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Reality and Appearance

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When approaching the dialogues of Plato we need to bear in mind that they are essentially meditations on questions, and often these questions remain unanswered. What makes Plato so important in western philosophy is the manner in which he raises these questions, because philosophy is essentially enquiry and a manner of enquiry.

I begin with this caution because Plato is now read as propounding doctrines. Most, though not all, modern scholarship on Plato attempts to extract from his works doctrines which are then examined for their logical consistency. This way of reading Plato has led to the rejection of much of his thought. Such an approach really has nothing to do with philosophy in the sense that the ancient Greeks understood it. Primarily, it has arisen from the rationality of the Enlightenment, in which 'reason' itself took on a meaning foreign to Greek thought.

This state of affairs means that many of the most important concepts and terms used by Plato, and also the Presocratics, no longer have their original meaning in modern thinking. Indeed, 'thought' itself has changed meaning, and so the understanding of words like 'knowledge', 'truth', 'being', 'reality', 'reason', 'idea', 'nature', 'cosmos', 'theory' has changed as a consequence. They no longer mean what they once meant even in the late Middle Ages.

Some recovery of the original meaning of these words may be made through etymology, but even this is limited because the very manner of apprehending and thinking on things is where the major change has taken place, which is reflected in the change of the meaning of words. The kind of attending to things which is philosophical attention has been lost, and this includes the way we attend to language itself. The question of the truth of things is not for the modern mind what it was to the ancient Greeks. The essential orientation to existence is different.

Nevertheless, not everything inherited from Plato is entirely lost. The distinction between reality and appearance remains a cornerstone of modern enquiry into the nature of things, although in a different

manner. No thoughtful person believes that the truth of things is to be found in their immediate appearances, or that understanding is the same as merely perceiving. But the manner in which modern thought proceeds from perceiving to understanding has little in common with the way Plato, or Greek thought generally, proceeded. Essentially this difference lies in making representations. Modern thought regards accurate representations of things as their truth. This, essentially, is how the modern natural and mathematical sciences approach reality. Philosophy and the social sciences have followed after, largely modelling their methods on the empirical sciences. This is how modern thinking assimilates reality and relates to it. In itself this is a very fascinating area for philosophical enquiry, and some philosophers have been bold enough to explore it.

What Greek thought sought in reality is altogether different from this. It was not concerned with representations of reality, with systems or models into which reality can be placed or classified, or with explanations of how things work, or with causes in the sense we moderns think of causality. Greek thought, from the Presocratics to Aristotle, was concerned with the participation of the mind with reality. In this respect there was no essential discontinuity between Greek art, religion and philosophy. *Knowing was understood as an act of being.* Therefore, in order to know there must be an order of being equal to knowing, and so any defect or incompleteness of being corresponds to a defect or incompleteness in knowing.

Clearly, this does not correspond with modern thinking, in which 'being' would generally be understood as an object among objects which thought can make representations of. Thus modern thought does not concern itself with approaching the act of being itself, but only with notions or inferences about being. Until Heidegger's seminal work on the question of being, ontology—the philosophy of being—had become the mere history of redundant theories of being.

The reduction of being to an entity among entities, or to a property of things, or to a general vague abstraction about things, follows from a profound shift in thinking in which the 'intelligibility' of things moved from things themselves to the thinking subject. The *act of knowing* became confined to the thinking subject, and so knowledge itself became something belonging only to the thinking subject. Essentially, this shift came about from relocating reason. For the ancient Greeks reason belonged to the essence of reality itself. The

cosmos was rational, that is, intelligent, and the human intelligence participated in that universal intelligence through the mediation of the soul which joined body to mind. Not only was the cosmos understood to be rational or intelligent, it was understood to be *primarily* intelligent and only secondarily material. For Plato the cosmos is one united harmonious motion of intelligence made visible to the senses. Therefore human knowing was a participation in the active knowing that was reality itself.

There is a principle underlying the possibilities of such human knowing: that like may know only like. Therefore 'mind' can truly know only mind, or the intelligible know only the intelligible. Knowing is kinship. So, for example, when Plato speaks in the *Symposium* of the lover uniting with Absolute Beauty itself, he is speaking of the individual human mind participating in the universal mind that is the essential reality of all forms of appearance. It is likeness joining likeness. According to the same principle, being may unite only with being. Thus 'ignorance' is a form of non-being, in so far as it is a holding to exist that which does not exist.

Another way of saying the same as this is to understand that what is most essential about the cosmos is that which is most real. In Greek thought the 'real' is that which is most fully existent, and the most fully existent is that which is neither coming into existence nor going out of existence—in other words, that which is eternal. It is important to appreciate that the eternal does not stand outside the cosmos. In Greek cosmology there is no external Creator who makes the world because the world itself is eternal. Here Greek philosophy differs fundamentally from Hebrew and Christian thought about the world. Greek creation myths, such as we find in Plato's *Timaeus*, are ways of conceiving the hierarchical structure of the cosmos. The same holds for Plotinus. This does not mean that the mythic way of thinking is less accurate than a purely metaphysical way of regarding reality, because the myths convey something of the emanation of intelligence throughout reality in a way that the more abstract thought of metaphysics does not. Nevertheless, the creation myth in the *Timaeus* is fairly abstract at the same time, because Timaeus, who offers this myth, wishes us to understand it as probable according to reason and suitable for contemplation. In the light of what we said previously about intelligence and being and knowledge being primary, consider this short passage from the *Timaeus*:

Now when the Creator had framed the soul according to his will, he formed within her the corporeal universe, and brought the two together, and united them centre to centre. The soul, interfused everywhere from the centre to the circumference of heaven, of which also she is the external envelopment, herself turning in herself, began a divine beginning of never-ceasing and rational life enduring throughout all time. The body of heaven is visible, but the soul is invisible, and partakes of reason and harmony, and being made by the best of intellectual and everlasting natures, is the best of things created.

We notice that the corporeal universe is formed within the soul, which envelops everything. The word 'soul' is a translation of the Greek *psyche*, which we should understand as pure intelligence, containing in itself 'the best of intellectual and everlasting natures'. This is not the same meaning as the term 'psyche' used in modern psychology or the term 'soul' as used in Christian thought. But also this intelligence is 'interfused everywhere from the centre to the circumference of heaven'. Also, this universal *psyche* is 'turning in herself', or self-revolving, meaning that it holds to its own nature without being impelled by anything outside itself. It is in communion with itself. Being thus self-abiding it does not require any agency by which to be present to itself, and so is invisible.

The myth expresses this primal order by way of a creation narrative, but the narrative sequence through time represents the instantaneous hierarchical order of existence as such. In Greek thought the word *arche*, translated as 'beginning', means 'first principle', in the same sense as the number one is the first principle of arithmetic, and is thus the pervading principle of all numbers. Strictly speaking, our English word 'beginning' means the 'begetting' of things, the source from whence they are born, not a first moment in time. We have to bear in mind that modern thinking generally conceives origins in terms of time and historical causation, while ancient thought conceives them in terms of principle. But also, the principle or origin of things is their true actuality or being.

The difficulty here—for us as well as the ancient Greeks—is that we commonly mistake the visibility of things for their actuality. Having said this, the way in which we mistake the visibility of things for their actuality is not exactly the same as Plato presents it in his time, so to

come to a clearer understanding of this we need to take an indirect route.

To illustrate this, here is an example from a seminar I recently conducted. A student pointed out that modern cosmology conceived of the planetary motions differently from that of the ancients, and this presented special problems to astrologers. Now it is quite obvious that astrology apprehends the planetary motions in a completely different way to modern astronomy, and with completely different concerns. For the astrologer the planets serve in some sense to disclose the meaning of events, while for the astronomer they are simply objects whose motions are the subject of calculation of physical motions. Here we have two quite distinct ways of interpreting the motions of the heavens. As is well known, for the astronomer the earth moves round the sun and rotates on its own axis, thus giving rise to the way the sun rises and falls each day and passes through the seasons. For the astrologer this motion of the earth is discounted and the sun and all the other planets are taken as they appear to be—moving across the heavens. Thus we are told as children that the movement of the sun and moon and stars is an illusion, not what it appears to be. But the astrologer tells us that the way they appear is meaningful, and that from this point of view what the astronomer says is beside the point.

Now, conceptually these two views are incompatible and, of course, from the astronomer's position astrology is sheer nonsense. However, from the point of view of the ordinary observer of the heavens there remains the fact that *despite* what the astronomer says the sun, moon and stars plainly move across the heavens, and no amount of adjustment of our sight changes this. In response to this I put the following question: How would the motions of the heavens need to be disposed in order to present themselves to the earth as moving across the heavens? The answer is that they would be disposed exactly as they now are, the earth rotating and so making the heavens *appear* to be moving about the Earth. Philosophically this is important. It means that reality presents itself to our intelligence in a manner that requires the cosmic order to be exactly as it is. This 'presenting itself' thus is the way in which it becomes visible, and this becoming visible is not to be discounted but rather considered as the manner in which existence discloses itself.

This example from everyday experience may perhaps seem a little curious. But if one considers it for a moment, it becomes clear that

everything becomes visible or discloses itself in ways that seem contrary to empirical investigation. We are told, for example, that thought may actually be only firings of neurons, or that a great talent may only be a certain genetic disposition. It appears, on the face of it, that these notions penetrate behind the appearances of things. Yet for the ordinary person talk of neurons or genetic codes has very little meaning—not because these things may be untrue, but because they are formulations which bring no actual insight into reality for us. On the contrary, as theories they alienate us from reality and from the natural way in which we apprehend it and live.

From a Platonic point of view these theories and explanations of things do not lead us to the intelligence that manifests through all things, do not bring us into contact with that which is more real or actual. Without exception such theories and explanations direct our gaze towards the inanimate dimension of reality rather than to the living or intelligible. Indeed, the living is reduced to the non-living and least intelligent.

Strictly speaking, this inconsistency between the Greek philosophical approach to reality and the modern empirical approach is no problem. The inconsistency is not actually a conflict. However, enormous problems do arise when it is held that the empirical investigation of things discerns the 'actuality' or 'essence' of reality. These problems arise from the unseen ontological assumptions made when empirical representations of things are taken to disclose the real. That is to say, there is nothing problematic in empirical method as such. What generally lies hidden is the nature of the stance towards reality that empirical method is assumed to involve. This may be summed up in the phrase 'rational objectivity'. What exactly is 'objectivity'? In its innocent form it presents itself as impartiality, as standing before things without any bias. But where is such a standing place? Theoretically it can only be completely outside reality, entirely divorced from anything underway within reality. Such a standing-place is, obviously, a fiction. It is interesting to ask where this fiction has come from. Historically it arose at the same moment when thought placed God wholly outside reality, during the period of the Reformation and the Enlightenment. The notion of impartiality comes with this, because at the moment thought placed God outside reality God was conceived as an external 'will' directing reality at a distance, and no longer ontologically, that is, no longer as participating in the being of things. Thus

the notion of scientific objectivity has its roots not in rationality, but rather in the theological displacement of God outside all things. This aberrant form of transcendence is, essentially, the mantle scientific objectivity theoretically takes to itself.

This idealized 'transcendent objectivity' is complemented by the elevation of the human reason as the power that can master reality. Reason, in the modern sense, is a manifestation of the will to power. It therefore stands in the same relation to reality as the transcendent divine will which is likewise understood as the essential relation of God to reality. Thus the manner in which modern thought is committed to the knowledge of reality derives from the relegation of God outside reality and the subsequent enthroning of the human reason into a seat equal with God.

I would like to make it quite clear that I am not critiquing scientific method itself here. My concern is only to bring to notice the unobserved metaphysical assumptions that underlie the modern commitment to scientific method as a commitment to truth or reality. This commitment does not lie in the method, but is concealed from view by the claim that it is nothing but method, and as such neutral towards reality. The method does not do itself, any more than chess plays itself. Nor is it a matter of practising scientists failing to grasp the metaphysical presuppositions underlying their commitment to truth. Our age in general shares the same commitment and the same concealed metaphysical assumptions, grounded in the relegation of God outside reality as divine will. Hence the modern disputes about the existence of God concern the question of the causation, control or intervention of God in nature, and so God is thought about, both by theologians and materialists, as a kind of super engineer.

Again, it is not a matter of critiquing this situation. The really important thing, philosophically speaking, is the hiddenness of the prevailing metaphysical view, which is so hidden that it is generally assumed that metaphysics plays no part at all in modern thinking. Nor should this surprise us. In Plato's dialogues Socrates shows us over and again that thought has the power to deceive itself or lead the mind up false trails. This raises the fundamental question of the relation of thought to reality. It is in the understanding of this relation that we see the great shifts in western philosophy and consequently in notions of the manifest world.

If we glance back over western thought from the Presocratics up to

the Renaissance we discern a way of coming at this question which now seems lost. First of all, everything that exists is oriented towards being known. The correlate of this is that the human mind is oriented to the knowledge of things. Secondly, the 'truth' of things is their 'being'. Thirdly, every being is related to the inner core of every other being. Fourthly, being is open to the totality of all that is.

Let us take each of these in turn. Everything that exists is oriented towards being known. This perhaps sounds strange in our time because we do not usually regard things as disclosing their being, as presencing before the presence of everything. Nevertheless, in ancient times and up until the modern era all things were considered as presenting themselves into existence, as affirming their being and proclaiming their truth. Metaphysically, this is because, as we said earlier, the intelligibility of things is their first principle or their true reality. In Christian theology this ancient understanding is assimilated into the act of God creating things through knowing them into being. The real being or essence of things is their knowledge in God, where they are pure act of knowing continuous with God's act of knowing Himself.

From this follows the second principle: that the truth of things is the same as the being of things. That is to say, truth is not a property of things distinct from their being. Therefore knowing the truth of things is the same as knowing their being. Truth is not, in the modern sense, an intellectual abstraction of things, or a theory or representation of them. To know the truth of things is to be present to their being through being.

This brings us to the third principle: every being is related to the core of being of every other being. In this relation lies the unity of all beings and the corresponding potential for knowledge of the totality of all things, our fourth principle. The unity of things is not to be found on any lower plane than their being, although that unity is reflected on each plane lower than being, such as in the natural order of things, in the common elements of things, and in the distinctness of each thing from another. Relationship is primarily between essence and essence. The essence of things is their being, and the being of things is their truth.

This stands as a corrective to the general misunderstanding of Plato's Ideas or Ideal Forms. It is usually assumed that Plato is proposing that beyond the visibility of things there stand universal notions or concepts, of which the visible things are mere shadows.

The Greek word *eidōs* does not mean this, it means the actual presence or manifestation of things to mind. This actuality of things is to be distinguished from their incidental properties, such as colour, weight or measure and so on. The Ideas are the reality or truth of things in so far as they are the being of things. Everything that appears before the senses is a disclosure of its being or truth to the mind, while mind, in this sense, is the openness of being to the intelligibility or truth of being. Mind is primarily oriented towards the truth of things and is by nature correlate with the truth of things. That is the first thing Aristotle says in his *Metaphysics*. Plato's Ideas or ideal Forms are not, as is commonly supposed, offered as a theory of knowledge but rather as articulating the normally hidden relation of the mind to the actual presence of things. It is the openness of the intelligence to the truth of things that is really meant here, and therefore a quite different understanding of the mind to that of the modern age.

This correlation between the orientation of things towards being known and the potential of the mind to know the inner core of the being of things is re-articulated by Aquinas in his *The Disputed Questions on Truth* where he says:

This is possible only if there really exists some entity essentially designed to conform with everything there is. Of such a nature, indeed, is the human soul, which in a certain sense is all in all The soul, however, possesses the power of knowledge and of will. Conformity of being and will, then, is called 'good' Conformity of being and knowledge is called 'true'. (*De veritate*, 1.1)

Notice Aquinas uses the word 'conform' here. He does not speak of the soul grasping things or making representations of them, but of the soul conforming itself to them. The soul, by its very nature, is open to everything there is and therefore able to conform itself to the truth of things, which is to say, it receives the being of things which are formed in the mind of God. It is this capacity of the soul to conform itself to the truth of things which is linked with the biblical notion of the soul being made in the image of God. The open *receptivity* of the human soul mirrors the infinite *creativity* of the mind of God. This receptivity of the human soul to all that exists, stated many times explicitly by Aquinas, is only implicit in Plato, Aristotle or Augustine. For example in the *Symposium* the ascent of the soul to Absolute

Beauty assumes the capacity of the soul to make such an ascent and become immortal like Absolute Beauty itself. On the other hand, we have to keep in mind that for Plato 'mind' or 'reason' were universals in which the human individual participated. The modern notion of the self-enclosed human subject, able to reflect only on its own private consciousness, comes with Descartes and his time when 'reason' was no longer understood as a primary part of the being of all things. Thus there are always in any era corresponding notions of human nature which complement notions of the reality of things, that is, an anthropology corresponding with cosmology.

In contrast to the enclosed Cartesian subject, for Aquinas the soul is *most itself* when it is conformed to the universal being of all things, open to all in all. It is most itself then because it is united with that which is most real, most true and most good. In being with the being of all beings it dwells most closely with itself, is most its own nature. To suppose the mind is closed to reality is like saying the eye is closed to light. The mind is more receptive to the truth of things than the eye is to light, because truth is its natural habitat. As Aquinas puts it, 'The only objects our mind apprehends directly are universal essences', 'it cannot perceive in any primary and immediate manner the specifics of a given material object' (*Summa Theologiae* 1, 86, 1). This is because what is most immediate to mind is the intelligible realm, not the objects of sense. Nor are the universal essences of things an abstraction of things taken together, all essences are universal. Thus the essence of a particular man is mankind as such, and mankind as such is what most belongs to each particular man. So 'mankind' is not an abstraction compounded of all individuals, nor a detached image from which each derive their being, but rather the true actuality of each. To put it another way, the essence of each individual is what is most universal about them, since all essences are universal. Further, it is this direct or unmediated knowledge of essence which makes possible the perception of material things in their distinctness, because particulars cannot be known without first a knowledge of universals.

In the *Republic* Plato draws an analogy of this with the sun making animals or other objects visible. Without the universal light of the sun nothing at all would be visible to sight. In the ascent from the cave, the object is finally to see the sun itself, by virtue of which everything else is visible, even reflections and shadows. Sight is here analogous to the intellect, and the sun analogous to that which is truly real:

this power of elevating the highest principle in the soul to the contemplation of that which is best in existence, with which we may compare the raising of that faculty which is the very light of the body to the sight of that which is brightest in the material and visible world—this power is given, as I was saying, by all that study and pursuit of the arts which has been described. (*Republic* VII, 533)

The arts mentioned here are the various sciences or branches of learning which, for Plato, prepare the mind for the intellectual contemplation of universals but which, of themselves, cannot grasp universals or essences, or true being. Knowledge of the universals is through dialectic alone:

Then dialectic, and dialectic alone, goes directly to the first principle and is the only science which does away with hypotheses in order to make her ground secure; the eye of the soul, which is literally buried in an outlandish slough, is by her gentle aid lifted upwards; and she uses as handmaids and helpers in the work of conversion, the sciences which we have been discussing.

Note here that dialectic ‘does away with hypotheses’, securing itself in reality itself without any images or representations of that reality. This distinction is very important because it is, I believe, where modern interpreters of Plato tend to go astray. When we speak of ‘truth’, ‘reality’, ‘essence’, ‘being’ and so forth we are most likely to conceive of these as referring to things we do not directly know, but which we nevertheless hold to be true. Our conceptions of them are not the things themselves. This, roughly speaking, is what Plato means by hypotheses. We may even grant ourselves an intuition of their actuality, but still we do not truly know them. Grasped only in this limited way our thought will go astray in thinking about them or from them. A very good example of this is when we seek proofs of them. There cannot be proofs of first principles, because proofs depend on first principles. But more than this, since these can be known directly in themselves they are in no need of proof. The truly real is the only evidence of itself because it does not follow from anything else beside itself. It follows from this that anyone who does not possess the knowledge of these things cannot impart them adequately in discourse. As Plato says:

Until the person is able to abstract and define rationally the idea of good, and unless he can run the gauntlet of all objections, and is ready to disprove them, not by appeals to opinion, but to absolute truth, never faltering at any step of the argument—unless he can do all this, you would say that he knows neither the idea of good nor any other good; he apprehends only a shadow, if anything at all, which is given by opinion and not by science.

This 'adequate discourse' Plato considers as most important because it is only through discourse that the intellect can gain the strength to distinguish between reality and appearance or between concept and reality itself. As he says in the *Timaeus*, speech is given by the gods to man in order that he may speak the truth. The words 'dialogue' and 'dialectic' really mean 'through speech' or 'through logos'.

Thus, for example, in the study of geometry it is one thing to recognize its various axioms and hypotheses, but quite another to see whence these derive their existence as concepts.

In the passage just quoted from the *Republic* Plato switches from apprehending first principles or essences to the reality or truth of the Good. We are familiar with the Platonic trinity, the Good, the True and the Beautiful. So far we have been looking at reality in terms of the true, in which sense the real and the true are the same. There is a sense also in which the real and the good are the same. This does not mean that there is something good about the real, but that the reality of the real is the same as the good.

To understand the meaning of this it may be helpful to contrast it with the general modern idea of reality. In the prevailing ways of thinking reality is regarded as neutral, value-free, objective and static. There is no ethical or moral dimension to reality. The 'good' is relegated, once again, to human subjectivity. This notion of the good permeates every academic discipline—the sciences, the social sciences and the humanities. There is a complete split between the understanding of the real and the good. Thus there is also a complete split between the desire for knowledge and the desire for good, manifest in the conflicts that arise in the progress of technology and the environment, or the progress of medicine and the ethical problems of genetics, or the application of market theories and social justice. In modern thinking the real seems to pull one way and the good another

way, as though reality and the good were at variance with one another.

This split arises, in Platonic terms, from a misapprehension of the real itself. That is to say, the real has become a mere notion of things distinct from their essence or being. This is evident if we consider the Platonic understanding of the good which was understood clearly until the close of the Renaissance. This understanding may be expressed briefly in the formula: the good is the full actualization of being. All things strive for the perfection of their own being. This is the dynamic aspect of being or reality, of reality as act, of being underway. In the realm of becoming it is the being that all growth or development strives towards, the actualization of its potential. The potential of being is its own essential being becoming actual to itself.

This understanding of the good is manifest in the harmony or unity of reality. Since the essence of every being is universal, so the relations of all beings are universal. The particular good and the common good are the same, identical. The complement to this is that 'evil' is, so to speak, the split of being from itself, or the separation of particular being from universal being. It follows from this that any conception of reality which fragments it, or sees one aspect as conflicting with another, fails to grasp the good, which is the principle of unity. Or, to put that another way, any notion of the good which does a harm to any part of reality is a false notion of the good. The good is *first* universal and secondarily particular. It also follows from this that the real good of any particular being is simultaneously the good of all being.

This understanding of the good belongs to the understanding of the real or the true. The real, the true and the good cannot be in conflict because they are essentially the same.

All this has a correspondence in human nature. In Plato we find that the quest for wisdom is always coupled with the quest for virtue. This is so not merely because it is nice if the wise are also virtuous, but because both wisdom and virtue come from the same conformation of the intelligence to being or reality. Perhaps the most obvious example of this in Plato's work is in the *Republic* which, after a long enquiry into the nature of justice, finally arrives at the conclusion that only the just man knows justice, because being and knowing are the same. Justice is knowledge in act, it is a dynamic aspect of being, and it depends upon a true apprehension of reality in which the universal good and the particular good are seen to be the same.

This understanding of the identity of being, reality and the good, which is the essence of everything, endured in western thought until the theory of knowledge became displaced by the theory of empiricism, where practical ends displaced the higher aim of knowledge which was unity with reality. It is important to note, however, that the principles of empiricism are not modern but were clearly known to the Greek philosophers, including Plato and Aristotle. The shift is not therefore due to a new method, as is so often claimed, but to the notion taking hold that the *empirical investigation of things would grasp metaphysical reality*. The consequence of this belief is that the ancient philosophers are seen by empiricists as seeking through mere speculation the things which science seeks by more rational means. So the two orders of knowledge are no longer distinguished. This state of affairs presents an enormous challenge in our time, but this challenge, although belonging to society as a whole, belongs primarily to philosophers and theologians. Strictly speaking, it does not matter so much if the scientists believe they are investigating the metaphysical truth of things, what really matters is that the philosophers have for a long time followed after them and imitated empirical methods, and the theologians likewise. The challenge lies not in method, but in the manner of thinking truth itself, and therefore in the manner in which the human intelligence dwells in reality.

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