

MASTER-MIND LECTURE

Plato

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WE START IN EDINBURGH in the last decade of the eighteenth century. Not a period when Plato was much read or studied. A young man from a poor background, training for the ministry at the Theological College, borrows from its library a large volume containing the complete works of Plato in Greek. Borrowers could only take out one book at a time. Yet he keeps coming back for the Plato, which he signs out on 16 April 1795, 17 June, 29 July, 14 December, then in the next year on 25 January, 14 March, 27 April.

What he is reading so assiduously is the Basel folio edition of 1556,¹ one of the most barbarously ligatured ever put into print. Figure 1 shows a sample page. Yes, the young man has an excellent knowledge of Greek (the result of a sound Scottish education), but however good your Greek, you would prefer an easier read, such as you could find for other ancient authors. He must be pretty enamoured of Plato to keep going month after month. Who turned him on to Plato? So far as can be discovered, no-one. None of the philosophers then teaching at Edinburgh was especially interested in Plato, and it would be unusual if they had been. For comparison, in the English universities of the time Plato was not taught at all, only Aristotle. It was not until the 1820s that you could hear lectures on Plato in Oxford, not until 1872 that the *Republic* became a prescribed text for Greats.

We move on a few years to London, where the young man has become a journalist—and a committed atheist. He now has his own copy of the complete works of Plato, the 1602 Frankfurt edition, where the Greek

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¹ *Platonis omnia opera*, ed. A. Arlenius (Preface by M. Hopperus). Basileae.

text is accompanied by Ficino's famous, much reprinted Latin translation.² The typography, as can be seen from Figure 2, hardly improves on the Basel edition he read at the Theological College. He does not like it either. Writing of the complete Plato editions he is acquainted with, he complains.

[T]heir typography, if we may judge from our own experience, must have been felt as a serious inconvenience by every Greek scholar.³

Undeterred, he continues throughout his life an avid reader of Plato. From time to time his trawl of the secondhand bookshops yields a volume of the beautifully printed Bipont edition of 1781–7,⁴ and he can enjoy its limpid typography. The sample in Figure 3 is indeed a pleasure to look at. But there is no firm evidence that he ever gets more than four of its eleven volumes. For the rest, he goes on with his Frankfurt, as can be seen from the referencing in his Common Place Books. These contain many excerpts from the dialogues, copied out (in Greek but without accents) either for use in future writing or just because they strike a chord. Of the second kind, I imagine, just because it struck a chord, is an excerpt from the *Protagoras* (347e) in which Socrates deplures dinner-parties where the conversation is all about rival interpretations of some poem or play. Our hero is a determinedly serious person, who cannot stand frivolity, as you will appreciate when I reveal his name: James Mill, the father famous for setting his son, John Stuart Mill, to read entire Platonic dialogues in the original Greek from the age of 7.⁵

I shall come back to James Mill later, but for the moment I offer you this little narrative as one proof, out of many that could be given, of Plato's power to speak across the millennia to minds and temperaments utterly different from his, overcoming the obstacles of cultural difference, language, and in Mill's case typography. I venture to say that no other philosopher in history has this power to such a high degree. In particular, none is so good at drawing the *young* into philosophy, which is why Plato's dialogues are so much used in introductory courses throughout the world. A lecture on Plato for the new Millennium should try to say something about why, after all this time, he is still so powerfully with us.

² *Divini Platonis opera omnia quae extant*, Marsilio Ficino interprete. Francofurti.

³ *The Literary Journal*, 3 (1804), 450.

⁴ *Platonis philosophi quae exstant Graece ad editionem H. Stephani accurate expressa, cum M. Ficini interpretatione*, ed. J. V. Ember and F. C. Exter. 11 vols. Studiis Societatis Bipontinae. Biponti.

⁵ The evidence for what I say here and later about James Mill's passion for Plato will be presented in my 'What was "the common arrangement"? An inquiry into John Stuart Mill's Boyhood Reading of Plato', *Utilitas*, 13 (2001), 1–32 and *Philogus*, 145 (2001), 158–86. Four of James Mill's Common Place Books are in the London Library, a fifth in the Library of the London School of Economics.

concerned, so I may be forgiven for seeking help in the form of a quotation. A quotation which captures the style of Plato's philosophising in terms I find both apt and thought-provoking.

On the last page of his marvellous little book *Plato: The Invention of Philosophy*,⁶ Bernard Williams writes of Plato's dialogues that '[I]t is just because they are not intended to control the minds of his readers, but to open them, that they go on having so much to offer'. This seems to me a good way to start thinking about Plato's unique place in the history of philosophy. It will also provide an opportunity to raise questions about the role of truth in the study of great philosophers of the past. For unfortunately Williams's pronouncement, like many other illuminating remark, is false—in this sense, that it is not true of all the dialogues. Plato's *Laws* was not written to open anyone's mind. This is the work which proposes the death penalty for people who remain incurably attached to atheistic materialism. It is all about controlling minds and keeping them closed to new ideas.

'So what?', you may say. There may be no such thing as the *essential* features of Plato's genius, features that show up in everything he wrote, but there surely are *characteristic* features, and an interpreter is entitled to highlight the ones they find significant. I agree. It cannot fairly be required of every student of Plato that they appreciate the ponderous Greek and theocratic politics of the *Laws*. Plato's dialogues are so varied in style and content that any useful generalisation is vulnerable to counter-example. All I want to insist on is that an interpretative claim about Plato can be illuminating even though it is strictly false. Later I will cite some more contentious examples where I find an interpretation illuminating even though, in my judgement, it is false — false because grossly one-sided, not merely vulnerable to the odd counter-example.

My reason for emphasising that, in matters of interpretation, truth and illumination may come apart is that Plato's writings have always been subject to extraordinarily diverse interpretations. All philosophers are subject to diverse interpretations, but Plato is an extreme case. By the close of antiquity he had already collected a more heterogeneous variety of them than even the wildest imagination could attach to Aristotle. This is not because Plato wrote dialogues, Aristotle treatises. Aristotle wrote dialogues too, now lost, but what we know about them hardly suggests that they were much more open to varied interpretation than his treatises. In general, and contrary to what is often said, little or nothing about Plato's

⁶ London 1998, also published as a chapter of Ray Monk and Frederic Raphael, eds., *The Great Philosophers: From Socrates to Turing* (2000).

genius is to be explained by the fact that, like other companions of Socrates, he wrote dialogues.⁷ What matters is the way Plato wrote *his* dialogues. That is what inspired such a variety of responses in later centuries.

Thus Plotinus is only the most famous in a long line of Platonists, stretching back to the first century BC and forward to the sixth century AD, who built an elaborate metaphysical system out of the dialogues (with assistance from Aristotle as needed). As time went on, the systems became more and more elaborate, while the standard trinity of hypostases—the One, Intellect, and Soul—made it possible for someone like Augustine to think of Platonism as a large dose of Christian theology with the names changed.⁸ Much earlier, Cicero's friend Antiochus of Ascalon had likewise seen Plato as the founder of a systematic philosophy—but to find the system properly set out he went to the writings of Aristotle, Xenocrates, and the Stoics. Antiochus for his part was reacting against the dominant trends in the Academy of his day, which for two hundred years had sought to preserve the Platonic heritage by arguing for various forms of scepticism. For Academics like Arcesilaus, Carneades, and Philo of Larissa, a systematic philosophy was the last thing you went to Plato for. What you found in his dialogues was the Socratic spirit, questioning received wisdom and exploring tentative solutions to the problem at hand. And even after 88 BC, when the institution we know as Plato's Academy ceased to exist, Plato's dialogues continued to serve as the inspiration for one or another brand of scepticism.

Interpretations of Plato have always swung between these two poles, Socratic questioning versus systematic metaphysics. The ancients pushed both tendencies to extremes where no-one would dare follow today, but the opposition is still with us. Any attempt, however sketchy, to appraise (some of) the characteristic elements of Plato's genius must face the question: Is this susceptibility to multiply diverse interpretations a fault or a virtue? I know some who regard it as a fault: a failure in clarity, precision, and rigour of argument, which since Socrates have been prime values in philosophy. I shall claim it as a virtue, a virtue closely connected with a manner of writing that aims to open minds, not control them.

Thus far I have been considering the role of truth in assessing the worth of interpretative statements *about* Plato. Truth has a different, more

⁷ Plus several works that are not dialogues. This is obvious with the *Apology*, which is a forensic speech, less obvious with the *Symposium*, which is not a dialogue but the narrative of a competition in epideictic rhetoric. The *Critias*, had it been finished, would have been the first Greek novel. Still other genres are found embedded within a dialogue: a treatise *On Nature* in the *Timaeus*, a parodic funeral oration in the *Menexenus*.

⁸ Augustine, *Confessions*, VII. ix. 13–14.

controversial role in the study of past philosophers when the interpreter passes judgements on statements made *by* their chosen author. In the case of Plato, we have no such statements, because what we are reading is words put into the mouth of some speaker other than the author. But every dialogue has a leading character—usually Socrates, on occasion Parmenides, Timaeus, the Eleatic or the Athenian Stranger—and Plato as author undoubtedly encourages his readers to think about the truth-value of statements made, and positions adopted, by that character, or about the truth-value of conclusions jointly reached in discussion between the leading character and their interlocutor. The encouragement to think for ourselves is conveyed in myriad ways, but one constant is the distancing of the author from his characters. We can never accept a conclusion on Plato's say-so because *Plato* never says so.

Modern scholars seldom acknowledge this sufficiently. The literature is full of claims to the effect that in such and such a dialogue Plato says that *p*. I prefer the ingenious device used by some ancient editors, who would put a special wedge-shaped sign (the διπλή) in the margin of the text to tell the reader which bits announce Platonic doctrine.⁹ This practice does at least acknowledge that working out what Plato himself believed is a complex interpretative task. A task, I would say, which must take into account the interaction between the various speakers as well as the content of what they say.

Perhaps the most challenging example for a modern reader is Plato's most famous theory, the theory of transcendent Forms. Never mind whether Plato believed it himself, or wanted us to believe it. Most interpreters have been sure that he did, but, even if they are wrong, the theory is put forward often enough in his writings, usually by Socrates but also, in different versions, by Timaeus and the Eleatic Stranger of the *Sophist*. In both *Phaedo* and *Republic* the theory is already familiar to Socrates' interlocutors, and accepted by them, so he can use it without further argument as the basis for extensive theorising: about the immortality of the soul in the *Phaedo*, about the requirements for true knowledge in the *Republic*. With so much at stake, it does seem important to ask: Is the theory true? After all, if it is true, and provided the arguments based upon it are valid, then death is not the end, and knowledge worthy of the name is far harder to achieve than our contemporaries suppose.

Not everyone wants to ask that question. Some have principled reasons for not asking it, others are simply deaf to the appeal of philosophy. There's

⁹ The evidence is Diogenes Laertius, I. 65–6.

no discussing with the deaf, but there are interesting issues of principle to debate about how far, when we are studying one of the great philosophers of the past, judgements of truth can, or should, enter into the process of interpretation. What is certainly the case is that judgements of truth should not precede interpretation. I do not mean that no-one should dismiss (or endorse) a philosopher's views without reading their sentences. That is too obvious to be worth mentioning. But sadly, there have been, and still are, all too many philosophers (especially in the analytic tradition) who think it enough to read the sentences and then pass judgement: 'This is right, that wrong—Plato, you get four out of ten. Try to do better next time.'

This is parody, of course, but it should help us to see what a disaster it would be if Plato got ten out of ten every time. That would mean we had nothing to learn from him, nothing we did not already know. Our minds could not be opened by anything he wrote. I trust you will agree that the people I am parodying have not even begun the process of interpretation, which is a long, laborious attempt to enter into the thought-world of an older philosophical text in order to understand how it hangs together. The interesting question is whether *that* can be (well) done if you insist, as some do, on bracketing truth until the end is reached. Should questions of truth be postponed until understanding is complete, or are they an indispensable means to propel the mind to the goal of understanding?

Put it another way. To understand Plato, is it enough to read everything he wrote, thinking about how a given sentence coheres with others in the corpus, analysing the argument in which it occurs, exploring its role in the dialogue, relating it to the wider cultural context of ancient Greece, including the context formed by other people's writings on the same or kindred topics? Or do we need a more actively philosophical engagement with the text, which might involve raising objections and arguing *against* its conclusions, or, contrariwise, developing Plato's ideas positively in ways that he never did, even perhaps in ways he never could have done? There is abundant evidence in the dialogues (some of which I shall mention) that the more active engagement is the response Plato wants from his readers. The moral I draw is that to understand Plato we have to argue with him, not merely read and study what he wrote. Questions of truth proceed *pari passu* with hermeneutics.

Yet you cannot argue with someone profitably unless you are prepared to see how things look from their view and learn from what they have to say. Otherwise we are back with the awarding of marks out of ten on the basis of preconceived answers. If our mind is not receptive to new and unfamiliar thoughts, it will be Plato's task to prise it open.

Let me stick with the hardest case, the theory of transcendent Forms, which most philosophers today would dismiss out of hand. Perhaps the best way to explain what these Forms are and why they are transcendent is to take the theme-question of the *Republic*: ‘What is justice?’. To say there is a Platonic Form of justice is (among other things) to say that this question, ‘What is justice?’, has an objectively correct answer that transcends all particular historical circumstances. It makes no difference whether the question is asked in fourth-century Greece or modern Britain, in Europe or in China. The answer is invariably the same. It makes no difference whether we want to know what makes a society just or what makes an individual just. The answer is the same both for collective agents and for individuals.

We should distinguish the claim that the answer is always one and the same from the *Republic*’s attempt to indicate what that answer is. To say that the *Republic* is wrong about what justice is is not yet to say that justice is not a Platonic Form, only that the dialogue has failed to identify it correctly. Nonetheless, the *Republic*’s actual answer can be a useful guide to the *sort* of answer we should expect if justice is a Platonic Form.

In Book IV of the *Republic* Socrates gives separate but parallel definitions, first of justice in the city, then of justice in the individual. A city is just if, and only if, the ruling class, the military class, and the producer class each keep to their proper function, working harmoniously together, under the guidance of wise rulers, for the good of the whole society and that of each class within it. An individual is just if, and only if, reason, spirit and appetite, which are the parts of the tripartite soul corresponding to the three classes in the ideal city, each keep to their proper function, working harmoniously together, under the guidance of reason’s wisdom, for the good of the whole soul and that of each part, as well as for the good of the body. The two definitions are parallel, but since they are two, neither can identify the Form of justice, which has to be the ‘one over many’. Hence, even though the Book IV definitions are both highly abstract, they give no more than an indication of how to specify the Platonic Form of justice in the single invariant formula it requires. Nonetheless, since Socrates insists strongly on the parallel between city and individual, I am emboldened to extrapolate a formula sufficiently abstract to cover both. Perhaps justice is exemplified by any system of elements working harmoniously together for the good of the whole and of each.¹⁰

¹⁰ Compare the formulation offered (as ‘an unwritten but clearly indicated extrapolation of the dialogue’) by Charles H. Kahn, ‘The Meaning of “Justice” and the Theory of Forms’, *Journal*

I am inclined to believe that something like this is what Plato thinks justice is. But it is my own positive extrapolation from the text, not something stated in the *Republic* or any other dialogue. What encourages me in this line of thought is that my abstract formula, precisely because it is so abstract, fits two Platonic texts where the idea of justice is invoked in a domain very far from ethics and politics as ordinarily understood. The first is a lengthy analysis of disease in the *Timaeus* (81e ff., briefly anticipated by *Rep.* 444de), which treats different diseases as the result of injustice (πλεονεξία) between the various elements and compounds making up the body. There are PreSocratic and Hippocratic precedents for transferring political vocabulary to the descriptions of health and disease,¹¹ but *Timaeus* seems bent on fusing the medical and the political perspectives into one. This comes out most strikingly for us when he cites (83e), as one agent of disease, blood that gets its nourishment in an unnatural way, *contrary to the laws of nature*, where the phrase ‘laws of nature’ has nothing of its modern scientific meaning, nothing at all: its sense is solely political, despite the distance between this application and ordinary political concerns.

Even more striking is a famous passage at the end of *Republic IX*, which speaks of a paradigm of the ideally just city laid up in the heavens. It is the politics of this city that will occupy philosophers who live in an ordinary imperfect society. They will seek to establish its constitution within their own soul. Centuries of admiring quotation have obscured the point that, when Socrates speaks of a paradigm laid up in the heavens (ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ), he is not contrasting some Christian heaven with the whole corporeal world, but contrasting our Earth, where the ideal city described in the *Republic* does not at present exist, with the skies above where it does. What the philosopher’s intellect will assimilate, as the *Timaeus* confirms (47c), is the orderly circular motions that drive the heavenly bodies. The planetary system, as the *Timaeus* will again confirm, is a harmonious dynamic structure working for the good of the whole cosmos and each of its parts. Cosmic justice is another PreSocratic theme that Plato appropriates (already in *Gorgias* 507e–508a) in order to renew its moral meaning. In sum, if justice is a transcendent Platonic Form, independent of all particular historical circumstances, its single invariant definition will have to be so abstract as to extend into the domains of medicine and astronomy.

of Philosophy, 69 (1972), 57: ‘Justice is a unity of differentiated parts, each with its own nature, and these parts are so related that each one performs the task for which it is best fitted’.

¹¹ Esp. Alcmaeon, frag. 4.

It is time to take stock, to consider how we arrived at this seemingly bizarre result. We began with the idea that the answer to the question ‘What is justice?’ should be independent of particular historical circumstances. The conditions of social life keep changing, but what justice is remains the same. Thus far the view amounts to what we nowadays call Platonism about concepts, the view that the phrase ‘conceptual change’ is a misnomer. As Frege put it: ‘What is known as the history of concepts is really a history either of our knowledge of concepts or of the meaning of words.’¹² Certainly, words may change their meanings, and come to express different concepts from before, but that should be seen as the substitution of one unchanging concept for another. Platonism about concepts is a controversial position, no doubt, but it is one that has adherents. What no-one today would accept as even a possible candidate for truth is my extrapolation from the parallel definitions of justice in Book IV: ‘Justice is any system of elements working harmoniously together for the good of the whole and of each.’ For that removes all reference to human life or to the social and psychological factors relevant to achieving the just society or the just life. What sense, you may say, can be made of justice outside the political and ethical domains?

You might relent for moment when I tell you that the planetary system of the *Timaeus* is a community of intelligent divine beings. Relative to that belief, which we can no longer share, justice in the heavens is not so outrageous. But no such relative tolerance will be granted to the idea that disease results from unlawful aggression (*πλεονεξία*) within the body, whose constituents are certainly not, in *Timaeus*’ scheme of things, intelligent agents. The crucial premise which put us in this predicament is the claim that justice is not merely unchanging, but *one*. A modern Platonist about concepts could perfectly well think there are two unchanging concepts of justice, one for justice as a virtue of social institutions, another for justice as a virtue of individuals, the relation between the two concepts being quite difficult to specify.

Suppose, for example, we think that a just society is one whose institutions guarantee appropriate rights and fairness. We would not normally expect parallel principles to govern the psychic make-up of just individuals, but rather that such individuals would respect and abide by the principles of justice enshrined in their social institutions. They would be just in a different way from the institutions they respect. The theory of transcendent

¹² Gottlob Frege, *Die Grundlagen der Arithmetik* (1884), vii; tr. J. L. Austin.

Forms insists on one single standard of justice by which both collective and individual agents may be judged.¹³ Both are just in the same way.

To make this possible *Republic IV* produces independent argument to show (a) that the individual soul contains three parts analogous to the three classes of the ideal state, and (b) that when the relations between these three psychic parts parallel the relations between the three classes of the ideal city (both exhibit the benefits of wisdom's rule), the individual concerned will be someone whose behaviour shows respect for appropriate rights and fairness, who will not go in for the sorts of behaviour (theft, murder, neglect of parents, etc.) that are commonly held to be unjust (442e–443b).

Fine, but once we accept the parallelism and we look for the *one* over many to show that the two definitions in Book IV specify concepts of one thing, *justice*, we have to reach for a formula general enough to cover both city and individual. We have to abstract from soul-parts and city-parts to talk about the parts of any system whatsoever. But that takes us to a standard that applies equally to the heavens above and to the innards of animal bodies. For an ancient Platonist, justice turns out to be a concept far more abstract and wide-ranging than ordinary folk suppose.

Once this is appreciated, you should not be unduly surprised when I tell you that Plato thought that the most perspicuous account of justice (and of health) would be in the abstract language of mathematical proportion. And when I say 'Plato thought', I mean it. I am not now ascribing to Plato some view he puts into the mouth of one or another speaker in his dialogues. I am reproducing from Aristotle a report of something Plato said, but not in writing—an item from a fairly substantial collection of material which has been known, since Aristotle, as Plato's unwritten doctrines. (I blush, in passing, at the scandalous way Anglophone scholarship has on the whole preferred to ignore or play down the significance of this material. It has been left to our German colleagues to bring it forcefully to our attention. If analytic philosophers do not like what they make of it, we should get into continental Europe and join the debate, not stand aloof disparaging it.)

¹³ Justice as a predicate of *actions* is treated differently: an action is just if, and only if, it helps keep the agent just (443ce). At 435ab (recalling 368d) Socrates claims that if a predicate such as 'just' is said of two things, one larger than the other, the two will be alike in respect of justice, i.e. they will be just in the same way. But just actions cannot be ranged on a scale of size with just agents. Accordingly, just action is defined as action that promotes an agent's justice, in much the same way as a healthy diet or healthy exercise are healthy because they promote a healthy condition in the body (444cd). This anticipation of Aristotle's 'focal meaning' (complete with Aristotle's favourite illustration) shows that the city-soul parallel is not to be put down as 'semantic monism', a refusal on Plato's part to allow that a word like 'just' might have different meanings in different applications.

From an analysis of justice and health in terms of mathematical proportion it is a short step to another thesis that features widely in reports of Plato's unwritten doctrines, that the Good is the One, or that Goodness is Unity. This too is not expressly said in the *Republic* or other dialogues, but I at least am tempted to extrapolate it from the *Republic*, where social unity is the good to which all legislation is directed and psychic unity is consistently treated as identical with virtue. First, let me quote Socrates on the final end (*σκόπος*) to which all legislation should be referred:

Can we think of a greater evil for a city than that which pulls it apart and makes it many instead of one? Or of a greater good than that which binds it together and makes it one? (462ab).

The parallel to this in the case of an individual soul is the idea that injustice is a kind of civil war between the different elements of your personality, while justice harmonises them together and makes you one instead of many (443e–444b; cf. 554de). Extrapolating, as before, to a single formula that will cover both the good of the city and the good of the individual soul, I propose as the answer: the Good is Unity itself. Moving ahead in time, the thesis that the Good is the One is of course the starting point for all those Platonist systems I mentioned earlier and will praise later. Its relevance to our present discussion is the following.

Socrates in the *Republic* insists that a full understanding of what justice is would involve taking the longer route, as he calls it, through mathematics and dialectic, to grasp the Form of the Good. This is the supreme Form which in some sense explains the being (and the goodness) of all other Forms, including the Form of justice. If every Form is a 'one over many', and the Good is the One, then the Good is, so to speak, the Form of Forms. I do not ask you to accept my view that this is Plato's view. I ask you simply to notice that already within the text of the *Republic* Plato makes the concept of goodness even more abstract than my extrapolated concept of justice. The famous simile of the Sun casts the Good as the ultimate ground of all knowledge and all being whatsoever. Anything knowable is knowable only in the light of the Good; anything that has its share of goodness. Now whatever you think of this as ontology and epistemology, you must admit that it stretches the concept of goodness far beyond the ethical and political domains with which the *Republic* is mostly concerned; indeed, far beyond the confines of human life. Our problem over the transcendent Form of justice is simply a special case of the larger problem we are all, ancient or modern, likely to have coming to terms with Plato's radically transcendent vision.

In a passage of the *Eudemian Ethics* where Aristotle is discussing Platonist theories which give a mathematical analysis of justice and health on the basis of the thesis that the Good is the One, he remarks,

They ought to take more trouble over this, and not accept, without argument, things that are not easy to believe even *with* an argument. (I. 8, 1218a 28–30; tr. Woods)

We can sympathise with this complaint. But we can also wonder how anyone could possibly be *argued into* accepting such theories. What premises could the arguments start from? If they are drawn from within our current stock of beliefs and assumptions, they will not lead to the realm beyond. If they start from outside our present outlook, they will not persuade.

I believe that Plato was acutely aware of this problem, and did not expect to win us over by argument alone. In Book VI of the *Republic* he has Adeimantus complain that, while he cannot rebut Socrates' *arguments* for the proposition that there will be no end to evils in political life until philosophers take charge of the state, yet the philosophers he sees around the place are mostly cranks, and even the more decent of them would be useless in government. Does Socrates agree with that assessment of what philosophers are like? To Adeimantus' amazement, Socrates does agree with it. How then can he persist in proposing that philosophers should rule? To which Socrates replies, 'Your question needs to be answered by means of an image (εἰκόων)', and he proceeds to develop the image of the Ship of State in which the sailors (*alias* the politicians) fight for control of the helm and scoff at any idea that there might be a trained navigator (*alias* the true philosopher whom Socrates has in mind), who could steer the ship with skill and knowledge. The image offers an outside perspective on political life as we know it, to show us how blinkered is the vision of the sailors who deny the very possibility of an art of navigation. The Ship of State, like the later images of Sun, Line and Cave, gives us temporary access to the transcendent view, accustoming us to look on ordinary human experience from outside and above. This is not argument, but it does help us make sense of the direction in which the arguments are leading.

The frequent use of imagery and other non-argumentative devices in Plato's writing has made him popular with poets and artists. Shelley, financially better off than James Mill, took the Bipont edition of Plato to Italy. It was from the lucid typography of that edition that he made his translations of the *Ion* and *Symposium*. Philosophers should not despise the fact that non-philosophers find Plato good to think with. For it connects with another fact relevant to philosophy, Plato's hostility to current opinion—δόξα. The Greek root survives in the contrast between 'orthodox' and

‘heterodox’, but also, more revealingly, in ‘paradox’, which means something *contrary* to opinion or belief. Socrates in the *Republic* underlines the paradoxical character of his proposal that philosophers should rule.¹⁴ As Adeimantus’ reaction showed, it goes against the general, but quite justified, opinion people have of the philosophers they know. When Socrates describes the kind of philosopher *he* means to rule the ideal city, it becomes clear that he is talking about someone who has spent a lifetime overcoming the power of opinion within their own soul.

Opinion here, as in many similar Platonic contexts, covers the full range of beliefs, assumptions, values, and habits of mind we acquire, largely without realising it, by being brought up to live in the sensible world. Since we cannot help being brought up in some particular part of the sensible world, it is the prevailing norms of one particular society that form our outlook. (The ideal city is no exception: the difference there is that the norms come as near to being *correct* as the philosopher-rulers can arrange.)¹⁵ Opinion in this wide sense, as Plato represents it, is so deeply rooted in our soul that it tends to be intransigent, blind to alternatives, resistant to argument. An image can jolt us into realising that alternatives are possible. Of course, it is one thing to see that an alternative is possible, quite another to accept it for oneself—or at least that is how it should be. But once someone’s mind has been opened, as Williams put it, to an alternative view, argument with them has a better chance of success.

This brings me back to the question of the role of judgements of truth in the process of interpretation. If Plato has a problem about starting points for persuasion, do not we have a problem about starting points for criticism? Indeed, are these not two sides of the same coin? If we cannot be argued into the theory of Forms and other manifestations of Plato’s longing for transcendence, on what basis can he be argued out of it? It can hardly be pertinent to complain that his views are paradoxical. They were meant to be.

Scholarly discussion of Plato has at times made it appear that Plato gets closer and closer to the truth—or at least to a reasonable, sane view—the closer he approximates to Aristotle. As if Aristotle’s outlook was the *telos* to which all previous thought was leading. Aristotle did indeed think this about his own philosophy (see below), but we are not obliged to agree. It may be salutary to remember that the bulk of ancient opinion went the other way: Aristotle was acceptable to the extent that he could be reconciled with Plato. It should be equally salutary to recall how

¹⁴ 472a 7 (οὕτω παράδοξον λόγον), 473e 4 (πολὺ παρὰ δόξαν), 490a 5 (σφόδρα παρὰ δόξαν).

¹⁵ For more on this point, see my ‘Culture and Society in Plato’s *Republic*’, *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values*, 20 (1999), 215–324.

often Aristotle's criticisms of the theory of Forms are drawn from Plato, above all from Plato's *Parmenides*.

In the first part of that dialogue the leading character, Parmenides, takes Socrates through a series of objections to the theory. Socrates proves unable to answer them and is told by Parmenides that he will get nowhere in philosophy unless he can resolve the difficulties he has been confronted with—for which purpose he needs intensive training in abstract dialectical argument. The second part of the dialogue, a model demonstration by Parmenides of the sort of argumentative exercise he means, is one of the hardest and most bafflingly abstract texts in the history of philosophy. If that what you have to master before committing yourself to the theory of Forms, all the more so (Parmenides adds: 135b 1–2) before undertaking to teach or explain it to someone else, then what Plato has made his leading character say is this. To understand the theory of Forms and explain it to others, it is not enough to be able to state it accurately. Socrates did that at the beginning of the dialogue, much as I tried to do a moment ago. You have to have the logical equipment, command of fine distinctions, and argumentative skills, to appreciate and respond to whatever objections and difficulties the theory may confront.

Aristotle took up and used against Plato several of Parmenides' objections to the theory of Forms, including the notorious Third Man argument. I assume that this is fair dealing, for it was after all Plato who wrote the first part of the *Parmenides* where the Third Man and other objections are formulated. Many have read the dialogue as a statement of Plato's reasons for abandoning or modifying the theory of Forms. This is an illicit move, since neither the author nor his leading character let us know whether they think the objections can be answered, still less do they indicate how that might be done. The correct response is to muster all our dialectical skills to think about the arguments and judge for ourselves whether the theory of Forms *ought* to be abandoned or modified. That is exactly what Aristotle did. He read the dialogue well.

Now consider the position of a modern scholar trying to explain Plato's theory of transcendent Forms. It is easy enough to reproduce what Socrates says at the beginning of the *Parmenides*, or at greater length earlier in the *Phaedo*. Some historians are content to do no more. Some philosophers are encouraged by these historians' restraint to think they can dismiss the theory outright. Both parties fail by the rigorous standard of understanding proposed in Plato's *Parmenides*. One cannot leave questions of truth to the end of the day. One of the many philosophical delights of Plato's dialogues is that they do their best to stop us simply reading through.

I mentioned two kinds of active philosophical engagement required for the interpretation of a Platonic dialogue. The one I have just been illustrating involves raising objections and arguing *against* its conclusions. The second is developing Plato's ideas positively in ways that he never did, even perhaps in ways he never could have done. I trust I have already given you some sense of how tempting it is to extrapolate from what is on the page to cosmic justice or to goodness as unity. I may be wrong to think that the *Republic* is designed to lead us on and upwards further than Socrates goes on the page. But I do not think that the system-building of later Platonists was just a monstrous mistake. What I am chiefly interested in now is not their results, but their methodology.

One of Plotinus' most approachable treatises is *Enneads*, III. 7, 'On eternity and time'. The contrast between eternity and time comes from Plato's *Timaeus*, with antecedents in Parmenides. The eternal is that which should always be spoken of in the present tense, the eternal being of the Forms. Time is the condition of the realm of becoming, where the present is flanked by past and future. Time, as *Timaeus* puts it in a much quoted phrase (37d), is a moving image of eternity. It is only an *image* of eternal being, a moving one, because past and future involve change and becoming. Nonetheless, eternal being is what it is an image *of*, because the present tense applies in both realms. Or so, controversially, I believe. From Plato to Boethius and beyond, the eternal Now is ever present being, not the mere timelessness we might find in mathematical truth.¹⁶

These are difficult ideas, and *Timaeus* does not stop to explain his dense pronouncements or answer questions. His discourse is decidedly not a dialogue; it is a prose treatise *On Nature* embedded within a dialogue.¹⁷ Later Platonists had every reason to expand and elucidate. One of them, Numenius of Apamea (second century AD, the only witty Platonist after Plato himself), wrote a dialogue *On the Good* in which he connects (quite seriously) Plato's eternal present with God's name as given to Moses from the burning bush in *Exodus* 3: 14: 'I am that I am', or as the Septuagint translation has it, Ἐγώ εἰμι ὁ ὄν. This was in pursuit of a project to demonstrate that a variety of non-Greek peoples—the Egyptians, the Brahmins of India, the Magi, and the Jews—agreed with Plato. The idea was not that they had expressed it as clearly and philosophically as he did, but that a study of non-Greek institutions, myths, and sacred writings shows them already in touch with the truth that Plato would articulate so

¹⁶ Here I dissent from the account of eternity as timelessness defended by Richard Sorabji, *Time, Creation and the Continuum* (1983), chaps. 8–9.

¹⁷ Recall n. 7 above.

wonderfully in a different place and language. Hence Numenius' most famous saying, 'What is Plato but Moses speaking Attic Greek?'. The first person voice from the burning bush (provided it is speaking Greek or King James's English, not the original Hebrew) is unquestionably present tense: 'I AM THAT I AM—tell them that I AM sent you'. And the leading character of Numenius' dialogue goes on to expound the Platonic contrast between eternity and time in terms that clearly support my side of the controversy. Being, he says (frag. 5 Des Places), neither at any time 'was', nor can it ever 'become', but it always 'is' in a definite time, the present (ἔστιν ἀεὶ ἐν χρόνῳ ὀρισμένῳ, τῷ ἐνεστώτι μόνῳ). Then he adds, 'If, however, anyone wishes to rename this present time eternity (αἰῶνα), that's what I want too.' I may be forgiven for thinking that Numenius read his Plato well.

On, then, to Plotinus in the third century, writing a treatise which contains an extended analysis of the concept of eternity and a vindication of the Platonic theory of time by some brilliant criticisms of the Aristotelian alternative. Here is his account of the method to adopt:

We must consider (δεῖ νομίζειν) that some of the blessed philosophers of ancient times have discovered the truth. But which of them have attained it most completely, and how an understanding of these things [*sc.* eternity and time] can become ours too (πῶς ἂν καὶ ἡμῖν σύνεσις περὶ τούτων γένοιτο)—that is what is fitting (προσήκει) for us to investigate. (*Enneads*, III. 7. 1. 13–17)

As we read on, there remains little doubt that Plato is the ancient philosopher who (six centuries earlier) attained the truth most completely. But it takes philosophy to show this. Not scholarly exegesis of Platonic texts, but independent philosophical reflection inspired by them. Thus the methodological credo which begins with such deference to authority ('We must consider that some of the blessed philosophers of ancient times have discovered the truth') turns into a declaration of intellectual autonomy. Yes, we know, or at least we must believe, that Plato has given us the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth—but to find it in his dialogues we have to win through to our own understanding of the issues. Then, and then only, will we be able to see that, where, and how the same understanding is already present in Plato.

I want to suggest that Plato would approve. These Platonists are using his dialogues to think with in the very different world of the Roman Empire. Their intellectual needs are extraordinarily different from those of the fourth century BC. One of their needs is a systematic theology to compete with Christianity, Gnosticism, and other new religions. So long as they build their systems for themselves, as they do, and debate

furiously with each other, as they also do, Plato should be well pleased. It was not their fault that Christianity won out and banned them from teaching. There is a pleasing story that the few Platonists remaining in Athens at the time of the Emperor Justinian's edict against their teaching (AD 529) removed to Harran (Carrhae) in Northern Mesopotamia, where they set going the process of transmitting Greek philosophy to the Arab world. Even if the story is too romantic to be trustworthy, and its heroes simply went off to various cities of the Near East, one fact remains. As the last pagan philosophers they had lived by Plato's precept: Think for yourself, whatever the prevailing norms and opinions may be.

Let me cite a much earlier parallel, which is seldom given its due: Plato's nephew Speusippus, who succeeded him as head of the Academy. He rejected the theory of Forms altogether, and with it the ontological and epistemological primacy of the Good. Instead, he elaborated a hierarchy of principles corresponding to the hierarchy of the mathematical sciences. This emphasis on mathematics as the key to metaphysics he clearly owed to Plato's *Republic*. But he insisted on working out an alternative, anti-Platonic view of what, in detail, that might involve. He was a system-builder, but on his own terms. From the beginning to the end of its long history in antiquity, Platonism was the name of a debate, not a fixed unvarying essence.

We do not know anything about how Speusippus became Plato's successor. All the same, we should be impressed by the fact that Plato was followed by the most independently minded senior presence in the Academy. That shows us something about what Plato expected of his colleagues.

What I have been saying is that Plato wrote for eternity, to open minds and encourage independent thought in any reader, whatever their historical circumstances. To show that he was not unique in this respect, I can point to two astonishing thinkers, one before and one after him, who certainly wrote for the future as well as the present. The first is Thucydides, who offered his very detailed history of the Peloponnesian War as a κτήμα ἐς ἀεί, a possession for ever, because, although the details would differ, human nature would remain the same, so that future history would run on much the same lines as before. The second such thinker is Plato's greatest pupil, Aristotle, about whom Cicero reports the following:

Thus Aristotle, accusing the old philosophers who thought that philosophy had been perfected by their own talents, says that they were either very stupid or very conceited; but that he sees that, since in a few years a great advance has been made, philosophy will in a short time be brought to completion.¹⁸

¹⁸ Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*, III. 28. 69 = Aristotle, frag. 53 Rose³; tr. Barnes-Lawrence.

In whichever of several possible sense of ‘completion’ Aristotle believed that, Plato thought the opposite. In this life at least, the search for philosophical knowledge is unending. Nonetheless, Aristotle, if we can believe Cicero’s report, testifies to the thought that a philosophical idea is for ever. Diotima in Plato’s *Symposium* suggests the same when she says that all creativity, including the creativity that gives birth to philosophical ideas and theories (210d), springs from a desire for immortality. The hope is that your ideas, like your children, will live on after your death.

There are many ideas that are not for ever, but for a particular audience here and now. So be it. But this should not be allowed to legitimate the thought that all ideas are intrinsically historical, bound to a particular time and place. It is sometimes said that there are no eternal questions in philosophy. The truth is that there are some, and there will continue to be, so long as the philosophical tradition keeps them alive. It depends on whether we continue to find them relevant. To illustrate, I return to James Mill and to the question why, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, he found Plato so relevant. John Stuart Mill reports,

There is no author to whom my father thought himself more indebted for his mental culture, than Plato, or whom he more frequently recommended to young students.¹⁹

Why?

Let the father tell us in his own words:

In most of the Dialogues of Plato, the object is to refute the tenets and expose the ignorance of some of those sophists who travelled about Greece, under pretence of teaching eloquence and philosophy, and who, in general, filled the minds of the youth with a spirit of mere logomachy, and with the worst impressions of right and wrong, with regard both to public and to private life. The ingenuity, the acuteness, the address, the eloquence with which this delicate and important task is performed, render the perusal of these dialogues among the most improving exercises which can engage a juvenile mind. Hardly any thing, in the way of example at least, can be conceived more calculated to sharpen the faculties; to render acute in discerning, and ingenious in exposing fallacies; to engender a love of mental exercise; and to elevate with the ambition of mental excellence. In some of the dialogues, as in those with Alcibiades, the object is to expose some of the false impressions which are most apt to prevail in the minds of men, and to lead to the most dangerous consequences. In these, the skill with which the misapprehension is analyzed; the variety of ridiculous lights into which it is thrown; and the power of argument as well as of satire which is employed to expose it, operate as the strongest sanative. In those of a different

¹⁹ *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, vol. I: *Autobiography and Literary Essays*, ed. John M. Robson & Jack Stillinger (Toronto, 1981), 25.

description, where inquiry, in the rigid sense of the word, is more the object, as in the book concerning Polity and Laws, the business is to give specimens of investigations, to let in rays of light, to analyze particular points, and, by throwing out queries or hypotheses, to encourage speculation, rather than lay down and establish any *system* of opinions. Accordingly, Cicero expressly tells us, ‘In Platonis libris nihil affirmatur; et in utramque partem multa disseruntur; de omnibus quaeritur, nihil certe dicitur’.²⁰

The critical spirit of Socratic questioning is what James Mill responds to. It is significant that he chooses Cicero as his *vade mecum* for reading Plato. His quotation is from Cicero’s *Academica* (I. 46), which is the distillation of some 200 years of Academic scepticism about the epistemological theories of the Stoics and other dogmatic philosophers. Given Mill’s Ciceronian perspective, the later Platonists can be swept aside—they are ‘the *charlatans* of antient philosophy’²¹—and Plato rejoins the sceptical tradition. To translate the Latin,

In the writings of Plato nothing is affirmed and many arguments are given on either side of a question; everything is open to inquiry, nothing is declared for certain.

Again, I want to suggest that Plato would approve. Mill, like Plotinus, and Cicero too, found Plato good to think with, a stimulus to independent thought about the issues that concerned him in his own day and age. Earlier I claimed it as a virtue in Plato that he can inspire such diverse interpretations. But perhaps they are not quite as diverse as I have made them appear. Perhaps there is a common factor to the systematising approach of Numenius and Plotinus, on the one hand, and the sceptical stance of Cicero and Mill on the other. The two parties share a common enemy: opinion, δόξα.

There are two reasons a philosopher might have for arguing *παρὰ δόξαν*, against the prevailing assumptions of their age. They might seek to replace opinion by something better than opinion, be it knowledge, enlightenment, or mystical union with the One; such are the Platonists of later antiquity. Or they might seek to replace the prevailing opinions by better opinions. Cicero fits that description, I suppose, and it is certainly apt for the nineteenth-century Plato-loving reformers, James Mill and John Stuart Mill, together with their mutual friend George Grote, the greatest Plato scholar of modern times. All three were leading members

²⁰ *Edinburgh Review*, 14 (1809), 199, italics mine. In the quotation from Cicero, ‘certe’ is a slip for ‘certi’.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 193, referring to later commentators like Proclus (5th century AD). But it is unlikely that Plotinus or Numenius would win Mill’s esteem either.

of a group called the Philosophic Radicals, who campaigned tirelessly (and with some success) to make Britain a more rational, more democratic, and more secular society than it was when they were growing up.²²

It is clear from Grote's magnificent three-volume work, *Plato, and the Other Companions of Sokrates* (1865), that he identifies strongly with Socrates in his role as the critic and questioner of prevailing norms and assumptions. His phrase for what Socrates was up against (a phrase borrowed from Pindar) is 'King Nomos', and one of its most vivid depictions he finds in the Great Speech of Protagoras in Plato's dialogue of that name. Protagoras claims that, despite Socrates' doubts about whether virtue is teachable, it is taught—and he describes a process by which morality is transmitted by everyone to everyone through a constant, often scarcely noticed, process of correcting and bringing into line, with no room left for independent, critical reflection. John Stuart Mill in *On Liberty* spoke similarly of the 'despotism of custom'.²³ Grote saw a parallel with James Mill's account of the transmission of established morality in his *Fragment on Mackintosh* (1835).²⁴ James Mill, at least 30 years before Grote's *Plato*, saw the parallel with Protagoras and applied the point to his own day:

The misfortune of the English universities is their being a part of the ecclesiastical establishment. With a fixed creed and fixed forms, the object of an ecclesiastical establishment is—to keep the human mind where it is. The object of a system of education should be to advance the human mind.²⁵

These were not empty words. In 1826 Grote and the Mills helped to found the University of London, now University College London, the first English university to dispense with religious instruction and open its doors to those who were not members of the Church of England.

My final task is to explain how I can celebrate both James Mill and Plotinus, both the sceptical and the systematic Plato. I confess that I find

²² I describe some of their achievements in 'The Past in the Present: Plato as Educator of Nineteenth-Century Britain', in Amélie Oksenberg Rorty, ed., *Philosophers on Education* (London & New York, 1998), 353–73.

²³ *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, vol. XVIII: *Essays on Politics and Society*, ed. J. M. Robson (Toronto, 1977), 219–20, 272–4.

²⁴ *Plato*, vol. II, 45–6, (cf. 72–7).

²⁵ Common Place Book V, 62, immediately preceded by three brief references to Protagoras' Great Speech. The entry is undatable, but it long precedes Grote's *Plato*, since James Mill died in 1836. Mill, older than Grote by 21 years, certainly influenced his son's reading of Plato. The possibility that he influenced Grote's (far more scholarly and influential) approach to Plato suggests that he may deserve a more prominent place in the history of Platonic scholarship than his published writings on Plato (only recently acknowledged) would lead us to suppose.

both interpretations illuminating—enormously so—though in my judgement neither is wholly true. Indeed, I think both are grossly one-sided. Nonetheless, each of them responds to important aspects of the dialogues, while missing others. No doubt one-sidedness is the inevitable fault of any interpretation/judgement of any great philosopher's work, including the one I am about to deliver. Still, for what it is worth, my view is that Plato opposed opinion (δόξα) both for Plotinus' reason and for Mill's.

He sought real knowledge, in a transcendent realm. But he also sought to encourage critical thinking, more stringent values, better and more rational opinions in the world we are born to. We should not underestimate the dangers and difficulty of the journey to Syracuse that he undertook no less than three times. Never mind whether the story is true that he was captured by pirates and sold into slavery. He would have known before setting out that that was a real possibility. He went nonetheless. Never mind what exactly he thought he could accomplish when he got there to talk to the tyrant Dionysius. He can hardly have aspired to turn Syracuse into the ideal city of the *Republic*. But he might have hoped to encourage Dionysius in a relatively better direction. He might even have cast himself as the praiseworthy lawgiver of *Laws* 710cd, who meets up with a virtuous young tyrant to transform society. The important thing is not the authenticity of the Seventh Letter, nor the veracity of its account of the events Plato was involved in, but simply and solely the fact that he was somehow involved, that he thought he should participate. When the opportunity came, he decided—sensibly or foolishly—to get stuck into contemporary events.

Plato's ability to move between two worlds, giving each its due, is evident on every page of his writing.²⁶ James Mill, like Cicero, remains firmly down here on earth. Plotinus is constantly eager to get away to a better place. Plato, inspiration for all three, illuminates both poles of the universe into which he draws his readers. That is why he is altogether larger, more imaginative, richer in ideas, more amusing and more inspiring (even to those who are not philosophically minded), more fruitful to think with, more challenging, more outrageous—in short, more philosophical—than any of the diverse followings that came after him. Plato remains a powerful presence because he opens our mind to thoughts it was not aware it needed.²⁷

²⁶ For an eloquent celebration of this ability, see Williams, *op cit.*, 42–5. My approach to Plato is much indebted to Williams's example and encouragement over the years.

²⁷ Thanks for suggestions and criticism to G. A. Cohen, Ruth Padel, and Quentin Skinner.