

## Three Disappearing Ladders in Plato

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Kenneth Dorter

Let there always be non-being so we may see their subtlety,  
And let there always be being so we may see their outcome.

—Lao Tzu

The crucial importance of rhetoric for Plato is most evident in the *Phaedrus*, where Plato, after devoting the first half of the dialogue to eros and the love of wisdom, devotes the second half to rhetoric. At first this juxtaposition of themes seems to represent a disunity in the dialogue, one that is especially surprising in a work that ridicules discourses that lack a unified and consecutive structure (263d–264e).<sup>1</sup> But the pairing of those themes ceases to seem a mere juxtaposition once we remember that the philosopher returns to the cave: the achiever of wisdom seeks to impart it to others, and so we must concern ourselves not only with discovery, but also with communication.

Philosophers who believe they have found a stable conception of truth need only a straightforward means to communicate that truth persuasively. But philosophers for whom truth can never be definitively mastered, and for whom the formulation even of that limited truth can only be provisional, require a rhetoric that functions in both a positive and negative way. Positively, it must lead the reader to experience the insights that they want to communicate; negatively, it must somehow convey that the formulations by which it does so are only functional and not foundational. The formulations must in some way efface themselves once they have fulfilled their function as guides. They must, in other words, be ladders that contrive to disappear lest they be confused with their destination, and they must do so by subtle means so that their effectiveness is not sabotaged too early.

Plato has been associated with each of these conceptions—the foundational and the provisional—by different readers. Those who assign him to the first category include the proponents of “Platonism,” whether the written or unwritten variety,<sup>2</sup> as well as commentators who see Plato as an early contributor to their own disciplines.<sup>3</sup> The

case for the rival view was initiated in this century most prominently by German commentators like Paul Friedländer, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and (in a different way) Leo Strauss, who argue that in the literary dimension of the idealogue Plato shows the limitations and hidden complexities of what appear on the surface to be straightforward doctrines. A radicalization of the German hermeneutical approach followed in French postmodernism (especially Derrida), which emphasizes the aporetic element in Plato virtually to the exclusion of any positive teachings.<sup>4</sup>

Both doctrinal and aporetic elements are present in Plato, and the tension between them is one of the factors that makes Plato's thought provocative and challenging to so many different traditions. Although Plato's writings are full of apparent doctrines like the sovereignty of the good, the theory of forms, the doctrine of recollection, and the tripartite soul, Plato always juxtaposes these doctrines with warnings of their inadequacy. Two places where Socrates gives explicit warnings of this kind—just prior to his development of the concept of the tripartite soul and also to that of the Divided Line<sup>5</sup>—also show us why such warnings are necessary, that is, why wisdom can never be attained in a definitive way. The tripartite soul shows that reason is always limited by the distorting demands of ambition (spiritedness) and appetite: the self-discipline that we must combine with reason in order to attain wisdom (*Republic* 430e–431b, cf. 442b–444a) can never be fully attained because the exigencies of the body and ego are incessant (e.g., *Phaedo* 66a–67a, 107a–b).<sup>6</sup> And the Divided Line shows that the body limits reason not only in the realm of desire (spiritedness and appetite), but also in the realm of knowledge itself, for rational knowledge must begin from sense perception and yet continually struggle against it.

From warnings of this kind about our cognitive limitations, it is not hard to see how the Academy in later generations came to be the home to skepticism. However, no one knew better than the author of the *Theaetetus* the paradox that as soon as skepticism is put into the form of a doctrine it destroys itself. When we argue for skepticism by pointing out the limitations of appetite, spiritedness, and sense perception on reason, we can do so only if we are willing to claim that reason, spiritedness, appetite, and sense perception are knowable as "real faculties." Arguments against the existence of knowledge are always as perilous as those in its favor.

It is the doctrinal side of philosophy, however, that is most seriously challenged by the limitations of reason. Skeptics can always content themselves with *ad hoc* refutations of any doctrine that is advanced, but those who profess knowledge must defend something positive. This is especially problematic in the case of metaphysical thinking, where no direct evidence or observation is possible by which to make evident the truth of what is offered. In the *Statesman* the unnamed philosopher from Elea who conducts the inquiries addresses this problem. He remarks that, although in the case of ordinary things we can always make our meaning clear by pointing to concrete examples of the kind of thing we mean, "it is difficult ... to show without paradigms [models or analogies] any of the greater things. For each of us knows everything almost as if in a dream, and then is ignorant as if he has awakened" (277d). Although we can point to no external things as adequate evidence by which to demonstrate the higher truths, there is an *internal* evidence to which we can appeal—a pre-cognitive understanding comparable to the latent knowledge of a forgotten dream that can be activated by taking external things, not as evidence in the logical sense, but as visible paradigms or examples that help us recognize the (implicitly understood) nature of what is not visible. The Eleatic Stranger's example of trying to remember a dream is itself a paradigm of the way we are at a loss with respect to our acquaintance with the most fundamental things. We can at best only dimly understand them, like something we dreamt but cannot quite recall now that we are awake. We need concrete paradigms of wisdom, visible reminders that help us recall and conceive what is so elusive. Thus in the *Republic* the visible operations of the city are primarily intended as paradigms to help us recognize the invisible functioning of the soul (368c–369a and *passim*, especially books 4, 8, and 9).

What the *Statesman* presents in the paradigm of a dimly recollected dream, the palinode of the *Phaedrus* presents in the mythic paradigm of recollection in general. It depicts a time before we were born, when our disembodied—that is, nonspirited, nonappetitive, and nonsensuous—soul could in some sense look directly at these higher truths. When we are born and the soul is embodied, the ego and its clamor all but drive our experience of those truths out of our memory. Therefore, as in the *Statesman*, we need a perceptible paradigm to remind us of these invisible truths. Socrates says,

As we have said, every soul of a human being has, by nature, perceived true being, or it would not have entered into this kind of living thing. But to recollect it from the things here is not easy for everyone.... Indeed, there are very few in whom the power of remembering is sufficiently present; but they, when they see something that resembles one of the things there [true justice, moderation, beauty, wisdom], are amazed and are taken out of themselves, and do not know what they are experiencing, because their senses do not discern it adequately. Now, in the images here of justice and moderation, and whatever else is valued by our souls, there is no brightness, and when we approach the images of them by means of our dim organs, hardly a few of us can perceive the kind of thing that is imaged.... With beauty, however, which as we said shone brightly among the things there, when we approach it here we apprehend it through the clearest of our senses, shining most clearly; for sight is the sharpest of the senses that come through our body. Wisdom is not seen by it—it would arouse a fearful desire if it provided some such likeness of itself to sight—nor those other beloved things. But only beauty is fated to be as manifest and beloved as possible. (249e–250e)

So to be human is to have some sense of true being. But we are normally unable to achieve any *definite* idea of it, and we need to be made aware of it by something more concrete that somehow makes us think of being itself. Socrates mentioned three kinds of “paradigms” that are more concrete in this way: (1) moral virtue like justice and moderation, (2) beauty, and (3) wisdom.

Justice and moderation, on one hand, and wisdom, on the other, aim at goodness and truth respectively, so Socrates’ paradigms imply the familiar triad of beauty, goodness, and truth, which variously represents all that is greatest in human experience: beauty is the sensuous presentation of perfection, moral goodness is the image of perfection in action, and truth is the perfection of thinking.<sup>7</sup> These paradigmatic particularizations of being are the basis of the three Platonic ladders by which we can progress toward wisdom: the ladder of beauty is eros, the ladder of morality is purification, and the ladder of wisdom is dialectic.

Although these ladders constitute a positive teaching, they should not be mistaken for formal doctrines. On one hand, as we shall see in section 4, they overlap and even converge into identity; on the other hand, they can be further differentiated and made to dissolve into subordinate species. More important, despite the detail with which Plato develops the themes of these ladders, within those very details he always plants the seeds of their self-effacement. What from the

outside seem to be doctrines, from the inside disappear into silence—but not the silence of aporia from which they rescued us. The ladders and the means by which they efface themselves represent the positive and negative poles of Platonic rhetoric.

### 1. Purification

The condition that gives rise to Plato’s advocacy of purification is most succinctly stated in the *Timaeus*. There we are told that when the soul (reason), whose nature is unchanging, enters into a body, whose nature is perpetual flux, the rational nature of the soul becomes confused and disordered by the irrationality and contingency of the body. That is why we are at first stupid, clumsy, and ignorant. Gradually, especially when our physical growth slows and the body calms down, the soul returns to a state closer to its proper balance (43a–44c). The irrationality of the embodied self is characterized by two primary urges: that of appetite, which seeks to gratify the needs and urges of the body, and that of spiritedness, which sets us competitively against other creatures, often at the expense of the comfort, well being, or pleasures of the body. Our goal in life, then, is to reestablish the primacy of the eternal principle within us—the soul in its pure state as reason—over the materialism of appetite and the egocentricity of spiritedness. Every virtue leads in this direction.

How are we to achieve this goal? If the *Timaeus* formulates most concisely the predicament that gives rise to the need for purification, it is the *Phaedo* that gives the most vivid account of purification itself, using Socrates’ immanent execution as a symbolic paradigm. The proper way to practice philosophy is to practice death (64a): since death is the separation of the soul from the body (64c), to practice death is to practice liberating our soul from the influence of our body, that is, from devotion to pleasure and from egocentric ambition. Purification is not puritanism, however: we are debarred not from enjoying pleasures but only from taking them seriously, from becoming attached to them (68b–c; cf. *Symposium* 176c).

The distinction between purification and puritanism is a coherent one, but there is a different tension implicit in the apparently straightforward concept of purification, which radically destabilizes it. In the *Republic* the boundaries of purification are delineated in terms of the difference between necessary desires and unnecessary ones: “Those which we are not able to prevent would rightly be called nec-

essary, as would those whose fulfillment benefits us.... Those which someone could eliminate if he practised from youth, and which accomplish nothing good by being present in us ... are not necessary" (558d-559a). Within the realm of appetite three standpoints are possible: the oligarchic, which prefers the necessary pleasures to unnecessary ones (554e); the democratic, which embraces them all equally (561c); and the tyrannic, which subordinates the necessary desires to unnecessary ones (559c). Purification can then be understood as growth in the direction of the oligarchic model and away from the tyrannical one (the two higher constitutions, aristarchy and timarchy, are not relevant here since they are not concerned with appetite). This seems a straightforward doctrine until we notice that the oligarchic model corresponds to the values of the first city that Socrates and Glaucon conceived, the primordial healthy city dedicated to the exchange of the basic necessities of life (although this city is not an oligarchy in the constitutional sense since it is too small to require a government). There too only the necessary desires were gratified (373a). But Glaucon rebelled against this austerity that made it no better than a "city of pigs," and he exerted the pressure to admit luxurious, unnecessary pleasures that led to what Socrates called the feverish city in distinction from this "healthy" one (372d-e). To purify our desires back to the necessary pleasures alone, then, would lead us back to the healthy city. But that is not a path to wisdom: Glaucon called it a city of pigs because life there is in principle no different from that of other animals; it is an entirely corporeal existence with no intellectual or even spirited component.

The path to transcendence, by contrast, leads through the dangerous fevers of the unnecessary desires, which must later be tamed, in the third city, by the control of reason in the person of the philosopher-ruler. The unnecessary desires are the engine of spiritedness—the insatiable appetite no longer for pleasure simply but for "more"—and without the ambition that spiritedness provides, we would forever remain at the level of the animals. The unnecessary desires, like *hybris* in *Oedipus Tyrannos*, are the source both of our greatness and of our greatest danger.<sup>8</sup> Purification can easily lead to sterility instead of enlightenment, to enervation instead of transcendence. When Socrates added that not only "those which we are not able to prevent," but also "those whose fulfillment benefits us," are necessary appetites, then any appetites that benefit us, no matter how unnecessary they may be according to the first criterion, become nec-

essary in a dialectical sense, a negative moment necessary to take us to a higher positive level. Ambition may be unnecessary in itself, a source of war and other evils, but necessary as a means to rise above swinelike contentment. Knowing how to purify ourselves effectively is no simple matter, therefore, and mystical traditions have always warned against mechanical asceticism, pointing out as well that it can also become an instrument of pride rather than humility.

Purification by itself, then, is a delicate matter, not a clearly specifiable doctrine of puritanism or asceticism. We may have a sense of what Plato means by it, but if we try to convert that undefined "sense" into a formal and rigorous doctrine, it evaporates and leaves us with nothing.

## 2. Dialectic

If we can think of ourselves as a rational soul that is contaminated by corporeal elements from which it needs to be purified, this can also be expressed by saying that within us is a latent wisdom that needs to be recollected. Purification and recollection are interdependent: the more we free ourselves from devotion to the corporeal, the more clearly will our latent innate understanding emerge; and the more vividly we experience divine truth, the easier will it be to resist the specious attractions of the physical world. The self-mastery by which reason governs the two mortal parts of the tripartite soul (cf. *Timaeus* 69c) and our upward ascent along the Divided Line of knowledge are essentially inseparable.

The stages of the dialectical ascent are depicted in the paradigms of the Divided Line and the Cave midway through the *Republic* (509d-535a). In the Cave allegory, the lowest level of the line, *eikasia* ("image-thinking"), is represented by prisoners who are chained within the cave so as to see only the shadows of the artifacts that are carried behind them in front of a fire. The prisoners compete for honors and prizes "for him who most sharply discerns [the shadows] that go by, and best remembers which of them customarily pass by earlier, later, or together, and who is most able to prophesy from these things what is about to happen" (516c7-d2). *Eikasia*, then, refers to the way we form expectations on the basis of past associations alone, without knowing anything about the real causes of events. Only those who become free of their chains can discern the true causes, that is, the fire and the people carrying the artifacts. This level is *pistis* ("be-

lief"), the understanding of physical causality. *Eikasia* and *pistis* are subdivisions of *doxa* or "opinion," the lower half of the Divided Line, which corresponds to the visible world of becoming. The casual principles that *pistis* understands are therefore the principles of physical causality only. The next step is to move to the causal ground of becoming as a whole, that is, to the realm of being. Having moved from effect to cause in the transition from *eikasia* to *pistis*, we next pass to the cause or ground of the whole system of cause and effect (*pistis* and *eikasia*) that constitutes the physical world, that is, to the intelligible principles of which all physical existence is a manifestation. This happens in two stages.

When we first posit intelligible principles underlying the visible world, and deduce consequences from our positing of them, we practice *dianoia*, the deduction of consequences from hypotheses (*Republic* 510b–c). Whereas *pistis* proceeded upward, from physical effect to physical cause, *dianoia* at a higher level proceeds downward, from intelligible cause to intelligible effect (as *eikasia* proceeded downward from memory to prediction). The path of the other, final level of thinking, dialectic, is to counter this downward movement by an upward movement from intelligible effects to intelligible causes, from hypotheses, not to consequences, but to presuppositions. We ask, for example, not what *follows* from mathematical postulates such as number, relation, and quantity, but what is *presupposed* by them. We overcome *dianoia* by *noēsis*, that is, the method of hypothesis: we progressively supersede our presuppositions by at each level deriving them from more comprehensive ones<sup>9</sup> until we arrive at the "unhypothetical" principle of the Idea of Good (510b, 511b). Once we understand the goodness of what is, we have seen the effects in light of the ultimate cause. And to know the good is also to know truth and beauty (508e); the *Phaedrus*'s implicit trinity is present here as well.

Only in the *Republic*, however, does Plato even hypothesize that this goal might actually be reached, and even there the reliability of the method of inquiry is repeatedly thrown into doubt (435c, 504b–e, and 543c–d). In the other dialogues, wisdom is consistently held to be impossible for embodied creatures like ourselves. The *Republic* itself never claims to represent an actualizable state of affairs; it is posited only as a model of what perfect justice would look like in a "soul writ large." Not only is the possibility of attaining this state repeatedly questioned (472e, 541a, and 592a–b), but so fragile is it

that even if attained it would almost immediately be destabilized as a result of the inability of the rulers to implement correctly the wisdom they have attained (546a–b).

This conception of wisdom was predicated on the possibility of drawing a rigid distinction between opinion and knowledge. True knowledge can only be of forms, for only forms are stable—beings rather than becomings—and knowledge differs from opinion by virtue of its infallibility (*Republic* 477e); cognition of unstable changing things cannot be infallible and must therefore be opinion rather than knowledge (478c–479d). Conversely, because opinion is by nature fallible, it cannot be cognition of the forms: since they are stable unities, to know them at all is to know them infallibly. So of the forms we can have knowledge, but not opinion, and of changing things we can have opinion, but not knowledge.

All this seems clear-cut in book 5—it is Plato's "doctrine of forms"—but under scrutiny the doctrine begins to lose its apparent substantiality. In the next book we discover that Socrates, who professes to have no knowledge of the form of the good, finally though reluctantly agrees to state his "opinions" about that form (variants of *δόξα* and *δοκεῖν* appear seven times from *Republic* 506b–e). How is this possible after he establishes that only knowledge is of being, while opinion must only be of becoming? In fact, the argument by which that distinction was established not only is patently invalid, but is preceded by one of Plato's warning alarms. Glaucon asks Socrates what he meant by saying that philosophers are "those who are lovers of the sight of truth" (475a) and Socrates responds by distinguishing truth or "what is" from "becoming"—that is, from that which is in between what is and what is not—and correlatively knowledge from opinion. Before doing so, however, he immediately responds to Glaucon by saying, "It would not at all be easy to do this with anyone else, but you, I think, will agree with me about this" (475e). When we look at the climax of the argument, we can appreciate why it would not have been at all easy to get anyone else to agree:

(1) "In the case of capacities [like seeing and hearing] I do not see any color or shape or any other such quality ... to which I can look in order to distinguish them for myself from one another. ... The only thing I can look to is what it is directed to and what it accomplishes. ... That which is directed to the same things and accomplishes the same thing I call the same, while that which is

directed to different things and accomplishes something different I call different" (477c-d).

(2) The capacities of knowledge and opinion are different from each other because the former is infallible and the latter fallible (477e-478a).

(3) Since different capacities are directed to and accomplish different things (1), and opinion is different from knowledge (2), then, since knowledge is directed to being, opinion must be directed to something else, that is, becoming (478a-479c).

Glaucon is a "friendly witness" and does not scrutinize the argument very carefully, despite its controversial conclusion that knowledge and opinion can never be directed to the same things. But it is easy to see that the argument turns on an equivocation. The first and third steps treat the phrase "what it is directed to and what it accomplishes" as a *conjunction*, both terms of which must be satisfied if capacities are to be distinguishable from each other. The second step, however, treats them as a *disjunction*, either term of which may be satisfied. And so the argument infers, from the satisfaction of one condition ("what it accomplishes" is different) in step 2, that the other condition ("what it is directed to" is different) must have been satisfied as well.<sup>10</sup> Although Glaucon did not see anything amiss, three pages<sup>11</sup> after the conclusion of the argument Adeimantus says,

Socrates, no one would be able to contradict these statements of yours, but those who hear you experience something like this whenever you speak as you did now. They think that, because of their inexperience in asking and answering questions, they are led astray by the argument a little bit at each question, and when these little bits are put together at the end of the discussion, a great falsehood appears that is the opposite to the first things they said. (*Republic* 487a-b)

Adeimantus's words are directed not at the conclusion we have been looking at, but at a further conclusion that is drawn from it on the basis of a new argument (to the effect that philosophers ought to rule the city), but it is a criticism that applies even more strongly to the earlier one, as Plato—who had put a preliminary warning into the mouth of Socrates at 475e—must have realized.

In book 1 Socrates defeated Thrasymachus by tricking him into accepting a fatal oversimplification of the issues.<sup>12</sup> Socrates virtually admits as much at the end of the book (*Republic* 354b-c), and Glaucon scolds him at the beginning of book 2 for his prior oversimplifica-

tions (357a). It is common for Plato to have his characters argue by oversimplification, while dropping hints that encourage his audience to pursue the issues to a deeper level. Socrates does respond to Glaucon's and Adeimantus's request to give a more adequate defense of justice, but continues to drop hints that here too he is still taking shortcuts, as we have seen. Plato never stopped constructing ladders from models and metaphors, to facilitate our ascent to a higher level of understanding, but he always balanced them with aporetic signals that warn us against confusing the ladder with the reality.

In the present case, there is no question that for Plato it is important to distinguish between knowledge and opinion, and between being and becoming. But there is always the risk, which Aristotle clearly appreciated in his criticisms of Plato's theory of forms, of distinguishing the members of these pairs too rigidly. If being is separated too absolutely from becoming, it can never function as the cause and essential nature of transient things; and if knowledge is separated too absolutely from opinion, how can we use the fallible as a starting point to aim at the infallible? Socrates may well have had good reasons for his apparent slip when he spoke in book 6 of having "opinions" of the Idea of the good (506b-e).

The counterpart of the *Republic* is the *Parmenides*, where Plato illustrates the conceptual limitations of the *Republic's* metaphysics by showing the inability of young Socrates to give an effective conceptual account of the theory when its metaphorical evasions are challenged. In the trilogy that follows, another dialectical ladder is offered: from the sterile empiricism of the *Theaetetus*, through the eidetic but value-free analysis of the *Sophist*, to the *Statesman's* ultimate grounding of thinking in the value-grounding doctrine of the "mean." But just when we think we have reached the top of that ladder, we find we have been going around in a circle, for the whole argument of the *Statesman* is fundamentally cyclical in a way that Plato can hardly have been unaware of: the final definition of the statesman in that dialogue begins as a continuation of the shepherd division (287b), but ends by subsuming the latter within itself. The *ultimate* description of statesmanship, as a science that supervises rather than acting directly, precisely coincides with the *opening* distinctions of the "shepherd division" at the beginning of the dialogue, the Eleatic Stranger's initial attempt to define the statesman. In the first step he differentiates statesmanship from other sciences insofar as it is intellectual rather than practical (258d-e); in the second step he further identifies

it as directive rather than critical (260b); and in the third step as originating rather than transmitting orders (258d–261a). Since statesmanship is thus defined at the outset as being neither practical nor transmissive, the territory that remains already excludes “acting directly”; and since it is intellectual and directive, its supervisory nature is already established. For Plato to repeat these same distinctions at the end of the dialogue as if they needed to be derived from what preceded, and are not the absolute starting point they appeared to be at the beginning of the dialogue, creates a fundamental circularity in the argument as a whole.<sup>13</sup>

The ladder of dialectic, like that of purification, vanishes as soon as we try to grasp hold of it, regardless of whether dialectic is conceived on the noetic model of the method of hypothesis (*Republic* and *Phaedo*) or the dianoetic model of the method of division (*Sophist* and *Statesman*).

### 3. Eros

The image of a ladder derives from the *Symposium*, which describes eros as involving an ascent up a stairway (*ἐπιαναβαθμοίς*, 211c). Socrates relates a lesson given to him by the priestess Diotima, for whom eros functions as an instrument of our desire for immortality. The first part of her lesson, she tells Socrates, describes rites of eros that “even you could probably be initiated into” (209e). These practices take eros as the desire for immortality in the most obvious sense—as the perpetuation of ourselves through our offspring, whether offspring of our body or of our soul. When we are pregnant in body or soul, we seek a beautiful body or soul in which to beget our offspring: a beautiful body in whom to plant our seed and give birth to biological children, or a beautiful mind in which to conceive and plant our thoughts and give birth to “wisdom and the rest of virtue” (208e–209c).

But these practices are all for the sake of higher mysteries (*τέλεα καὶ ἐποπτικά*), and, for reasons she does not explain, Diotima does not know whether Socrates will be capable of initiation into them. According to the higher mysteries, the initiate must climb a stairway of beauty that carries us up four stages: (1) love of a beautiful body, (2) love of what is common to all beautiful bodies, (3) recognition of the greater value of beauty in souls than in bodies (the beauty of actions and laws), and (4) the vision of beauty itself. “Then alone will it come about for him, who is seeing the beautiful in the way it can be

seen, to give birth not to images of virtue, since he is not in touch with images, but true virtue, since he is in touch with truth” (212a). Here again, both in the lower and higher mysteries, beauty, goodness, and truth coincide.

The account of eros in the *Phaedrus* agrees with this one in some ways but differs in others. As in the *Symposium*, physical things that are beautiful lead us to think of “true” beauty (249d), which is connected with moral goodness (250a–b). The *Phaedrus*, however, places great emphasis on the passionate nature of love (251b–252a), which is mentioned only in passing in the *Symposium* (207a–208c). More important, in the *Phaedrus*, Socrates does not talk of loving common denominators (beautiful bodies or souls *in general*) rather than individuals. We do not pass beyond loving the individual. However, what is missed by commentators who take this difference as evidence that Plato has now become more humanistic is that we love individuals, not *for* their individuality, but rather insofar as they are representative of something beyond themselves. For that reason, what interests Socrates in the *Phaedrus* is ultimately not individuality but typology (in a way that anticipates Jung’s theory of psychological types and archetypes). Some of us are by nature followers of Zeus, others are followers of Hera, or Apollo, or one of the other gods, and we fall in love with someone whose nature accords with that of our god, someone who is “our type.” We then seek as much as possible to encourage and foster in that person what is godlike in this way, and to make that person into visible images of the divine for us (252d–253c).<sup>14</sup>

If we ask why the account in the *Phaedrus* differs so much from that of the *Symposium*, there is no need for speculations about Plato’s love life and theories about whether, after he had written the *Symposium*, some decisive event suddenly made him aware for the first time of the value of loving relationships (see, e.g., Nussbaum 1986, chaps. 6 and 7). The answer is already implicit in the fact that Socrates’ speech in the *Symposium* is really by the priestess Diotima who openly doubts Socrates’ ability to pass from the lower mysteries to the higher ones while his speech in the *Phaedrus* is by Socrates himself.<sup>15</sup> In the lower mysteries of Diotima’s speech, we seek to achieve immortality through procreation, whether of children of our body or of children of our soul, the latter case including either virtues (like wisdom, moderation, and justice) or teachings (like the proper ordering of cities). These descriptions all apply to the practices of Socrates, whose newest baby made an appearance in the *Phaedo* when Socrates was about

seventy, and who continually discoursed on the virtues and on politics. As a family man, however, Socrates cannot follow the higher mysteries and love all beautiful things equally—all beautiful souls equally and all beautiful bodies equally—for then he must renounce his special duty to his family and live unattached to the world, like the priestess whose doctrine this is (and like the philosopher-rulers of the *Republic*). Socrates cannot be the author of this speech because he has neither experienced nor, as far as we can tell, even desired the complete renunciation of worldly attachments that the speech describes. His own speech in the *Phaedrus* supplies a “middle way,” something more ambitious and high-minded than the procreative immortality of the lower mysteries, but not requiring the consecrated world-renunciation of a priest. We may devote ourselves to loving individual human beings as long as we see that what makes them most worthy of love is the way the divine is present within them. If the *Phaedrus* is more humanistic than the *Symposium*, it is not because the intelligible realm of the divine is any less exalted over the visible realm of the human than it was in the *Symposium* and other “middle” dialogues, but because the proposed way of reaching the divine makes more concessions to the worldly circumstances in which most of us live.

But behind even the *Phaedrus*'s more user-friendly ladder lies something that threatens to destroy it. According to the myth of Socrates' palinode, Hestia stays home while “the twelve leading gods each lead their companies” around the heavens. Since Hestia is the goddess of the hearth, it is not surprising that she is at home, but what is the significance of this detail for the myth—why does Socrates make a point of mentioning it? By excluding Hestia from the procession of the twelve, Socrates is tacitly including Dionysus, for one or the other of them was considered the twelfth god of the pantheon.<sup>16</sup> But if Dionysus is a member of the pantheon, then some of us are legitimately his followers, and when they fall in love it is proper for them to celebrate the attributes and values of Dionysus in their love. This, however, goes against everything that has been said so far. The ladders of eros, knowledge, and purification all move from the direction of passionate embodiment to that of calm disembodied contemplation. But that is the way of Apollo, not Dionysus. Dionysus is present in the intensification of passion, rather than the cleansing of it; in the frenzy of corporeal irrationality, rather than its dissolution into the clarity of reason; in the loss of control, rather than in

self-mastery. It is not surprising, then, that Plato acknowledges Dionysus's legitimacy only indirectly, but he acknowledges it in numerous passages besides the one cited here.<sup>17</sup> The spirit of Dionysus is never entirely absent from the middle part of the dialogue, which is pervaded by the theme of madness in all its manifestations.<sup>18</sup>

In the *Symposium*, the Dionysian pole is often expressly subordinated to the Apollonian one. We are told, for example, of Socrates' mastery over wine, the Dionysian sacrament *par excellence*: it was matter of indifference to Socrates whether he drank it or not, and when he did drink it, it had no effect on him (176c and 223c–d). The Dionysian also makes an appearance in the powerful Bacchic presence of the drunken, overwhelming Alcibiades—who was unable, however, either on this occasion or on the previous ones mentioned in his speech, to perturb Socrates' Apollonian composure. Nevertheless, ascetic as the *Symposium* is, it still gives the Dionysian its due in several passages that describe the mad or irrational behavior of lovers (e.g., 183a, 207a–c, and 208c). Nor should we forget that the dramatic occasion of the *Symposium* is a Dionysian festival.

Plato cannot explicitly accommodate the Dionysian ladder of mysticism without destabilizing his own exhortations for achieving transcendence through emotional control, but neither can he pretend that it does not exist. The ladder of eros, then, is as little susceptible to unambiguous formulaic advocacy—and thus as insubstantial—as were those of purification and dialectic.

#### 4. Conclusion

The non-Dionysian ladders all overlap. To follow to its end the higher way of eros in the *Symposium* is to renounce particular attachments and thus to practice purification; even the moderate path of eros in the *Phaedrus* requires the purging of our more irrational impulses (253c–256e). The way of eros also combines with that of recollective dialectic because it is beauty that most strongly “reminds” us of all of higher truth (250d–e). Finally, the way of dialectic is inseparable from that of purification because only by ridding ourselves of attachments to corporeal things can we remove the distractions to our attention, the static that interferes with our vision of truth; only by ordering the tripartite soul can we ascend the Divided Line. So what seemed to be three distinct ladders becomes something far more complicated and intricate.



The concept of ladders is problematic, not only because it conveys the image of horizontal discreteness, but also (and more importantly) because it conveys the image of vertical linearity. Plato was a dialectical, rather than linear, thinker: purification cannot dispense with unnecessary desires, conceptual knowledge can never escape aporia, and love of the rational cannot entirely escape the irrationality of love. Every doctrine effaces itself eventually. But this does not mean that Plato's thought disappears into incoherence or skepticism. For Plato, philosophy must posit provisional models or paradigms of the highest things, however much those paradigms can never be free of fundamental tensions. Although no point of view is without perspective of some kind, and no philosophy is definitively universal and unlimited, to acknowledge perspective is not to embrace relativism. The different perspectives are directed toward a common reality, and what we see owes at least as much to what is glimpsed of that reality as it does to the standpoint from which it is glimpsed.

In all three realms the path of paradigms formally contradicts the path of aporetic. In the realm of thought, the aporetic thinker seems to the constructive philosopher to be a skeptic and misologist, and to the aporetic the constructive thinker seems doctrinaire, a builder of arbitrary models that are insensitive to the differences among things. But if philosophy, love of wisdom, can never be reduced to absolute wisdom, if no definitive and exclusive comprehensive formulation of reality is possible in words, then constructive dialectic and aporia need each other. Without aporia, dialectic eventually becomes satisfied with a particular formulation of truth and falls into dogmatic slumber; while aporia, without a dialectical or interpretive moment, remains in silence if not ignorance.

In the realm of action, a person pursuing goodness by means of purification may seem cold and self-centered to one who pursues it through good works,<sup>19</sup> while the latter may seem to the former to be earthbound and attached. We each make an effort in the hope of accomplishing something, so to practice moral effort is inevitably to run the risk of becoming attached to the goals of that effort. Conversely, to attempt to reduce our attachment to temporal things is to run the risk of becoming indifferent to them. However incompatible these paths may seem when looked at in a merely formal way, in fact whoever succeeds at one succeeds at both because love without attachment is an unselfish and therefore deeper love.

The same is true of the contradictions among the different paths of eros, even between the extremes of Diotima's haughty Apollonian eros and the dangerous Dionysianism of Alcibiades. Unless Diotima feels the same needy intensity as Alcibiades—although directed to the divine rather than the human—her mortal nature remains in control and no genuine transcendence can take place.<sup>20</sup> And in the case of Alcibiades we should not forget that what he loves in Socrates is not Socrates' fallible humanity but his divine goodness (cf. 215c, 216d–217a, 218d, 219d, and 222a). If he were able to keep his Bacchic passion focused on the god and virtue he perceives in Socrates, rather than constantly confusing it with the appetitive and egocentric gratification of sexual conquest, that passion would eventually lead to transcendence. But Dionysian eros must include an element of direction and control, just as Apollonian eros must include one of passion.

For Plato, philosophy operates by means of constructive models or paradigms—the forms, the good, the soul, virtue, beauty, the divine—and in that sense formulates positive doctrines. But these can never be more than provisional formulations: they help us recognize the invisible reality on which the visible is founded, but they can indicate it to us only through images, not as it is in itself. So that we do not confuse the image with the reality and get stuck in place, the image must always dissolve under pressure, like a mirage that draws us forward but disappears when we get close enough to embrace it.

In the *Symposium*, love of theoretical knowledge is at the fourth level of the higher mysteries—after (1) love of a particular body, (2) love of corporeal beauty in general, and (3) love of beautiful practices in souls—but even theoretical knowledge is no more than a propaedeutic for a fifth stage:

After practices he must be led (4) to kinds of knowledge, in order that he may now see the beauty of knowledges, ... looking at beauty in multitude, no longer in a single instance.... But, turned to the multiple ocean of beauty and contemplating it, he gives birth to many gloriously beautiful theories and thoughts, unstinting in philosophy. Until, having been strengthened and having grown there, he discerns (5) a certain such single knowledge which is of such beauty.... All his previous labors, Socrates, were for the sake of this. (210c–d)

The final stage of the ascent, introduced here only toward the end, no longer gives birth to theories and thoughts (*λόγους ... και διανοήματα*). It is once again concerned with the singular rather than plural; however, no longer the singularity of a particular instance but

now the singularity of something absolute. It is neither a particular instance of an absolute, or even the aggregate of all such instances ("the multiple ocean," τὸ πολὺ πέλαγος); it is the original itself rather than an image or collection of images. Therefore, "Then alone will it come about for him, who is seeing the beautiful in the way it can be seen, to give birth not to images of virtue, since he is not in touch with images, but true virtue, since he is in touch with truth" (212a). Similarly, in the *Statesman* the Eleatic Stranger says of all rulers other than the true statesman, regardless of whether they are good or bad, and whether they are monarchs, oligarchs, or democrats, "Because they preside over the greatest images, they themselves are such" (303c). All political constitutions are images of the true one because they are based on written law, which can never be more than an inadequate and unresponsive attempt to imitate the wisdom of the statesman (293e), who rules not in accordance with codified law (293e–294b), but in accordance with his knowledge of the unformulatable mean (284a–b); that is, his intuition of the good as it applies to practice.

This distinction between images and that of which they are images is absolutely crucial for Plato, and it is, of course, the fundamental principle of the Divided Line. Images can lead us to the ultimate source, but they are dangerous insofar as they can be mistaken for the source itself, as the prisoners in the cave mistake the shadows for reality—and not only the prisoners, but those at every level short of the direct intuition of the divine good. Philosophical doctrines are nothing more than sophisticated images of something that is too singular to be expressed discursively. They are valuable as instruments to lead us out of our ignorance, yet they are dangerous because an instrument can be confused with the goal. In that case, what has led us forward will now hold us back, anchoring us to the spot and terminating a search that is never fruitless but never final. The teacher of the highest things must know both how to give with one hand and how to take with the other.

Department of Philosophy  
University of Guelph

#### Notes

1. References to Plato's works are to those published in the *Opera*, ed. John Burnet (1900–1907).

2. The view that Plato disseminated unwritten doctrines, which persisted until its rejection in the nineteenth century largely under the influence of Schleiermacher (see his general introduction to *Introductions to the Dialogues of Plato* [1836]), and has recently been championed by the Tübingen school, holds that Plato's writings are only allusions to an unwritten teaching that was passed down in a parallel oral tradition (and has come down to us through the seventh letter and surviving reports from Speusippus and Aristotle). See, for example, Hans Joachim Krämer, *Plato and the Foundations of Metaphysics* (1990), and Giovanni Reale, *Per una nuova interpretazione di Platone* (1987).

3. This is the case with many Aristotelian and analytic interpreters, for example.

4. See Jay Farness, *Missing Socrates* (1991), for an example of a Derridean exegesis of Plato that shows considerable sensitivity to the deconstructive literary element at the expense of any recognition of the legitimacy of the doctrinal element.

5. At the beginning of the tripartite soul discussion, Socrates says, "In my opinion we will never apprehend this accurately from these methods that we have been employing in our discussion; but there is a longer and fuller way that leads there" (*Republic* 435d—a warning repeated at 504b). Glaucon, however, is satisfied with the present level of accuracy, so they continue in an avowedly inadequate way. And even at the beginning of the discussion of the Divided Line, which some readers have taken to be the "longer and fuller way" referred to above, he warns: "I am omitting a great deal" (509c).

6. The *Republic*, in contrast, hypothetically posits wise rulers, but at the same time questions whether their existence is really possible (472e–473a).

7. Sense perception, action, and thinking jointly represent our three fundamental modes of intercourse with reality. While sense perception and action are our passive and active relations to the sensible world, thinking is our (active and passive) relation to the intelligible world. The fact that thinking is active as well as passive is responsible for our inability to simply "perceive" truth in the neutrally receptive way that would be necessary if doctrinal wisdom were to be possible.

8. This paradoxical theme is voiced succinctly by the chorus (873–880): "Hybris nourishes the tyrant, Hybris—if vainly gluttoned with many things that are neither reasonable nor profitable.... But I pray god never to get rid of the striving (πάλασμα) that is advantageous to the city." Hybris and striving are formally the same, differing only with regard to whether our striving happens to be unseasonable (μη' πικαιρα) or advantageous (καλῶς δ' ἔχον).

9. For example, from arithmetic to plane geometry to solid geometry to astronomy to harmonia to dialectic (524d–532b).

10. Socrates emphasized this conflation in his prefatory remarks by referring to "what it is directed to and what it accomplishes" as a single thing, *ἐκείνο μόνον* ("that alone," 477c). The easiest way to see the manipulateness of the argument is to substitute things for capacities. Whereas capacities are distinguished by what they are directed to and what they accomplish, *things* may be distinguished by color and shape. Socrates had said, Socrates' logic can therefore be extrapolated as follows:

(1) Things that are the same have the same color and shape, and things that are different have different color and shape.

(2) A red triangle is different from a green one because they have different colors.

(3) Since they are different they must have different shapes.

The slyness of this argument has not escaped readers as different in their orientation as Cross and Woosley (1964, 150–51), on one hand, and Benardete (1989, 136–37), on the other.

11. The argument with Glaucon concludes at 480a, the end of book 5, but there are four nontextual Stephanus pages before book 6, which begins at 484a.

12. The crucial step is at 349d: "Then each is such as that which he is like," that is, things that resemble each other in one respect must resemble each other in all respects. This all-or-nothing fallacy is accepted by Thrasymachus only because Socrates introduces it at a point in the argument when it looks like it will work in Thrasymachus's favor. The logic (but not the order of presentation) of the argument may be summarized as follows:

- (1) A just person is like a knowledgeable one and an unjust like an ignorant one (349a-d, 349e-350b).
- (2) Being alike means having the same qualities (349d).
- (3) Thus a just person has the same qualities as a knowledgeable one, and an unjust the same as an ignorant one.
- (4) Thus a just person is knowledgeable and an unjust person ignorant.
- (5) A knowledgeable person is superior to an ignorant one (349d-e).
- (6) Therefore a just person is superior to an unjust one (350c).

We can see from the Stephanus numbers that step 2 is introduced before step 1 has been completely formulated.

13. At 283b the stranger spoke of "going around in a circle" (*περιήλθομεν ἐν κύκλῳ*) with reference to the weaver division. It is a hyperbole for "taking a roundabout route," but it can be taken quite literally as a foreshadowing of the fate of the statesman diaeresis, of which the weaver diaeresis was said to be a paradigm. I have given a detailed explication of these points in *Form and Good in Plato's Eleatic Dialogues* (1994).

14. What we love in someone then is not *primarily* their unique idiosyncrasies: however endearing these may be at first, they become irritants if we stop loving the person who manifests them because we love the idiosyncrasies, not for themselves, but only as outward signs of the beloved person. Rather than idiosyncrasies, what we love in our beloved is what is best in our beloved. Hence, in loving someone, I am also loving an aspect of the divine, the good; and in the image of my beloved, I also see an image of divine beauty, truth, and goodness. Because what we love is what is best in our beloved, we can love someone and yet still wish to change that person. We do not want to change the person's essence; we want to cleanse that essence as much as possible from those characteristics that detract from it and compromise its realization; we want to make the being of our beloved true to itself, more focused, and less tangled and dispersed.

15. Although it is inspired by Stesichorus, as its predecessor in the *Phaedrus* was inspired by Phaedrus (244a).

16. See W. K. C. Guthrie, *The Greeks and their Gods* (1955, 111). Socrates says, "Following [Zeus] is the host of gods and spirits arranged in eleven parts. For Hestia alone remains in the dwelling of the gods; of the others, all who are ranked in the number of the twelve leading gods each lead their companies according to their rank" (246e-247a). The division of the host of gods into twelve ranks (Zeus and eleven followers), and the explicit statement that "all who are ranked in the number of the twelve leading gods each lead their companies," shows that the myth accepts the principle of the twelve-god pantheon, and that all twelve are present in the procession. So the absence of Hestia means that Dionysus is tacitly admitted into the Pantheon.

17. The Dionysian appears, for example, in the lascivious bad horse (246a-c, 253d-254a) and in the dialogue's emphasis on the "madness" of the lover (244a ff.). Moreover, Socrates' description of himself as "Korybantic" (228b) is a reference to the followers of Dionysus, and subsequently he actually refers to himself as a Bacchant (234d). Again, in order to compel Socrates to make a speech of his own, Phaedrus swears an oath by the plane tree (236e), a tree sacred to Dionysus (see Farnell 1909, 118; and Cary et al. 1949, "Trees"), and in the middle of his speech Socrates says, "this place seems to be divine, so do not be surprised if in the course of my speech I become very much possessed by nymphs; my utterances just now were not far from dithyrambs" (238c-d). The reference to dithyrambs, the metric form of Dionysian verse, leaves no doubt as to which divinity Socrates feels to be present.

18. Although we are told that Dionysian madness is mystical [*τελεστικῆν*] rather than erotic (265b).

19. Plato's advocacy of rational self-control is sometimes regarded as a cold controlling intellectualism. But people who are controlling are, in Plato's sense, not rational, but spirited; they are concerned with mastery and control for its own sake rather than for the sake of wisdom. Reason points beyond the individual to the divine or spiritual aspect of reality; the suppression of emotion by reason is the subordination of the controlling ego to the universal and eternal.

20. Evelyn Underhill documents the widespread recognition among mystics that the mystical journey is driven by passion rather than by calculated desire. She remarks, "The mystic does not enter on his quest because he desires the happiness of the Beatific Vision, the ecstasy of union with the Absolute, or any other personal reward. The noblest of all passions, the passion for perfection for Love's sake, far outweighs the desire to transcendental satisfaction" ([1930] 1955, 92).

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