at the point of greatest dramatic tension in navigating these waters. Ficino also tried to reconstruct Plato's lecture.<sup>276</sup> This, like the lecture, is lost; like the lecture, we do not know if it was ever written down. I cannot finally say whether we really lack anything because of these losses, Athenian and Florentine, since the notion behind the lecture, or behind Ficino's unraveling of it, could never have been completed or never can be finished. Incessant suggestion of the problem is enough. Perhaps for this reason, Plato's *Philebus* was more an intuitive contemplation or spiritual movement than a method, moderating the good we know and the absolute good; and despite Socrates's understanding that "sufficiency and perfection" are never found in either our will or our intellect, Plato nevertheless stated the unity of the Good itself in his lost lecture.

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<sup>276</sup>See Allen (1975).

## Chapter 4: A Moral Turn.

What intellect restores to us under the name of the past is not the past. In reality, as soon as each hour of one's life has died, it embodies itself in some material object, as do the souls of the dead in certain folk-stories, & hides there. There it remains captive, captive forever, until we should happen on the object, recognize what lies within, call it by its name, & so set it free.

(Marcel Proust, *By Way of Sainte-Beuve*.<sup>277</sup>)

### A. Re-enactment.

The date of this writing is February, 2012. Since the first of this year, a group of Republicans have competed in state primary elections for the presidential nomination of their party. These elections will persist in other states for several more months. At the end of them and after the party convention the winner of the nomination will represent the doctrines now held by the dominant party faction in the general election. On the day of this writing, the 10<sup>th</sup> of the month, the leading people in this faction began a series of meetings, called the "Conservative Political Action Caucus," to discuss ideology and strategy. Charlie Pierce, a political reporter,

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<sup>277</sup>Marcel Proust, trans. Sylvia Townsend Warner, *By Way of Saint-Beuve* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1958).

attended the Caucus and described it today:

WASHINGTON —You spend all day in a hotel with the CPAC people and you begin to feel yourself slipping into The Bubble. You really have to give them credit for what they've built — a completely self-contained universe with its own laws and its own history, eminently comfortable and eminently seductive. Nowhere is this more obvious [than] in their tacit devotion to the government of the Articles of Confederation. You see, all of them here are devoted Tentherers, which is better than calling yourself a “states-rights person,” because that still has some unpleasant resonance with events in Mississippi in 1962, although it's coming back into vogue.<sup>278</sup>

The political position Pierce refers to, “Tentherism,” is the claim that the Tenth Amendment to the United States Constitution not only limits the scope of action of the federal government to a pinpoint in contrast to that which it currently exercises but furthermore authorizes the states to nullify laws duly enacted by Congress, regulations administered by the Executive department, and decisions of the federal

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<sup>278</sup>Charlie Pierce, “CPAC: Tenther Heaven, On the Big Screen,” in *Esquire*, Feb. 10, 2012, at <http://www.esquire.com/blogs/politics/nullification-movie-cpac-6653981>. Pierce’s full explanation is well worth reading, including his typographic errors, which, he states, were due to his having gotten drunk after the day’s meetings at the conference: “There have been two examples in this country's history of attempts to govern on a radical states rights basis — one was the Articles [of Confederation], which brought so much misery that James Madison and a whole lot of other folks euchred the country into throwing it out in favor of the new federal Constitution; and the Confederate States of America which, by the third year of its existence, consisted of little more than the Army of Northern Virginia. Yet, there was Virginia attorney-general Ken Cuccinelli, who is suing the federal government over the mandate in the Affordable Health Care Act, up there on Thursday, getting an award and saying, quite seriously, “You all know about separation of powers, right? Well, I look at federalism as a kind of vertical separation of powers, as a check on federal power.” And thus do New York and New Jersey once again stare daggers at each other across the Hudson because of import duties. “But I didn't realize how round and complete this was until I sat through a movie called *Nullification: The Original Remedy*,....”

courts including judicial reviews of both federal and state actions. To nullify a law is to refuse its legitimacy and duties. The ideology behind this claim is, generally speaking, that combination of racism, religion, region, class, and culture with which all of us are familiar in this “most desperately schizophrenic of republics,” as James Baldwin once put it.<sup>279</sup>

I’ve paid a lot of attention to the *wirklichkeit* of the Republican primaries while working to re-imagine Plato’s lost lecture. I glance at their successive events because I know that they will be foolish and therefore funny, and I do laugh a little, but there’s not much pleasure in it. Instead, outrage grabs me. Fear of violence and oppression transfix me. I tremble, like the undersea anemone with a thousand hairs as delicate and strong as porcelain detecting life-saving knowledge waving in the surrounding flowing water, or like my dog whose nose tastes the air on account of fear or hunger. Though I but dimly conceive what these animals know, I do yet feel that like them I am waving receptors at fragmented warnings of peril, when I read and think of persons alive in my own day defending Nullification under the U. S. Constitution and loudly scheming to act upon this principle. I sense the ideas as well behind these policies, those notions of freedom, governance, justice, and their opposites. My views and the views of others, as I take them to be, are connected to my fear and anger.

The last time the doctrine of nullification had a significant effect on American politics is recalled by this detail from my desultory reading of the last months. Soon after his inauguration as President in March, 1861, Abraham Lincoln held a vast public reception at the Executive Mansion.

From eight until ten-thirty, the President shook hands without pause, often

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<sup>279</sup>Andrew Delbanco review of David Blight, *American Oracle: The Civil War in the Civil Rights Era*, titled “The Central Event of our Past: Still Murky,” in *NYRB* 69.2, 9/ii/12, p. 20.

using his left hand, too, to pass the visitors along.<sup>280</sup>

This the same personal who responded to the ideas and forces of his day in the receiving line in 1861 had this advice for historians two and one-half years later about some of the events that followed:

The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here.

If one tries to re-enact Lincoln's action in a play or a movie, he will only partially succeed. One needs a suggestive mise-en-scene, probably a sequence of scenes establishing momentum, and a great many acting skills that render the actor open and flexible. Besides these things, he needs a good disposition for playing the part—knowledge of the times and its complex of stresses and of the person he will imitate—plus lots of practice. But we know that no matter how hard the actor works at it, his re-enactment of the motions of Lincoln's left and right hands will necessarily be hollow to a greater or lesser degree. An actor cannot truly feel the forces of the nation and its institutions, its history, and its people upon him at that time and places of the original event. The actor is not Lincoln. The force of ideas through their conceptual development, along with all the other relevant social and personal forces, including the expectation of what was to come, were all brought to bear on Lincoln as he stood next to his wife in the receiving line. An actor, as he re-acts Lincoln's handshake with one hand and re-acts the way his other hand waved, pushed, and presented his visitors to Mrs. Lincoln, must always be conscious that he is a mimic, pretending to be someone he is not, whose dignity, exhaustion, attention and

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<sup>280</sup>Maragret Leech, *Reveille in Washington* (New York: New York Review Books), 2011, p.



boredom are not his.<sup>281</sup>

But there's another side to this. If one grows angry and worried at today's news from CPAC, as I do, one has a connection with Lincoln (and me) through ideas from the two dates in 1861 and 2012 similar enough to each other to cause similar feelings in us, because the ideas, grey yet armed to the teeth, have caught our attention, as men and women move along in front of us, making brief introductions of these notions along with their persons, as we stand tired and amazed while trying to move the next encounter with the outward world into our field of attention. If in a museum, for example, we see a carved Aztec dagger used for human sacrifice, we can gain some cultural, and not only artistic, understanding of it even if we do not require a priest to stab it into an actual human or think that we ourselves must believe the Sun has to have the victim's blood in order to keep shining.<sup>282</sup> There is no convincing argument that the imperfection of our knowledge of historical time, whether from documents or objects, obliterates the value of what we do or can know. For even the strictest sceptic holds that scepticism must free us from any prejudice that we have justified by our pride as over-achieving rationalists.<sup>283</sup> We do not empirically assay historical time as if we knew of no consequences in ignoring it. Our experimental trial and proof itself has consequences.

Henri Febvre claimed that because ideas are facts it makes no sense to write their history as if they moved in "an ether" of their own, such that changes in philosophy "show" the reader how history changed, as opposed to the broadest, richest, most colorful, and most complex material historiography. The question of intellectual history arises from philosophical endeavors to find, or to deny, a non-

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<sup>281</sup>Even stable old physical objects have multiple identities when closely studied, q.v. Undorf  
in Wagner and Reed, eds., pp. 307-310.

<sup>282</sup>I have borrowed the Aztec dagger example from Carrier (2001).

<sup>283</sup>Cf. Chandler on Adam Smith pp. 318-319.

physicalist description of reality. A great many social and cultural forces precipitated a turn toward the nature of temporality in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. A line of thought moving from Nietzsche's *Untimely Meditations* of 1874 to Foucault's profound essay "Nietzsche, Genealogy and History" in 1971 brought the disruption of conventional philosophical notions of temporal value arising from both Enlightenment and Romantic philosophy to the domain of history.<sup>284</sup> The direct critiques of historical method by both structuralists, such as Lefebvre, and positivists, most notably Carl Hempel, chipped off the validity of the history of ideas approaches developed first by Wilhelm Windelband and Heinrich Rickert and then by Arthur O. Lovejoy and his many followers. By the time of the abandonment of positivism in historiography—in the 1970's, far later than in philosophy—an array of structuralist and post-structuralist types of historical inquiry also strongly endeavored to invalidate the movement of abstract ideas as anything but the epiphenomenon of real historical change. Among disciplinary philosophers, this has appeared as the dull re-questioning of the worth of studying the history of philosophy.<sup>285</sup>

#### B. Constitutivism.

Although historiography developed more pure empirical rationalizations in the nineteenth century than it previously enjoyed, it remained subject to pressures from philosophical developments further upstream than nineteenth century axiology earned. A work on the history of philosophy, Richard Rorty's *Philosophy and The Mirror of Nature* (1979) proved to be a blow to conventional intellectual

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<sup>284</sup>I tried to think through this development in my essay *Toward Personalism* (online at [http://www.porlockspensum.com/assets/text/toward\\_personalism.pdf](http://www.porlockspensum.com/assets/text/toward_personalism.pdf)) and use a couple of ideas from it in this degree paper.

<sup>285</sup>Chartier (1988) recounts the moves between different kinds of history of ideas in the last decades.

historiography as strong as Foucault's or Derrida's, because he targeted the self-concept of all philosophy as "foundationalism." Anti-foundationalism in the historiographic context has come to comprise five claims:

first, that nowhere in nature can our understanding establish a firm correspondence;<sup>286</sup>

second, that intellectual operations do not control our understanding of the world;<sup>287</sup>

third, that the concept of the unitary self is not competent to serve knowledge other than as a dominative, incarcerative, and hegemonic agent;<sup>288</sup>

fourth, that the personal agency is fully imbricated in species-being (to use Marx's term); and

fifth, mankind is an artifex whose production determines his experience by expressing it; or, to put it another way that culture constitutes human discourse rather than reflect or mime it.

In these pages I use the word "constitutivism" instead of "(social) constructivism." By "constitutivism" I mean both social constructivism and other varieties of constructivism that I will discuss in section C of this Chapter.

"Constitutive," as an opposite of "representative," is the word inscribed on the banner of a many key scholars of art history, material culture, and rhetoric.<sup>289</sup> But I use it here to name the genus of which constructivism is a species.

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<sup>286</sup>This idea is found in such widely divergent philosophers as Rorty and David K. Lewis.

<sup>287</sup>Roth p. 286.

<sup>288</sup>Fully developed by Joan W. Scott (1991). Zuckert (1996) p. 207 finds this in Derrida's Plato.

<sup>289</sup>Two good examples of the importance attached to this word are T. J. Clark's canonical statement of this principle in the introduction to his *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the Second French Republic, 1848-1851* (Princeton, N.J. : Princeton University Press, 1982) pp. 9-20 and the sophisticated statement by Irit Rogoff in the preface to his *Terra Infirma: Geography's Visual Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 6-9.

Philosophers of history have turned to illocutionarity, narrativity and performativity, first one and then each of the others, as solutions to the issue of validating meaning within a naturalized framework. These approaches, including many variations, are part of the replacement of a philosophic perennis with recognition of our fissiparous will in “the history of differences.” But these three approaches, regarded as theories and taken in one view, are in fact foundationalist projects. They require prior, rational, and tangible connection of persons with the objects of their cognition or actions. Even if this fundament is regarded as social, rather than as grossly atomic, it always admits rational connection between subject and object, and it refers to a limited range of ideal meanings. Thus, both the objects of interest to intellectual history and the agency of intellectual historians are themselves subject to rationalist critique. As types of historical inquiry, these are fair enough expressions of due regard for empiricism and due avoidance of obscurantism. But if we take them to limit or deflate intellectual history, rather than to accept it as a companion, then they fail, because sustaining them requires a rationalist view of nature and of human agency (or personhood) that is itself the issue that must arise in the first place in the questions of validity or value of intellectual history.

They depend also on notions about the freedom and determination of human agency. Any claim from positivist or social constructivist views of knowledge, whether narrowly factual or widely imaginative, uses a firm view of causality, with variations. Often enough, it requires full, iron-cage determinism. This too is part of the foundationalist project, and so a fortiori are also the turns to language, and narration, and performance. I suggest that nobody, but nobody, can draw a bright line between the determined and the free, and that therefore no one can exclude the non-determined by a line sufficiently bright as to be a proven ground for understanding meaning in historical time. We can barely tell the difference between

past and present. Sources of comfort and hurt mix very deeply in human affairs, so the supposition that an historian, whose job it is to trace these, knows their fundamental pattern so truly that she can dismiss intellectual, or philosophical, history as a chief inquiry is wrong.

Determinism over events in historic time requires holism. "Holism" refers to the position that if determinism is right, viewing an historical phenomenon from the widest possible pertinent perspective is the right historiographic approach. Success in describing holistic understanding of large sweeps, or even small cuts, of historic time is due to the persuasive skill of the writer rather than to verifiably holistic causality. Causality, as Schopenhauer said, is not like a taxi, which you enter or leave at your convenience. Theoretically consistent historiographic holism requires data, back to the beginnings of human action, that we shall never be able to have. There is nothing falsifying with having a theoretical position that in its pure form cannot be enacted, nor is criticizing such a theory on this account made possible only by reducing it to absurdity. Instead, the problem with holism, or with consistent determinism, in writing history is that it cannot properly tell the story of the fissiparous character of cultural and social production. This is an old crux: how do things grow and change but remain themselves? In the ordinary course of things we are butchers, picking joints to carve. This is a principle of the historiography of difference, successfully opposing it to grand recits, but holistic historiographers must remember that causality itself is a grand recit.

Neither narrativity nor performativity are to be taken as reductionisms. (I do, on the other hand, have my doubts as to where reference to illocutionary discourse ought not, at least as it is sometimes practiced, be taken as reduction.) Foucault in particular was heroic on this matter. His effort was always to establish knowledge of culture distinct from knowledge of nature in its truthfulness and meaningfulness

while maintaining its footing in positive reality. He wanted always to put knowledge in the service of life. The most powerful anti-foundationalist philosophers of history will not profess any aim other than this, and this they endeavor to do. There is, I think, one exception to this in contemporary metaphysics, as yet barely glancing over to historiography, of which I shall reserve discussion until later in this essay.

Anti-foundationalist historiography opposes intellectual history on two accounts.<sup>290</sup> First, it questions what the object of such study is, denying that abstract or universal ideas are final objects of historical (or philosophical) knowledge and affirmatively claiming that we can be satisfied only with the complex routes of material construction in the place of such ideas, which are epiphenomenal to historical processes. Second, it questions the agent of historiographic (and philosophic) inquiry, whose command of ideas is said to be just a shadow of the historical processes he or she participates in, with greater or lesser degree of true consciousness.

If, under this theory, the agent now is, as the agent always, not a unitary self but an objective physical construction of historic forces, then the live agent now is much the same as any other agent, object, idea, or even event in historic time. In this case, the relation of the agent to the object of inquiry is that of the observer who has been put into the picture and is no longer solely an observer. Ultimately the agent or observer is distributed, or adequated, to everything else in the world, the boundaries being set by selection of handy proximate causes. In painting, for example, perspective creates this adequation by including the other objects furnishing the scene from one point of view—or trying to do so, at any rate, in a stable way. In an account of historical time, this includes the narratives of persons, objects, ideas and events as they play in the historians's judgment. This maceration of the subject

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<sup>290</sup>The schema of object and agent is developed by Bevir (1997).

accompanies ratio in the modern world. In representational media, the artist became his subject at an early date, even with distortion, as Parmigianino did in his *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (1524). As the subject was separated from the object by rationalism, it was also filled in and pulled back into the object of inquiry by the development of self-conscious inquiry in the sciences and arts. As soon as reproductive media and machines began to command the reproduction of culture, the subject was anamorphed in ways necessary to the process of reproduction.

Perspective presents us with an enhanced form of the problem it purports to solve: where do we fit in things? It is disembodied and never quite lands on bodies as we see them with our own eyes.<sup>291</sup> When we enhanced vision in the Baroque, having invented microscopes to see very small things and telescopes to see jumbo-sized things, the stretch needed to comprehend these extremes became longer. Full comprehension required harmony, an architectonic with articulated hoses and tubes. But the distortion remained, and reproductive media were soon devised to capture, reverse, combat, or to tame and then to celebrate the anamorphosis of formerly solid and simple objects.

The notion of the constitution of subjects by culture is in no fundamental way different from the revisions of notions of personhood that rationalist and perspectival thinking initiated. “Constitutivist” isn’t much else than “foundational”; it lacks only the complex epistemology and metaphysics that thinking through foundationalism has required of philosophers. Before “constitutivism” cultural theorists used phenomenology as a short-cut borrowed from philosophy through the subject-object distinction. But it was a short-cut on the cheap. Constitutivism repeats this way of proceeding, for it does not seem to me to differ from perspectivalism and

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<sup>291</sup>On this line of thought about perspective, see Lyle Massey’s *Picturing Space....* (State College, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999).

anamorphism at all. From the point of view of the anti-foundationalist philosopher of history, this might seem odd, since constitution is intended to break monopunctual hegemony and to replace the old with the new. But as Prof. Scott, who wrote perhaps the single most consequential argument for the external constitution of the self in recent philosophy of history, says, even narrativist and performative theories unknowingly still require foundationalist notions. By recursion of thought, she, along with her many predecessors in cultural theory from Hegel onward, have attempted to achieve supremacy over the unitary self and, since Foucault, over any notion of its having its own basal power. But how is this different from what ratio has always aimed for? In her essay, Prof. Scott makes moral claims with severity and rigor.<sup>292</sup> But if foundationalism alone generates moral philosophy, then whence does she take her morality? It might seem impertinent or silly of me to ask this question. I ask it of Foucault also, who gave up Nietzsche's basal energy of the self; and I certainly ask it of Marx, as he is one of the greatest moral thinkers of all; I ask it equally of Deleuze and of David K. Lewis; Levinas and Derrida have ready answers; and I ask it of anyone. I strongly and earnestly suggest that reason, intuition, and nature are answers poor enough to dispense with for my purposes.

The constitutivist answer is, in a word, society. Under this theory, our historiographic and scientific investigation into historic time delivers evidence of what I shall call moral life as feelings, thoughts, events and deliberations constituted by the materials, forces, and laws (or regularities) of the world we know through our senses. Such a phenomenon is called a positivity. If the evidence does not show a positivity, there is inadequate material for rigorous historiographic treatment and remains so until it does result in a positivity. Under constitutivism, these positivities include discourse and philosophy as well as production and action. The sufficiency of

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<sup>292</sup>Joan W. Scott, *Op. cit.*



positivity for historical understanding is doubted by constructivists, who are seeking (again, following Foucault) to find an approach to meaningfulness that is compatible with empiricism, neither vaporizing nor absolutizing positivity. But positivity, like causality, is an omnivorous foundation. It eats up middle ways and compromises.

I have suggested that both the theoretical and the actual historical course of rationalism and empiricism continue in a paramount way to found causality in positivity, from which no non-positivist understanding of historical meaning will escape. But I now draw your attention to a difficulty deeper than causality. The problem is personhood: the self as moral agent. The escape that constructivists attempt to perform uses a notion of moral agency that is at odds with the purposes of constitutivism.

Consider the matter in this way. When you seek to learn true facts about historical time or to develop a truthful account of an event, you seek to fill in a lacuna—a gap, rather like those encountered in damaged manuscripts and textual fragments. The ways of supplying a lacuna are quite limited: you can reason forward from what has been established as being prior in place and time to the lacuna, you can reason back from what has been established as posterior in place and time to the lacuna, and you can reason from the proximate and contemporary context of the lacuna.<sup>293</sup> Any scholar usually does all three. This might seem to be a skeletal view of things, but it is a metaphor that is good as far as it goes provided we see in it that our understandings of prior and posterior facts and events themselves depend on the solutions to other lacunae. We decipher dead languages in this way. Whether the theory of the scholar at work on the restoring the text is foundationalist or not, whether she works from religious conviction, logical positivist, class consciousness or

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<sup>293</sup>Mansfeld and Ruina pp. 87ff. have an interesting technical discussion of lacunae-filling methods in classical studies.

feminist ontology, she requires the recursive actions of reason to establish each advance in all three of these basic methods. Both foundationalist and anti-foundationalist historiography employ recursive reason to approach certainty in a reality in which first principles are never settled by reason alone.

Because dominative power is the operative system of human affairs (where we often sloppily call it reason), we are not therefore entitled to conclude that no force operates other than power or ratio operates. According to the wisdom tradition for which I cited Huxley as a witness,<sup>294</sup> power, like recursive thinking, exhausts itself, though it does not necessarily stop spinning merely because the thinker is exhausted. It builds an empire—a nation, a design style, a political movement, a school of creativity or belief. From the seed this becomes a full way of being, extended by conquest or persuasion, then manufactured or reproduced, and then it corruscates and exists only in memory, though not without some hidden vigor. What then sparks the next system of power? Nothing about anti-essentialism shows that there cannot be or is not another system of force or moral energy—something beside the axioms of logic—that is also at work, especially in the periods of failure of dominative power.

Furthermore, if one wishes to constitute human persons by culture she must consider artifacts of culture as part of the human person. The things with which we think, remember, discourse, calculate, and communicate, as well as the things we use in order to survive and to build capabilities of action, under constitutivism are a part of the self, or else the self retains some immunity from the socially constituted world. In this way of construing things, some use a strictly functionalist account of the self as a fallacy of composition. It is switching around names for things according to function, which may do very well for many purposes. But this procedure obviates the question of whether positivity accounts for meaning, while trying to maintain both

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<sup>294</sup>Chapter 3.J.

empiricism and meaningfulness through social constructivism. When the human and the prosthetic are construed as indistinguishable, we shall reach a point in metaphysics of which, again, I defer consideration.

In my own view, the truth is that a self, or a person, in part stands outside of history. She will slip away from this, or rather, has already done so, and this is because I think that God's intentions toward reality are of an order wholly different from those associated with reason—the frequent belief of mystics, perhaps best expressed as a critique of reason by Nicholas of Cusa—and that in some way we persons have just the slightest minimally valent angle of communication with these intentions.

One need not have any such belief, however, to see that when one dissolves ideas in physical and social reality she moves in some ways further from grasping the actuality of embodied personhood; and that, oddly, when one seeks some way to grasp this actuality by means of ideas one can come closer to fulfillment. This does not require a metaphysics of essences. It does not dispose of anti-foundationalism. As a philosophy of historiography, it does not require a notion of empathy or of the intentionality.<sup>295</sup> It does not dismiss, though it does not privilege, the findings of neuroscience and other cognitive sciences.<sup>296</sup> It does not expect the renewed repression of anything hidden. It is as demanding that we find what we have lost, hide, deny and pretend to forget as any other approach to historical time.<sup>297</sup> It does, however, require stopping short of something to which constitutivism is inclined. This, again, is the set of ontological claims to which my discussion has been pointing. But we need one more part of the picture.

The disjunction between the reflection of historical circumstances in cultural

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<sup>295</sup>Stephen Turner (2008) makes the case for remedying historiography empathy.

<sup>296</sup>Fitzhugh and Leckie (2001) make the case for the cognitive sciences as salvator mundi.

<sup>297</sup>Constantin Fasolt (2004) has a particularly well-developed concept of this.

production and the constitution of culture by historical circumstances is not complete. It does not fully comprise or fully evacuate the inward life of the moral agent, the person, who, by remembering and reflecting and speaking and acting, inwardly persists. The uniform result of culture is to create culture that is vaster than what came before, particularly through enlarging the number of verbal expressions, and often deepening these in the long view, by multiplying the sum of the connections inquirers can make. Even logic as we know it grew in tandem with the capabilities of graphic storage, dissemination, and retrieval of texts, though the capability of media is hardly the sole cause of the development of logic.<sup>298</sup> Human intelligence of no sort is reducible to the capabilities of its media. This is not the place to enter into the argument about reduction, either as the analysis of supervenience or as reproduction of social forces. I do however suggest that as we enter more fully into the means by which artifacts, including texts, give memory over to deliberation, the more the materiality of these means diminishes as an ontological category; and we will see conceptual communication to be a part of something not physical but intellectual, part of a history no less spiritual and inward than it is social and outward. The reflecting, responding person is the topic of history, his deeds become the examples others make a part of their actions, her words nourish the basal power of honest conscience that sometimes drives us toward more truth and more justice.

I have now, in a round-about way, constructed responses to each of the five bases of constitutivism that, cohering, put constitutivism into a difficult crux. The first two points concern causality. First, constitutivism relies on a rational empiricist view of causality and, contrary to its aim, recursively, compulsively extends the domain of ratio rather than guillotines it. Second, its holism requires more factual

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<sup>298</sup>Goody p. 143.

knowledge than any theory of causality will sustain. In the end it relies on formalized knowledge, which no one today can responsibly recognize as the historical knowledge or understanding. The three other bases of constitutivism concern the self, or personhood. In the third, constitutivism identifies the unitary self as part of dominative and hegemonic power. Yet this claim requires the power-structure of rational perspective in no important way different from the system against which constitutivism pits itself. In the fourth place, it maintains that social agency is the only correct and adequate view of human agency. “Correct” and “adequate” are not friends when it comes to understanding human behavior at any moment, much less in historical time. Fifth, finally, the disjunction between reflection and constitution as the modes of cultural theory does not comprise all the possibilities of non-foundationalism, apart from every other consideration about it. It will be obvious that it excludes theo-centric views of culture. But we are now getting in a position to see that this disjunction must also exclude anthropocentric theories of culture. This, it would seem, is rather an unhappy burden for constitutivism, since it is motivated by care for humankind rather than for homo artifex or by a passion for valorizing modes of production. But if my analysis is correct, constitutivism both lacks resources for any theory of human culture that has the worth of human persons as its chief concern and yet it cannot be content with a naturalized ontology because constitutivist theorists are people profoundly committed to the worth of human persons. One reply would be that constitutivist cultural theory seeks to avoid only reductive sorts of naturalism. But, just as Schopenhauer said of causality, naturalism is not like a taxi one can get into and out of at one’s convenience. If logically pursued, it is forced into a distressing corner. It must rely on a non-anthropocentric ontology in the way cultural theory is used to relying on phenomenology to integrate subject and object. That corner is the topic I have so far deferred and to which I now

turn.

### C. Object-Oriented Ontology.

The non-anthropo-centric but non-reductively-naturalized corner is occupied by object-centric thought. Its current main and most creative stream is object-oriented ontology. Graham Harman, a brilliant and prolific philosopher, is the chief among those working to titivate it into a system called Speculative Realism.<sup>299</sup> This is a development of the past few years, very few, but one will readily recognize its roots and range.

Here is a list of what I understand its principal “roots” to be. This is not a genealogy. This little account is not complex enough to explain this movement but is intended to lay out a broad idea of the “post-human” (i.e., post-humanist) themes that philosophers find compelling and are conscientiously developing. I do have a rough temporal order in mind, but this list is not a chronology, nor is it a ranking of grandeur of influence; even the word “roots” is something of a misnomer, since these lines of thought have been developed within just a few decades.

(1). Wittgenstein’s critique of self-consciousness, directed more by others than by him toward the Occidental tradition of self-reflective reason. His friend G.E.M. Anscombe ably and piercingly applied this critique to notions of the self associated with idealism and historicism.<sup>300</sup>

(2). The “spatial turn” of urbanist and geographic theory, ultimately related to Lefebvrian structuralism, extended by Marxist ideas into the critical theory of the arts.

(3). Development of the non-immune boundary of human beings with

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<sup>299</sup>Ian Bogost, Levi Bryant, James Landyman and Ian Chambers are among the many

<sup>300</sup>Anscombe (1975).

artifacts, especially machines. This is associated with Gilles Deleuze and Bruno Latour, more latterly with Quentin Meillassoux; and it was made a principle of historiography by Michel de Landa's work on the intersection of humankind with the "machinic phylum."<sup>301</sup> Speculative Realism is a chief outcome of this line of thought in American philosophy.

(4). Scientific research and theory into the concept of "self-organizing systems."<sup>302</sup>

Its other roots are phenomenology and in particular Merleau-Ponty's concept of embodiment. Whether it is a revival of phenomenology or a revolution against phenomenology, or both, is contested. It also has a clear relation to the digitization of information and the artefaction of functions akin in some way to human intellection. With just these principal references, one sees that Speculative Realism arises at a fertile crossing in the history of ideas. Historical time, consisting of narratives of events and objects at once real but accessible only to the speculative mind, is profoundly interesting to object-oriented ontologists. Besides de Landa's philosophical histories, its first great impact in historiography was in medieval studies.

It suggests ways to regard all nature without having to be grounded in a transcendental point of view. Nature thus regarded is not clearly split between the organic and the inorganic, nor indeed is the distinction itself given much more time to exist. Instead, all things are "self-executing." All things have autonomy in the sense given the word by a metaphysics the aim of which is to concede the full merits of intentionality to all things regardless of their level of consciousness. Things can be

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<sup>301</sup>This is the theme of de Landa (1991)

<sup>302</sup>Beside the authors collected in Yates, ed., other important figures in this line of thought are Ilya Prigione, Humberto Maturana and Francesco Varela.

withdrawn as well as be used by us as tools.<sup>303</sup> Information is regarded as dissipative, rather than static. It is something like a force by which things organize, endure, and extend their existence.<sup>304</sup> Without conceding a bit to essentialism, object-oriented ontology endeavors to discover what seem like the secret powers of things, their “dark and stormy essences,” activated by kinds of causality philosophy has hitherto been ignorant of, suppressed or idealized.<sup>305</sup> This is, the claim is made, the only way to re-enchant with betwitching, as it were. As Prof. Harman says, “what we really want to be is objects,” not subjects.<sup>306</sup> The fecundity of this approach is amazing: one need only look on any day at such websites as BldgBlog.com to get an idea of the stimulating and absorbing perspectives this opens up.

The first outright suggestion I know of that object-oriented ontology can supply meaning to accounts of historical time was made by the Polish sociologist Nicholas Luhmann, who, studying early cybernetics, suggested that “autopoetics,” that is, self-organizing systems, is a sound basis for the science of society because it could apply to individuals, whom our increasing natural and social knowledge makes it difficult to “re-specify,” as well as to groups.<sup>307</sup>

I cannot, of course, evaluate this metaphysics here. I have briefly outlined it in order to show that since constitutivism cannot rely on any self-referential concept established by discourse, it must rely on an approach to positivity that is thoroughly cleansed of the self. Anti-foundationism is not a stroke of the pen or a disclaimer made once for all. The reason is not simply that essences are tricksters but that positivities are tricksters too. We require rational science to understand them, even

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<sup>303</sup>Harman pp. 1, 48-49 et passim.

<sup>304</sup>See the essays by Arthur Iberall in Yates, ed.

<sup>305</sup>Harman p. 104.

<sup>306</sup>Harman p. 140.

<sup>307</sup>See Luhmann in Heller, ed., and den Hollander (2010).



to state them. In searching for a way to express the meaning of historical time, historiographers require something more than external events. We are promiscuous observers, always running from disaster or chasing beauty, and exist in a non-relational world, in uphill struggle to make relations in unconscious nature. When we admit no real internality, as in constitutivism, the notion of meaning must be as utterly transformed as the change of persons into things and of all things into a new kind of meaning, such as the Speculative Realists are striving to express.

The application of object-oriented ontology to the project of understanding historical time—historiography in the broadest sense—produces one or more constructivisms other than the social, another species of the genus constitutivism. We can call this machinic constructivism. Bruno Latour stated the basis of this in his notion of “the paradox of scientific realism.” In the classic modernist view, following Einstein, “there are no fixed points in space.” This is the guideline for a great deal of the art and performance of the twentieth century. Latour argues that this principle protects one vestigial fixed point, that of the subject. He illustrates, in different ways in different works, that the many prostheses, or “external” instruments of investigation that people use put persons and the objects they observe on the same ontological level. If one is listening to a bird singing over a live feed, then the listener, the bird, the machines, and the physical forces are all parts of the one circulation of information. We can go a step further. The same way of thinking can give us a digital-data constructivism, in which persons and droves of data are to be investigated in the same way. This, then, is the tendency, and a strength, of constitutivism, capable of writing history on a wide front ranging moving masses of persons or on drifting data.

However, good historians, such as New Historicists, will want to think very carefully about what the dogmatic elimination of personal agency entails. The

destination of constitutivism in object-oriented ontology reveals its need for philosophical grounding at the site of weakness in its demand for ethical accountability while at the same time separating representations of the state of things from ethical goals. Constitutivism institutes a view of reality circumscribed by its technical operations.<sup>308</sup> Object-oriented ontology regards all objects as the human person was traditionally regarded, as a basal energy much like a noumenon. Constitutivist historiography does not ascribe basal energy to the human person, and it cannot evade the question of how to account for the meaning of human affairs unless it views the object of determinations as the same as the determinations themselves. The self in this case can have, or express, the force of its determinants. But constitutivism also wants to avoid completely naturalizing human affairs, and thereby it is obliged to seek a speculative, or imaginative, element in its account of agency while not straying from positivities. This is the crux that Speculative Realism, or “Continental Anti-Realism” as it also is called,<sup>309</sup> attempts to cross. But when the issue is actual history, rather than Prof. Harman’s list of marvelous nouns, and when good historians, such as the New Historicists, rely on the expanded understanding of human activity that scientific research and reasoning has provided, it seems not to have stirred beyond the point where Dilthey stopped in looking for “immanent purpose” in human agency.

More specifically, I see several problems that constitutivists will encounter in object-oriented ontology.

(1). It requires a novel approach to causality, the resources of which to give due respect to empiricism are *prima facie* in doubt. Discourse about the withdrawn,

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<sup>308</sup>Certeau p. 200.

<sup>309</sup>This is Lee Braver’s phrase in his important recent survey of the history of the subject, “A Short History of Continental Realism” (<http://philpapers.org/rec/BRAABH>), preparatory to his forthcoming book on the subject.

such as apophasis, kenosis, and the *via negativa*, has not been realist in ontology. These are non-foundationalist types of meaning, but one is not to make sense of them through positivities. In general, constitutivism aspires to make affirmative constructions, but it will be heir to specific weaknesses of physicalism. Realist ontology is not a shell one may put around speculation that does not alter it.

(2). The convergence of constitutivist historiography with object-oriented ontology in these days of the disappearance of the object is subject to larger forces. By “disappearance of the object” I mean two things: that digitization is evanescing the object and that Western societies are becoming materially poorer on the whole. Fascination with the object is a response to these tendencies. Object-oriented ontology is in many ways modeled on the way in which we look at precious objects. Its stated aim is the opposite, to look at all objects in a new manner of equal regard. But it in fact draws on the desire to form, by careful handling and comparative observation, comprehensive conceptual, specific understandings of objects precious to us by their human associations, and to draw from scientific as well as artistic inspiration as to the handling of objects.<sup>310</sup> I am not sure what distinguishes this from Madame de Pompadour’s fascination with her bibelots and bindings, and in a sense the Speculative Realist might agree with this. But what then justifies the self-conscious, self-referential intellectual tools that historians take in hand to dig meaning out of human narratives?

(3). Objects are indeed available as routes around propositional thought. The complexity of our narratives about them directly opposes the notion that all knowledge is formalizable, in part because even empirical knowledge of objects issues

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<sup>310</sup>The earlier works of Sherry Turkle on scientific inspiration and discovery through objects, such as *Evocative Objects* and *Falling for Science*, show both of what I regard as the attractive and the objectionable sides of the matter. She has pulled back from this view of technology a good deal in her more recent publications.

in narratives that intervene in the discourse surrounding all knowledge. We cathect with them, and we abandon them; they are both inaccessible and stylish; their burden is both ideology and sentiment. In truth, we have barely begun to understand what objects mean for persons.

#### D. Personhood

The reach of New Historicism in historiography, the wealth of material culture studies throughout the humanities, and the originality of object-oriented ontology tend to demonstrate a fundamental presumption of modern Occidental culture, that we can achieve a sufficient account of meaningfulness in human affairs by means of socially-focused and non-reductionist study of positivity and without reference to divine being. I think this is true, based on the results of these approaches to understanding historical time. To accept this, however, does not preclude altering it to claim that not only a sufficient but a more satisfactory account can be made by including non-empirical notions of divine being in the metaphysics to which a philosophy of history corresponds or belongs. The word “satisfaction” here serves the reader and me alike to defer the issue to another occasion. This is not the alteration I propose here by giving my account of Plato’s lecture and this reflection, although I believe it to be a correct and needful claim. The alteration I propose here, instead, is this: that a sufficient account of meaning in human affairs requires, and cannot be made without, a non-constitutivist, but not necessarily foundationalist, notion of the self as personal moral agent, or personhood, because without such a metaphysical notion we—“we” being each of us in her capacity as the philosopher within the historian—cannot sufficiently explain the situation created by communication between two or more people.

Apply my claims against constitutivism to the situation of two persons in a

society with regard to one another. First, under constitutivism the causality in any such situation is absorbed by positivity, so that the constructivist theory becomes as much a tool of the rationalist discourse it wishes to evade as earlier discourses and epistemes were. It endeavors to modify the rhetoric of causality, but so far as I am aware constitutivist historiographers have not examined the many grades of “emergent” physicalism in both metaphysics and moral philosophy to see if any of them is successful. Object-oriented ontology is, in my view, far more successful at explaining the world without a materialist death-grip, but “more successful” might be far from enough. Object-oriented ontology, too, must come up against conflict between the hard claims of realism on the one hand and the irreducible spirituality of moral life on the other, not so much because the former is invincible, for it is in truth weak, but because the latter is a reality from which each breath and step we take denies us escape. Second, nothing in the conception of these two persons as unitary selves, with personal moral agency, requires a commitment to anything within the foundationalist discourse. Third, more critically, attempting to avoid both positivism and the unitary self, constitutivist historiography has in the long run an object-oriented ontology as its sole resource for analyzing the communication between two persons; and this, taken as a leading idea rather than a heuristic or even as a substantial tool of inquiry, is to take a question as being an answer and to put life in the service of history rather than to think historically in the service of life. Constitutivist history can certainly persist without a unitary self, maintaining personhood entirely as social construction, but only because of the success of its scholarly production. When it is brilliant, we can think about what it points to rather than about moral personhood. But it cannot successfully subvert the metaphysical self. It ignores it but cannot erase it. The constitutivist historian knows this at least as well as anyone else, because it has been her business to try to get

around the self and simultaneously to retain the moral agency of persons. In so far as she attempts this difficult task, she is facing the crux of moral choice.

The student of objects always comes in the end to face a line of moral choice not thick but thin, occasionally hazy but most often bright enough. One must not invest the object with the virtues, or vices, values or fears that draw one to the study of it. In the end it is just stuff scattered about, or else it is the material of mania. The treasure-box of history is empty. A certain rejection of the material world is the ransom we have to pay.

The reason I can dissent from constitutivism without revanchism against modernity is that I am not speaking of abstract and universal ideas, so much as I am speaking of moral ideas. These in turn exist in close connection with fundamental notions about the nature of reality. Plato's lost lecture epitomizes his thinking on the great question as to whether morality requires a metaphysics. From the Platonic point of view, it is clear that even an anti-foundationalist metaphysics cannot assume that it has dispensed with this problem because we as a culture, in this epoch, have dispensed with one kind of moral reasoning. The question of how ideas may be said to exist in historic time is at heart the question of the relation between persons and objects—a question of fully taking in, rather than limiting, the range of forces with which we contend against an overwhelming reality by not excluding from positive historical study the possibility these forces include universal values. Since any such universal value in the jumble of things would be a long winding story, it requires and deserve a history.

Here lies the essence of the challenge to the value of "intellectual history": does the movement of ideas carry its own "etherized" weight? Can any such discipline as intellectual history, occupying a ground configured closely to most of what the academic discipline of philosophy occupies (whether obviously or

obscurely), explain what happens when Abraham Lincoln and we seem to share a concern expressed in his gestures and our daily news? We use “universal” to describe the integrity of this force and “moral” to describe its peculiar province within humankind. Michel de Certeau said consumption is a form of production: we produce new ideas by consuming old ones. Perhaps it is the case, then, that the story of philosophy forces us more pointedly than other inquiries into recognizing that persons and their ideas are locked in a form of continuing new creation. Unlike any other description of historic time, the history of ideas places us in the position not of mimics but of actors in the work of re-creation. This, I argue, might help us in the ancient quest to see how to make statues move and speak.

Consider again the notion of re-performing Abraham Lincoln’s hand-shaking at his inauguration reception. I spoke solely of his hand gestures, leaving out the rest of his movements, and these were to be repeated (though not identically) because their duration led in part to his weariness and because the number of persons he shook hands with was due to the significance of his actions for the whole nation. The detail of his repeated gestures, simultaneously hand-shaking and hand-waving, represents this for us. Now, no matter how skilled we are as actors, the performance must clearly be something constructed by us here and now and not the event of those agents there and then. As historians, using either evidence or narration to describe the event, we are similarly limited. We are limited for general reasons having to do with the nature of time and space as far as we understand it. The relevant and specific reason, however, is that we can see only determinants and we cannot see agency. We can see causes, or what we think to be causes, but we cannot see choice. But what is agency or choice beside those verifiable, lawful, or repeatable things determining it? It is, beside these things, the compelling lines of thought the agent has. A compelling line of thought is not verifiable or lawful in the technical senses of

these terms, since it involves a decision or sequence of decisions. But it does give a high order of coherence to historiographic accounts. But in respect to the importance of what historians write about, of what importance is the high-order coherence demanded by conceptual thought? Little enough; on its own, a dead end. I argue that Plato came to see things this way. How then do we explain this coherence as an enterprise in ethics?

#### E. A Moral Turn

People don't have to study history and generally don't. But whenever we choose to spend our precious time today in studying historical time, we have more abundant perspectives for understanding human experiences than Plato or anyone else had before our time, due to the development of the human sciences and the humanities over the last century and a half. Nonetheless, the study of history has a running border defined by the singular and overriding issue of moral choice. The dilemma this border causes was well explained a workman whom James Lees-Milne, the founder of the National Trust for Historic Preservation in the United Kingdom, talked to when inspecting a building the workman was helping restore for the National Trust. In his diaries for 1955-1956, Lees-Milne recalled that

workmen say that old buildings OK for looking at once in a while but "it's flesh and blood what matters."<sup>311</sup>

This in a nutshell is the argument against historiography, not just against treasuring old objects but also against labor, physical, conceptual, artistic and scriptural, exercised for the purpose of understanding historical time. It is a moral argument: the suffering of persons, infinitely worse in the quantities the living experience than

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<sup>311</sup>James Lees-Milne, *Ancestral Voices* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1975), pp. 55-6 (for 2 May, 1952).



in far vaster quantities endured by those no longer living, precludes the moral legitimacy of any distraction from actions that will better it. Supererogatively, no kind of contentment—in at home, in family, with friends—sustains independence from the oceanically interconnected worldwide system of punishment and pain. Even though one readily sees that production of these conditions today, or at any one moment, is reproduction from the past, this argument accuses any of us who ignore healing suffering today in favor of anything else one might do today, including any industrious study of the past, of having Pharaonic hearts. The argument, as Lees-Milne's workmen gave it, exempts only a prudent person's modest quantum of emotional or aesthetic pleasure in the past and also, I presume, inquiry into matters bearing so very immediately on present matters at hand that the understanding of them is necessary to making current and future action.

Leaving aside supererogation—the claim that no exemption whatsoever from the maximum demands of moral law, down to the last crumb and the last breath, ever holds—as a kind of barbed-wire outer perimeter for enforcing moral agency, look at the claims we make to mollify the prick of conscience from the workman's argument. All the claims we can make for the “relevance” of the past tend to respond, in one way or another, to the workman's argument. In truth, the workman's argument, is part of the moral motivation for anti-essentialism and anti-foundationalism in metaphysics just as it is in historiography. The fact that workman's argument is part emotional and part intellectual gives great strength to its claims. In fact, constitutivism relies on this argument when it regards ideas as not having real effect and therefore being products rather than essences, “ether,” rather than any self-subsisting part of the humankind's self-sustainment. Constitutivism takes its moral motive seriously enough as to make a revolutionary effort to do so, by comparison with which the moral effect, if not the motives, of foundationalist historiography

sometimes looks to be uninformed, purblind, or bigoted.

Prof. Scott says,

And subjects do have agency. They are not unified, autonomous individuals exercising free will, but rather subjects whose agency is created through situations and statuses conferred on them.... These conditions enable choices, although they are not unlimited.<sup>312</sup>

But what are we to make of such compensatory, mugwump phrases as these? They disclose the dent they themselves make in the constitutivist idea, whether it is Prof. Scott's or Prof. Bhabha's or Prof. Spivak's. Such "scope" is found only in the passage of time, which is itself the possibility of change, especially change not tied to place. Human decisions and actions are the exercise of agency as everyone defines it. But this agency may be regarded as moral agency (or personhood) only when we trace it through a concept standing apart from the plural goods and interests that constitutivists are so good at describing. Instituting reality that follows the patterns or laws of social and economic life, or of machinic or digital entities, separates historical time from the ethical goals of its actors. Even if one thinks that these actors are all fully constituted by plural goods and interests, the narrative still has reference to "some scope"—something not accounted for or constituted, and possibly something that is not "in time" at all. Social constructivism uses a notion of personal moral agency that it is not logically entitled to. Object-oriented ontology reveals this inconsistency and has not yet bothered to address the problem on its own ledger. It too cannot evade a way of accounting for personal moral agency in a world of plural goods and interests. If this were not the case, how could we share with persons in the past the passions and goals that we clearly do share with them, however imperfect

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<sup>312</sup>Scott (1991) p. 793.

our understanding of people long ago or far away may be?<sup>313</sup>

As we learn to understand ourselves less imperfectly, in some ways we more imperfectly understand the past, even when we “know more” about it than we used to know. This is the somewhat ridiculous situation in which we stand with respect to historiography. We at once verify knowledge of narratives of objects and events in historic time and simultaneously falsify our relation to historic time. The path by which conceptual thought both satisfies us and frustrates us is recursion. In combination with the events of history, this tends both to deepen our understanding of those whom we follow and to separate us from them as well.

I suggest that historiography and cultural theory take a moral turn. This would be to add the viewpoint of the moral agent to its stock of resources, among which it stands notwithstanding posthumous recognition or diminishment. Whether historiographic temperament emphasizes what we share with those whom we live after more than what we do not share or the other way around, we are not merely affected by the past but are actors, with agency, in the creation of our own times, by choosing how and what to re-create, or even re-enact. We do not institute only that which hitherto has constituted us. That bit of difference is enormous. How do we comprehend and explain it along with the plural goods and interests in action within us? I suggest that historians and theorists of culture can do this by observing moral notions as such, which are revealed by the conceptual form of moral thought, and give explicit consideration to the subjectivity in which moral life wanders and

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<sup>313</sup>Veyne’s essay (1984) on intellectual history (pp. 71-84) both criticizes what I call constitutivism (under the name “existentialism” for some reason) and deflates the ethical interest in historiography, leaving intellectual history in a sort of realm of coincidence. If this is the alternative to recognizing the commonalty of historical time and “afterlivers” (in Philip Sidney’s phrase), then it is clearly unfactual. Goehr (1992) has a little-noticed but interesting view of intellectual history on pp. 44-86; similarly, Kracauer (1969) on pp. 98-

changes. This would be an intellectual history, or history of ideas, with the moral turn, by which alone it can stand, and by which it necessarily stands, with the deep investigation of the breadth of human culture in historical time.<sup>314</sup>

Under rational inspection, moral life seems to have no ground beside whatever we assign to it. Yet since we always do assign it a ground, even if it is wholly a notion about ourselves and nothing else, the question of this ground itself remains, in stable times and in unstable times. It is the thinnest way for thought and the thickest idea for thinking about at the same time. It concerns things that we desperately desire and yet do not need, and it concerns relations with ourselves and others that we need but readily forget or abjure. Habits we make for the sake of moral life sometimes stand in the way of better actions. Conflict between the sides of one's self or as among one person and others always refers us to something we do not fully grasp and yet must act upon. Change adds to what already is virtually infinitely complicated. Tension between the present and the past, as between us and something greater than ourselves, puts us face to face with necessities we are not fully capable of providing for.

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<sup>314</sup>I think of Terry Pinkard (2002) as an example of what recognition of co-terminous moral and intellectual thought. He discusses, i.a., the diffusion across classes of philosophical ethics in the middle of the eighteenth century (p. 214ff.), Hegel's conspectus of ethical thought in power relations (pp. 226-233-242), and romantic idealism as a realization of moral concepts (246ff.). His analysis, to my mind, highlights the specifically ethical foundations of the thinking from which modern cultural theory arises (e.g., pp. 277ff. and 359ff.).

## Chapter Five: Latest Advices.

The positions I have taken on the historical matters this degree paper addresses are suggestions as to factual likelihoods, although I state them in a very positive manner, partly because I think this is more interesting for the reader since it obliges this writer to commit himself to his claims, but largely because of firmly, though open-mindedly, held philosophical beliefs governing my reading of Plato, ethics, and theories of culture and history. I should like to add here a few words about these beliefs. Some of these will specify their context, and some of them will ask further questions.

The position in normative ethics I have staked out here, through the historical inquiry, is compatible with both deontological and consequentialist ethics, or, as I like to call them, rules and results ethics. In fact, it must complement them, as well as virtue ethics—to which it has more conflicted relationship—because its chief significance is to state an enuring and indefeasible issue in moral life. This issue in its formal guise is something like G. E. Moore's naturalistic fallacy, the claim that whatever descriptors we use to specify a human action or decision the question of its goodness remains a question that cannot be answered in any terms others those we might abduct from our knowledge of the Good itself. My statement of Moore's idea is idiosyncratic. It puts an argument that I do not believe ever to have been defeated into what I consider the most favorable words. In informal terms, the issue is very

simple. It is the question every responsible person asks every day, “What is the next right thing to do?”

The compatibility of a notion of moral force, such as the one I think Plato developed, with modern normative theories is congruent with mystery, or, at the least, patient with it. Heavy theories such as rules and results ethical systems cannot outpace the basic mystery to which Plato’s late thought pointed. There are two reasons for this. First, our metaphysics ought to tolerate mystery. Our desire for this is one of the reasons for the popularity of phenomenology. American Pragmatism was successful in this regard, too, with a great deal less fuss about its own cleverness and originality. William James in the sixth chapter of *The Will to Believe* stated a kind of normative ethics formed by human experience without erroneously limiting our experience. Hilary Putnam has continued this in his recent *Ethics Without Ontology*. The whole Platonic normative theory I developed here could be adequately re-stated in Pragmatist terms.

But these terms, though more modern, would lack something well worth preserving from Plato’s struggle over these issues. In a word, these other significances relate to the *philosophia perennis*, a very old-fashioned term indeed. I think of it not as an essentialism but as an enigmatic. It is not, therefore, in mortal combat with contemporary thought, since we today have to face the same ultimate questions that those who came before us faced. This, too, betrays another position of mine, that the past is translatable. The edifice of modern theory is enormous. It, along with science, has immeasurably increased the depth and breadth of our understanding of life, human and non-human. It has made possible a kind of advance in ethics based on personhood, which had been barred to Plato and many others by their particularities. On the other hand, the wisdom of the *philosophia perennis* has a very, very long presence in human inquiry. I have tried to express this enigmatic view of culture by

placing within it past thought in which the question of the Good itself was wholly translucent.

Questions responded to and elided by this degree paper, questions for now and for later, often rejected yet congenial, arise in the diaphanous image of history I tried to see in Plato's lost lecture on the Good.

What is the relation between logical and technological tools for conceptual thought and the activity of thought itself? Is the trend of one wholly and necessarily the trend of the other or are they at odds, whether as agonistic or as brute forces?

How does one connect these two oceans of inquiry—critical, recursive thought and moral thought—with one another, or must we forever fall into measuring the one against the other?

Is the not-living and not-dead historical past a way to think about the seeming convergence of matter and energy into non-organic life that science and philosophy present to us in many ways?

As we come to better and advanced understanding of the jumble inside of material culture, shall we grow more fatally attached to its rust, or less so, or both, or in the same measures by which in different guises we have always lived?

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