Plato (427–347 BCE)

DOI: 10.5040/9781474276986.ch-002
Page Range: 19–25

Plato (427–347 BCE) is probably the single most important figure in the whole of Western philosophy. Born to an aristocratic family in Athens, he spent most of his life there, apart from sojourns in the Greek cities of southern Italy and Sicily. In Athens, he founded the Academy, a community of men and women pursuing intellectual studies and living the philosophic life.

Plato's work consists of a body of dialogues addressing, in an integrated, holistic way, what are later distinguished as areas of philosophy such as metaphysics, ethics, philosophical psychology, theory of knowledge, logic, philosophical theology, spirituality, political theory, and cosmology. In response to the cultural tendencies of his time, in particular the relativism, skepticism, and nihilism that he associates with the Sophists, he shows that there can be true being, knowledge, or value only if the world reflects and shares in a higher reality, consisting of "forms" or "ideas," which are intelligible, incorporeal, timeless, and, in a word, divine. Hence, the intellect in us is our share in divinity, and the human soul is immortal just to the extent that it makes the cognitive, ethical, and spiritual ascent from the relativity of sense-based opinion to the intellectual knowledge of and union with divine reality.

Phaedrus (246a–248d)

SOCRATES: To describe what the soul actually is would require a very long account, altogether a task for a god in every way; but to say what it is like is humanly possible and takes less time. So let us do the second in our speech. Let us then liken the soul to the natural union of a team of winged horses and their charioteer. The gods have horses and charioteers that are themselves all good and come from good (246b) stock besides, while everyone else has a mixture. To begin with, our driver is in charge of a pair of horses; second, one of his horses is beautiful and good and from stock of the same sort, while the other is the opposite and has the opposite sort of bloodline. This means that chariot driving in our case is inevitably a painfully difficult business.

And now I should try to tell you why living things are said to include both mortal and immortal beings. All soul looks after all that lacks a soul, (246c) and patrols all of heaven, taking different shapes at different times. So long as its wings are in perfect condition it flies high, and the entire universe is its dominion; but a soul that sheds its wings wanders until it lights on something solid, where it settles and takes on an earthly body, which then, owing to the power of this soul, seems to move itself. The whole combination of soul and body is called a living thing, or animal, and has the designation "mortal" as well. Such a combination cannot be immortal, not on any reasonable account. In fact, it is pure fiction, based neither on (246d) observation nor on adequate reasoning, that a god is an immortal living thing which has a body and a soul, and that these are bound together by nature for all time—but of course we must let this be as it may please the gods, and speak accordingly.

Let us turn to what causes the shedding of the wings, what makes them fall away from a soul. It is something of this sort: By their nature, wings have the power to lift up heavy things and raise them aloft where the gods all dwell, and so, more than anything that pertains to the body, they are akin to the divine, which has beauty, wisdom, goodness, and (246e) everything of that sort. These nourish the soul's wings, which grow best in their presence; but foulness and ugliness make the wings shrink and disappear.

Now Zeus, the great commander in heaven, drives his winged chariot first in the procession, looking after everything and putting all things in order. Following him is an army of gods and spirits arranged in eleven (247a) sections. Hestia is the only one who remains at the home of the gods; all the rest of the twelve are lined up in formation, each god in command of the unit to which he is assigned. Inside heaven are many wonderful places from which to look and many aisles which the blessed gods take up and back, each seeing to his own work, while anyone who is able and wishes to do so follows along, since jealousy has no place in the gods' chorus. When they go to feast at the banquet, they have a steep climb to the high (247b) tier at the rim of heaven; on this slope the gods' chariots move easily, since they are balanced and well under control, but the other chariots barely make it. The heaviness of the bad horse drags its charioteer toward the earth and weighs him down if he has failed to train it well, and this causes the most extreme toil and struggle that a soul will face. But when the souls we call immortals reach the top, they move outward and take their stand on the high ridge of heaven, where its circular motion carries (247c) them around as they stand while they gaze upon what is outside heaven.

The place above heaven—none of our earthly poets has ever sung or ever will sing its praises enough! Still, this is the way it is—risky as it may be, you see, I must attempt to speak the truth, especially since the truth is my subject. What is in this place is without color and without shape and without solidity, really real reality, the subject of all true knowledge, visible only to intelligence, the soul's steersman. Now a god's (247d) thought is nourished by intelligence and pure knowledge, as is the thought of any soul that is concerned to take in what is appropriate to it, and so it is delighted at last to be seeing that which is and watching what is true, feeding on all this and feeling wonderful, until the circular motion brings it around to where it started. On the way around it has a view of justice itself; it has a view of self-control; it has a view of knowledge—not the knowledge that is close to change, that becomes different as it knows the different things which we consider real down here. No, it is the knowledge (247e) of that which really is. And when the soul has seen all the things that really are and feasted on them, it sinks back inside heaven and goes home. On its arrival, the charioteer stables the horses by the manger, throws in ambrosia, and gives them nectar to drink besides.

(248a) "Now that is the life of the gods. As for the other souls, one that follows a god most closely, making itself most like that god, raises the head of its charioteer up to the place outside and is carried around in the circular motion with the others. Although distracted by the horses, this soul does have a view of the things that are, just barely. Another soul rises at one time and falls at another, and because its horses pull it violently in different directions, it sees some and misses others. The remaining souls are all eagerly straining to keep up, but are unable to rise; they are carried around below the surface, trampling and striking one another as each tries to get (248b) ahead of the others. The result is terribly noisy, very sweaty, and disorderly. Many souls are crippled by the incompetence of the drivers, and many wings break much of their plumage. After so much trouble, they all leave without having seen that which is, uninitiated; and when they have gone, they will depend on the food of opinion.

The reason there is so much eagerness to see the plain where truth (248c) stands is that this pasture has the grass that is the right food for the best part of the soul, and it is the nature of the wings that lifts up the soul to be nourished by it. Besides, the law of destiny is this: if any soul becomes a companion to a god and catches sight of any true thing, it will be unharmed until the next circuit; and if it is able to do this every time, it will always be safe. If, on the other hand, it does not see anything true because it could not keep up, and by some accident takes on a burden of forgetfulness and wrongdoing, then it is weighed down, sheds its wings (248d), and falls to earth."

Timaeus (27d–31b)

TIMAEUS: As I see it, then, we must begin by making the following distinction: What is that which always is and has no becoming, and what is that which (28a) becomes but never is? The former is grasped by intellection, which involves a reasoned account. It is unchanging. The latter is grasped by opinion, which involves unreasoning sense perception. It comes to be and passes away, but never really is. Now everything that comes to be must of necessity come to be by the agency of some cause, for it is impossible for anything to come to be without a cause. So whenever the craftsman looks at what is always changeless and, using a thing of that kind as his pattern, reproduces its form and character, then, of necessity, all that he so (28b) completes is beautiful. But were he to look at a thing that has come to be and use as his pattern something that has been begotten, his work will lack beauty.

Now as to the whole universe or world order [*kosmos*]—let's just call it by whatever name is most acceptable in a given context—there is a question we need to consider first. This is the sort of question one should begin with in inquiring into any subject. Has it always existed? Was there no origin from which it came to be? Or did it come to be and take its start from some origin? It has come to be. For it is both visible and tangible and it has a body—and all things of that kind are perceptible. And, as we (28c) have shown, perceptible things are grasped by opinion, which involves sense perception. As such, they are things that come to be, things that are begotten. Further, we maintain that, necessarily, that which comes to be must come to be by the agency of some cause. Now to find the maker and father of this universe [*to pan*] is hard enough, and even if I succeeded, to declare him to everyone is impossible. And so we must go back and raise this question about the universe: Which of the two patterns did the maker use when he fashioned it? Was it the one that does not change and stays (29a) the same, or the one that has come to be? Well, if this world of ours is beautiful and its craftsman good, then clearly he looked at the eternal pattern. But if what it's blasphemous to even say is the case, then he looked at one that has come to be. Now surely it's clear to all that it was the eternal pattern he looked at, for, of all the things that have come to be, our universe is the most beautiful, and of causes the craftsman is the most excellent. This, then, is how it has come to be: it is a work of craft, patterned after that which is changeless and is grasped by a rational account, that is, by wisdom. (29b) Since these things are so, it follows by unquestionable necessity that this world is an image of something.

Now in every subject it is of utmost importance to begin at the natural beginning, and so, on the subject of an image and its pattern, we must make the following specification: the accounts we give of things have the same character as the subjects they set forth. So accounts of what is stable and fixed and transparent to understanding are themselves stable and unshifting. We must do our very best to make these accounts as irrefutable and invincible as any account may be. On the other hand, accounts we give of that which has been formed to be (29c) like that reality, since they are accounts of what is a likeness, are themselves likely, and stand in proportion to the previous accounts, that is, what being is to becoming, truth is to convincingness. Don't be surprised then, Socrates, if it turns out repeatedly that we won't be able to produce

accounts on a great many subjects—on gods or the coming to be of the universe—that are completely and perfectly consistent and accurate. Instead, if we can come up with accounts no less likely than any, we ought to be content, keeping in mind that both I, the speaker, and you, the judges, are only (29d) human. So we should accept the likely tale on these matters. It behooves us not to look for anything beyond this.

SOCRATES: Bravo, Timaeus! By all means! We must accept it as you say we should. This overture of yours was marvelous. Go on now and let us have the work itself.

TIMAEUS: Very well then. Now why did he who framed this whole (29e) universe of becoming frame it? Let us state the reason why: he was good, and one who is good can never become jealous of anything. And so, being free of jealousy, he wanted everything to become as much like himself as was possible. In fact, men of wisdom will tell you (and you couldn't do (30a) better than to accept their claim) that this, more than anything else, was the most preeminent reason for the origin of the world's coming to be. The god wanted everything to be good and nothing to be bad so far as that was possible, and so he took over all that was visible—not at rest but in discordant and disorderly motion—and brought it from a state of disorder to one of order, because he believed that order was in every way better than disorder. Now it wasn't permitted (nor is it now) that one who is (30b) supremely good should do anything but what is best. Accordingly, the god reasoned and concluded that in the realm of things naturally visible no unintelligent thing could as a whole be better than anything which does possess intelligence as a whole, and he further concluded that it is impossible for anything to come to possess intelligence apart from soul. Guided by this reasoning, he put intelligence in soul, and soul in body, and so he constructed the universe. He wanted to produce a piece of work that would be as excellent and supreme as its nature would allow. This, then, in keeping with our likely account, is how we must say divine (30c) providence brought our world into being as a truly living thing, endowed with soul and intelligence.

This being so, we have to go on to speak about what comes next. When the maker made our world, what living thing did he make it resemble? Let us not stoop to think that it was any of those that have the natural character of a part, for nothing that is a likeness of anything incomplete could ever turn out beautiful. Rather, let us lay it down that the universe resembles more closely than anything else that Living Thing of which all other living things are parts, both individually and by kinds. For that Living Thing comprehends within itself all intelligible living things, just (30d) as our world is made up of us and all the other visible creatures. Since the god wanted nothing more than to make the world like the best of the intelligible things, complete in every way, he made it a single visible living (31a) thing, which contains within itself all the living things whose nature it is to share its kind.

Have we been correct in speaking of one universe, or would it have been more correct to say that there are many, in fact infinitely many universes? There is but one universe, if it is to have been crafted after its pattern. For that which contains all of the intelligible living things couldn't ever be one of a pair, since that would require there to be yet another Living Thing, the one that contained those two, of which they then would be parts, and then it would be more correct to speak of our universe as made in the likeness, now not of those two, but of that other, the one that contains them. So, in order that this living thing should be like the complete Living (31b) Thing in respect of uniqueness, the maker made neither two nor yet an infinite number of worlds. On the contrary, our universe came to be as the one and only thing of its kind, and is so now and will continue to be so in the future.

Now that which comes to be must have bodily form, and be both visible and tangible, but nothing could ever become visible apart from fire, nor tangible without something solid, nor solid without earth. That is why, as he began to put the body of the universe together, the god came to make it out of fire and earth. But it isn't possible to combine two things well all by themselves, without a third; there has to be some bond between the (31c) two that unites them.

Symposium (210a–212b)

SOCRATES: [reporting the speech of Diotima]: "A lover who goes about this matter correctly must begin in his youth to devote himself to beautiful bodies. First, if the leader leads aright, he should love one body and beget beautiful ideas there; then he should (210b) realize that the beauty of any one body is brother to the beauty of any other and that if he is to pursue beauty of form, he'd be very foolish not to think that the beauty of all bodies is one and the same. When he grasps this, he must become a lover of all beautiful bodies, and he must think that this wild gaping after just one body is a small thing and despise it.

"After this he must think that the beauty of people's souls is more valuable than the beauty of their bodies, so that if someone is decent in (210c) his soul, even though he is scarcely blooming in his body, our lover must be content to love and care for him and to seek to give birth to such ideas as will make young men better. The result is that our lover will be forced to gaze at the beauty of activities and laws and to see that all this is akin to itself, with the result that he will think that the beauty of bodies is a thing of no importance. After customs he must move on to various kinds of knowledge. The result is that he will see the beauty of knowledge and (210d) be looking mainly not at beauty in a single example—as a servant would who favored the beauty of a little boy or a man or a single custom (being a slave, of course, he's low and small-

minded)—but the lover is turned to the great sea of beauty, and, gazing upon this, he gives birth to many gloriously beautiful ideas and thoughts, in unstinting love of wisdom, until, having grown and been strengthened there, he catches sight of such (210e) knowledge, and it is the knowledge of such beauty ….

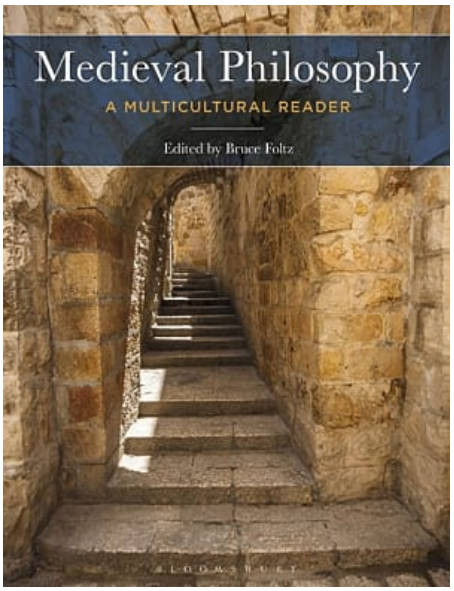
"Try to pay attention to me," she said, "as best you can. You see, the man who has been thus far guided in matters of Love, who has beheld beautiful things in the right order and correctly, is coming now to the goal of Loving: all of a sudden he will catch sight of something wonderfully beautiful in its nature; that, Socrates, is the reason for all his earlier labors (211a).

"First, it always is and neither comes to be nor passes away, neither waxes nor wanes. Second, it is not beautiful this way and ugly that way, nor beautiful at one time and ugly at another, nor beautiful in relation to one thing and ugly in relation to another; nor is it beautiful here but ugly there, as it would be if it were beautiful for some people and ugly for others. Nor will the beautiful appear to him in the guise of a face or hands or anything else that belongs to the body, nor as one idea or one kind of knowledge, nor as anywhere in another thing, as in (211b) an animal, or in earth, or in heaven, or in anything else, but itself by itself with itself, always one in form; and all the other beautiful things share in that, in such a way that when those others come to be or pass away, this does not become the least bit smaller or greater nor suffer any change. So when someone rises by these stages, through loving boys correctly, and begins to see this beauty, he has almost grasped his goal. This is what it (211c) is to go aright, or be led by another, into the mystery of love: one goes always upward for the sake of this beauty, starting out from beautiful things and using them like rising stairs: from one body to two and from two to all beautiful bodies, then from beautiful bodies to beautiful customs, and from customs to beautiful things to be learned, and from these things learned he arrives in the end at this thing learned, which is learning of this very beauty, so that in the end he comes to know just what is beauty itself (211d).

"And there in life, Socrates, my friend," said the woman from Mantinea, "there if anywhere should a person live his life, beholding that Beauty. If you once see that, it won't occur to you to measure beauty by gold or clothing or beautiful boys and youths—who, if you see them now, strike you out of your senses, and make you, you and many others, eager to be with the boys you love and look at them forever, if there were any way to do that, forgetting food and drink, everything but looking at them and (212e) being with them. But how would it be, in our view," she said, "if someone got to see the Beautiful itself, absolute, pure, unmixed, not polluted by human flesh or colors or any other great nonsense of mortality, but if he (212a) could see the divine Beauty itself in its one form? Do you think it would be a poor life for a human being to look there and to behold it by that which he ought, and to be with it? Or haven't you remembered," she said, "that in that life alone, when he looks at Beauty in the only way that Beauty can be seen—only then will it become possible for him to give birth not to images of virtue (because he's in touch with no images), but to true virtue (because he is in touch with the true Beauty). The love of the gods belongs to anyone who has given birth to true virtue and nourished it, (212b) and if any human being could become immortal, it would be he."

Republic (507d–509b)

SOCRATES: Sight may be present in the eyes, and the one who has it may try to use it, and colors may be present in things, but unless a third kind of thing is present, which is naturally adapted for this very purpose, you know that (507e) sight will see nothing, and the colors will remain unseen.
GLAUCON: What kind of thing do you mean?
SOCRATES: I mean what you call light.
GLAUCON: You're right.
SOCRATES: Then it isn't an insignificant kind of yoke that yokes the sense of sight (508a) and the power to be seen—it is a more valuable yoke than any other yoked things have got, if indeed light is something valuable.
GLAUCON: And, of course, it's very valuable.
SOCRATES: Which of the gods in heaven would you name as the cause and controller of this, the one whose light causes our sight to see in the best way and the visible things to be seen?
GLAUCON: The same one you and others would name. Obviously, the answer to your question is the sun.
SOCRATES: And isn't sight by nature related to that god in this way?
GLAUCON: Which way?
SOCRATES: Sight isn't the sun, neither sight itself nor that in which it comes to be, namely the eye (508b).
GLAUCON: No, it certainly isn't.
SOCRATES: But I think that it is the most sunlike of the senses.
GLAUCON: Very much so.
SOCRATES: And it receives from the sun the power it has, just like an influx from an overflowing treasury.
GLAUCON: Certainly.
SOCRATES: The sun is not sight, but isn't it the cause of sight itself and seen by it?
GLAUCON: That's right.
SOCRATES: Let's say, then, that this is what I called the offspring of the good, which the good begot as its analogue. What the good itself is in the intelligible realm, in relation to intelligence and intelligible things, the sun is in the visible realm, in relation to sight and visible things (508c).
GLAUCON: How? Explain a bit more.
SOCRATES: You know that, when we turn our eyes to things whose colors are no longer illuminated by the light of day but by night lights, the eyes are dimmed and seem nearly blind, as if clear vision were no longer in them.
GLAUCON: Of course.
SOCRATES: Yet whenever one turns them on things illuminated by the sun, they see clearly, and vision appears in those very same eyes (508d)?
GLAUCON: Indeed.
SOCRATES: Well, understand the soul in the same way: When it focuses on something that truth and being illuminates, it intelligizes, knows, and apparently possesses intelligence, but when it focuses on what is mixed with obscurity, on what comes to be and passes away, it opines and is dimmed, changes its opinions this way and that, and seems bereft of intelligence.
GLAUCON: It does seem that way.
SOCRATES: Say, then, that what gives truth to the things known and the power to know to the knower is the form of the good. And since it is the cause of (508e) knowledge and truth, think of it as something known. Both knowledge and truth are beautiful things, but the good is other and more beautiful than they. In the visible realm, light and sight are rightly considered sunlike, but it is wrong to think that they are the sun, so here it is right to think of knowledge and truth as goodlike but wrong to think that either (509a) of them is the good—for the good is yet more prized.
GLAUCON: This is an overwhelming beauty you're talking about, if it provides both knowledge and truth and is superior to them in beauty. You surely don't think that a thing like that could be pleasure.
SOCRATES: Hush! Let's examine its image in more detail as follows.
GLAUCON: How (509b)?
SOCRATES: You'll be willing to say, I think, that the sun not only provides visible things with the power to be seen but also with coming to be, growth, and nourishment, although it is not itself coming to be.
GLAUCON: How could it be?
SOCRATES: Therefore, you should also say that not only do the things known owe their being known to the good, but their existence and reality is also due to it, although the good is not reality, but still beyond reality, surpassing it in seniority and power.



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