

The Invisible Pillar

On the Genesis and Concealment of Dualism
from the Pre-Socratics to the Moderns

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Abstract

This paper traces the genealogy of the dualism between intelligible and sensible, between *logos* and matter, from its pre-Socratic background through its Platonic inauguration to its modern transformations. The central thesis is that Plato introduced a structural division that subsequent philosophy inherited, criticized superficially, re-articulated, but rarely questioned as a framework. The paper examines how this dualism was first epistemic and social (Plato's distinction between philosophical knowledge and common experience), then cosmological (the scientific revolution's separation between the mathematically describable real and the qualitatively perceived apparent), and finally metaphysical (Descartes' *res cogitans* and *res extensa*). The natural philosophers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—Copernicus, Kepler, Galileo, Newton—are treated here as what they were: philosophers investigating nature, whose work deepened and transformed the Platonic distance between the true and the accessible. The aim is not to refute dualism but to make it visible as a historical structure, a framework that has become so assimilated as to be invisible.

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1 Introduction: The Question of Being and Becoming

The question that animated the earliest Greek thinkers was deceptively simple: what is there, and how does it change? Or, to put it in terms closer to their own: what are things made of, and why do they not stay the same?

These questions concern what we might call *ta onta*—the things that are, the beings, the reals. The term is useful precisely because it predates the later distinctions that will concern us. *Ta onta* is what is out there, what we encounter, what resists us and supports us, what burns and flows and falls. The pre-Socratics asked about *ta onta* directly, without first asking how we know about them or whether our knowledge is reliable. The river is there; it flows; we step into it. What is it made of? Why does it flow? These are the questions.

Somewhere along the way, this directness was lost. The question “what are *ta onta*?” became entangled with the question “how can we speak truly about *ta onta*?”—and eventually the second question came to dominate, or even to replace, the first. This paper is an attempt to trace how that happened.

The central claim is that Plato introduced a structural dualism—between the intelligible and the sensible, between *logos* and matter, between true being and mere appearance—that has shaped Western philosophy ever since. This dualism was not simply a thesis to be accepted or rejected; it became the framework within which philosophical questions were posed. Later thinkers criticized aspects of it, modified it, re-articulated it in new terms—but they rarely stepped outside it. By the time of Descartes, the dualism had become so deeply embedded that it could be presented as a new beginning, a radical departure, when in fact it was a transformation of a structure already two millennia old.

The paper proceeds as follows. We begin with the pre-Socratics, examining their approach to being and becoming before the Platonic turn. We then analyze Plato’s intervention: how he shifted the question from *ta onta* to the Ideas, and how this shift introduced a distance—epistemic and social before it was cosmological—between the true and the accessible. We follow the inheritance of this structure through Aristotle and the medieval period, showing how the dualism became an invisible background rather than a contested position. We then turn to the natural philosophers of the scientific revolution—Copernicus, Kepler, Galileo, Newton—treating them as philosophers whose work transformed the nature of the Platonic distance without abolishing it. Finally, we examine Descartes’ re-articulation of dualism, arguing that his apparently novel framework is continuous with the Platonic structure it seems to replace.

2 Before the Division: The Pre-Socratics and *Ta Onta*

Our understanding of the pre-Socratic philosophers depends on fragmentary evidence, collected and analyzed by scholars such as Kirk, Raven, and Schofield (Kirk, Raven, and Schofield 1983) and interpreted in comprehensive histories by Guthrie (Guthrie 1962–1981) and Barnes (Barnes 1982). What follows is necessarily a reconstruction, but the philosophical point—the contrast with Plato—should be clear.

2.1 The Proximity of the Real

For the earliest Greek thinkers, the question of being and becoming was a question about the world—not about our knowledge of the world, not about the conditions of possibility of experience, not about the structure of language. Thales said that everything is water; Anaximenes said air; Heraclitus said fire; Empedocles said earth, water, air, and fire combined by Love and separated by Strife. These are claims about what *ta onta* are made of, about the substrate or principle (*archē*) of things.

What is striking about these early inquiries is their directness. The philosophers are asking about the same world that everyone inhabits. The river that Heraclitus invokes is a real river, or every river; the fire is the fire that burns, that we see and feel. There is no suggestion that the philosopher has access to a different reality than the farmer or the sailor. The difference is in the depth of understanding, not in the object understood.

This does not mean the pre-Socratics were naive empiricists. Heraclitus famously says that most people do not understand the *logos*, even when they encounter it. Parmenides distinguishes the way of truth from the way of opinion. There is a sense in which the philosopher sees more, or sees better. But what the philosopher sees is the same world—its hidden structure, its underlying unity, its governing principle. The *logos* that Heraclitus speaks of is not in a separate realm; it is the very law of fire, of strife, of measure. It is in the world, not above it.

We might say that for the pre-Socratics, the real is *proximate*. It is here, around us, touching us. We are immersed in it. The question is not how to reach it but how to understand it.

2.2 Parmenides and the Problem

Parmenides introduces a complication that will prove fateful. His argument, reconstructed from the fragments, goes something like this: whatever is, is; whatever is not, is not; therefore being is one, unchanging, and indivisible, for any change would require something to come from not-being, which is impossible.

This is not yet dualism. Parmenides is making a claim about *ta onta*—indeed, about *to on*, being itself. But the claim has a troubling consequence: if being is unchanging,

then change is unreal. The world of our experience—the world of rivers and fires, of birth and death—is somehow illusory, or at least not fully real.

Parmenides does not develop this into a two-world metaphysics. His Way of Opinion, which discusses the phenomenal world, is presented as the beliefs of mortals, not as a description of a lower realm of being. But the structure of the problem is there: how can we reconcile the unity and permanence that reason seems to demand with the multiplicity and change that experience reveals?

Zeno's paradoxes sharpen the problem. Achilles cannot catch the tortoise; the arrow does not move; the runner cannot reach the end of the stadium. These are problems about space, motion, divisibility—problems that arise from applying rational analysis to the continuum of experience. The paradoxes do not prove that motion is impossible; they show that our concepts of motion, space, and time harbor unresolved difficulties.

The pre-Socratic response to Parmenides was not to deny experience but to find ways of accommodating both unity and plurality, both permanence and change. The atomists posited unchanging atoms in the void, whose combinations and separations account for the changing world. Empedocles posited permanent elements and changing mixtures. Anaxagoras posited infinite seeds of all things, arranged and rearranged by Mind.

These are all attempts to save *ta onta*—to give a rational account of the changing world without denying its reality. The question remains within physics, within the inquiry into nature.

2.3 Heraclitus and the *Logos*

Heraclitus deserves special attention because his concept of *logos* will later be transformed beyond recognition (see Kahn 1979, for a careful analysis). For Heraclitus, the *logos* is not a realm, not a language, not a faculty of the soul. It is the rational structure of reality itself—the measure, the proportion, the law that governs the flux.

“This *logos* holds always, but humans always prove unable to understand it”—Heraclitus is not saying that the *logos* is hidden in some transcendent place. He is saying that it is here, in the fire, in the river, in the strife of opposites, but most people do not see it. They live as if they had a private understanding, when in fact the *logos* is common (*xynos*).

The important point is that the *logos* is not opposed to *ta onta*. It is the structure of *ta onta*. Understanding the *logos* is not escaping from the sensible world but grasping its hidden coherence. The philosopher does not ascend to a higher reality; the philosopher wakes up to the reality that is already there.

This is precisely what Plato will change.

3 Plato's Turn: The Birth of Dualism

3.1 The Devaluation of the Sensible

Plato inherits the Parmenidean problem: how can there be knowledge if everything changes? But his solution takes a different direction. Instead of finding a way to make the changing world knowable, he concludes that the changing world is not the object of true knowledge. True knowledge—*epistēmē*—requires objects that are stable, unchanging, always the same. Since *ta onta* of the sensible world are not like this, they cannot be truly known. At best, we have opinion (*doxa*) about them.

The objects of true knowledge are the Forms or Ideas (*eidē, ideai*). The Beautiful itself, the Just itself, the Equal itself—these are what they are, always and everywhere, without variation or contradiction. The beautiful things we see are beautiful in some respects and not in others, at some times and not at others; they fall short of the Beautiful itself.

This is the first move: a hierarchical distinction between two kinds of objects. The sensible things are less real, less knowable, less valuable than the intelligible Forms. Plato says explicitly in the *Republic* that the visible world stands to the intelligible world as image to original, as shadow to substance.

Notice what has happened. The question “what are *ta onta*?” has been answered by saying: the things you encounter are not really *ta onta*, or not fully. The really real is elsewhere—in the *topos noētos*, the intelligible place that is not a place. The pre-Socratic proximity has been replaced by distance.

3.2 The Promotion of *Logos*

The second move is correlative to the first. If the true objects of knowledge are not accessible to the senses, how do we reach them? Through *logos*—reason, argument, dialectic.

In the *Phaedo*, Socrates describes his “second sailing”: having given up on investigating things directly, he takes refuge in *logoi*, examining the truth of beings through propositions about them. This is not presented as a second-best method but as the proper method for philosophy. Direct investigation of the sensible world leads to confusion; only the analysis of concepts, the pursuit of definitions, the dialectical ascent through hypotheses can reach the unhypothetical first principle.

The *logos* thus becomes the privileged means of access to the real. But this means that the real is now defined in terms of what *logos* can grasp. The Forms are precisely what can be defined, what can be captured in a formula, what remains self-identical through all predications. The sensible things, which resist definition, which are always “both and neither,” are relegated to a lower status.

There is a subtle circularity here. The Forms are more real because they are knowable; they are knowable because they are stable; they are stable because they are what definitions capture; definitions are the work of *logos*. The criteria of reality have been tailored to the capacities of rational thought.

3.3 The Allegory of the Cave and Epistemic Distance

The allegory of the cave in *Republic* VII makes the distance explicit. Most people are prisoners, chained in a cave, seeing only shadows on the wall. They take these shadows for reality. The philosopher is the one who breaks free, turns around, ascends to the light, and sees the sun—the Form of the Good, the source of all being and intelligibility.

The allegory is usually read as an epistemological parable: we must move from appearance to reality, from opinion to knowledge. But it is also a social parable. The cave is the human condition as such; the prisoners are not stupid or wicked, they are simply unenlightened. Only the philosopher makes the ascent, and when he returns to tell the others, they do not believe him. They might even kill him, Plato suggests, thinking of Socrates.

This introduces what we might call *epistemic distance*—a gap not (yet) between the human and the cosmic, but between those who know and those who do not, between the philosopher and the common person. The real is out there for everyone, in some sense; but access to it requires a special formation, a long education, a turning of the soul.

The *Republic* specifies the curriculum: arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, harmonics, and finally dialectic. Only after years of mathematical training can one approach the Forms themselves. Philosophy is not for everyone—not because of arbitrary exclusion, but because the ascent is difficult and most people lack either the capacity or the opportunity.

This is not the cosmological distance that will come later with Copernicus and Galileo. The universe is still finite and Earth-centered. But the structure is analogous: the true is far from the apparent, and reaching it requires special methods and special people.

3.4 The *Sophist* and the Entanglement of Being and *Logos*

The *Sophist* represents Plato's most sophisticated treatment of being and non-being (as analyzed by Cornford 1935), and it reveals how thoroughly *logos* has become entangled with ontology.

The problem is: how can the sophist speak falsely? To speak falsely is to say what is not. But Parmenides has forbidden us to think or say what is not. If non-being is impossible, then falsehood is impossible, and the sophist cannot be caught.

The Eleatic Stranger's solution is ingenious: non-being is not absolute nothingness but *otherness* (*heteron*). To say what is false is not to say nothing; it is to say of something things other than what it is. The five "greatest kinds"—Being, Same, Other, Rest,

Motion—can combine in various ways, and the study of their combination is dialectic.

But notice what has happened. The problem was ontological: what is non-being? The solution is logical: non-being is otherness, a relation of predication. The question “how can there be what is not?” has been transformed into the question “how can we predicate falsely?” The inquiry into *ta onta* has become an inquiry into the structure of *logos*.

This is not a mistake; it is a choice, though perhaps not a fully conscious one. Plato is committed to the view that being and intelligibility go together, that what is most real is what is most knowable. Given this commitment, it makes sense that the analysis of being would converge with the analysis of predication. But the convergence has a cost: the things themselves recede behind the screen of language.

4 The Inheritance of Dualism

4.1 Aristotle: Criticism and Conservation

Aristotle is Plato’s greatest critic, but also his greatest debtor. He attacks the separation (*chōrismos*) of the Forms from sensible things. The Third Man argument shows that positing a separate Form of Man to explain what makes men men leads to an infinite regress. The Forms do not explain anything; they just duplicate the problem.

Aristotle’s alternative is hylomorphism: every substance is a composite of matter (*hylē*) and form (*morphē*). The form is not in a separate realm; it is in the thing, making the thing what it is. To know a thing is to grasp its form through the matter in which it is embodied.

This looks like a rejection of Platonic dualism, and in a sense it is. The two-world picture is replaced by one world with two aspects. But the aspects are still two: form and matter, actuality and potentiality, the intelligible and the sensible. And they are still hierarchically ordered. Form is prior to matter, actuality to potentiality. Pure form without matter—the Prime Mover—is the most real, the most divine.

Moreover, Aristotle retains the correlation between intelligibility and being. What is knowable in the highest sense is what is most actual, most formal. The material aspect of things is what resists knowledge, what accounts for contingency and change. The *nous* grasps forms; sensation gives us the matter-bound particulars.

Aristotle does not present this as Platonic inheritance. He presents it as the truth about the structure of reality. But it is Plato’s structure, internalized and naturalized. The dualism has been modified, not abolished.

4.2 Neoplatonism: Explicit Hierarchy

The Neoplatonists—Plotinus above all—make the hierarchy explicit and cosmic. Reality is a series of emanations from the One, descending through Intellect (*Nous*), Soul, and finally Matter. Matter is the last emanation, the farthest from the source, almost non-being, the principle of evil and dispersion.

Here the dualism is fully ontological. It is not just that matter is less knowable than form; matter is less real, a deficient image of the higher. The goal of philosophy—and of life—is to ascend, to return to the One, to escape the realm of matter and multiplicity.

This is not Plato exactly, but it is Plato’s structure taken to an extreme. The distance between the intelligible and the sensible has become a cosmic hierarchy, a ladder of being with matter at the bottom and the ineffable One at the top.

4.3 The Medieval Synthesis: Dualism as Background

Medieval philosophy, both Christian and Islamic, inherited the Platonic-Aristotelian framework and made it the structure of the universe. The Forms became ideas in the mind of God; the hierarchy of being became the Great Chain of Being; the goal of knowledge became the vision of God.

What is striking about medieval philosophy is not that it debated dualism but that it debated within dualism. The great controversies—about universals, about the relation of faith and reason, about the nature of the soul—all presuppose the basic framework: there is an intelligible order and a sensible order, the former is higher and more real, knowledge ascends from the lower to the higher.

The framework was so thoroughly assimilated that it ceased to be visible as a framework. It was simply how things are. The question “why should we think that the intelligible is more real than the sensible?” was not asked, because the answer seemed obvious: because God is pure intellect, because the eternal is superior to the temporal, because the soul is immortal while the body decays.

This is what we might call the “invisible pillar”: a structure so fundamental that it supports everything else without itself being examined. The dualism is not a thesis among theses; it is the ground on which all theses stand.

5 The Natural Philosophers: A New Distance

The transformation wrought by the natural philosophers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries has been analyzed by historians of science, most notably by Alexandre Koyré (Koyré 1957; Koyré 1939) and E. A. Burt (Burt 1924). What follows draws on their insights while emphasizing the continuity of the underlying dualist structure.

5.1 Copernicus: Displacing the Center

Copernicus, Kepler, Galileo, and Newton are usually called scientists, and rightly so. But they understood themselves as natural philosophers, and their work was philosophical through and through. They were not merely collecting data; they were rethinking the structure of the cosmos.

Copernicus' heliocentrism is often presented as a triumph of observation over prejudice, but this is misleading. There was no decisive observational evidence for heliocentrism in Copernicus' time; the Ptolemaic system could accommodate the data. Copernicus' argument was aesthetic, mathematical, philosophical: the heliocentric system is simpler, more unified, more beautiful.

But the implications were revolutionary. If the Earth moves, then our senses deceive us. We do not feel the motion; we see the sun rise and set. The truth is contrary to appearance. This is not a minor point. It is a radicalization of the Platonic distance. Not only is true knowledge different from common opinion; the senses themselves are systematically misleading.

Moreover, the Earth is no longer the center. We are not at a privileged position in the cosmos; we are on one of the planets. The universe is not organized around us. This is the first blow to what Freud will later call human narcissism.

5.2 Kepler: The Mathematical Soul of the World

Kepler was a mystic and a mathematician, and he saw no contradiction. For him, the mathematical harmonies of the planetary orbits were traces of the divine intellect, the signature of God in creation. To understand the mathematics was to think God's thoughts after Him.

Kepler's laws replaced the perfect circles of ancient astronomy with ellipses. This might seem like a demotion—the ellipse is less perfect than the circle. But for Kepler it was a revelation: the actual mathematics of the heavens is more complex and more beautiful than the idealized geometry of the ancients.

This is still Platonism of a kind. The true structure of reality is mathematical, and mathematical knowledge is the highest knowledge. But the mathematics is now empirically constrained; it must fit the observations. The philosopher cannot simply contemplate the Forms; he must measure, calculate, test.

Kepler's universe is still a cosmos—ordered, harmonious, meaningful. But the order is mathematical, not qualitative. The categories of ancient physics—heavy and light, natural places, the four elements—are being replaced by quantities: distance, period, velocity.

5.3 Galileo: The Book of Nature in Mathematical Language

Galileo made the methodological revolution explicit. “Philosophy is written in this grand book, the universe, which stands continually open to our gaze,” he wrote. “But the book cannot be understood unless one first learns to comprehend the language and read the letters in which it is composed. It is written in the language of mathematics, and its characters are triangles, circles, and other geometric figures.”

This is the decisive move. The true description of nature is mathematical. The qualities we perceive—colors, sounds, tastes, textures—are effects of the quantitative primary qualities on our senses. They are in us, not in things. As Galileo put it, if you remove the perceiving organism, the secondary qualities vanish; only shapes, sizes, and motions remain.

This is a new dualism, or rather a new form of the old dualism. The distinction is no longer between the intelligible Forms and their sensible copies, but between the mathematically describable real and the qualitatively perceived apparent. The structure is the same: a privileged domain of true being, accessible to the intellect (now mathematical), and a derivative domain of appearance, given to the senses.

But there is a crucial difference. The Platonic Forms were eternal and separate; the mathematically describable real is the physical world itself, but stripped of its sensory clothing. The distance is not between two worlds but between two descriptions of one world—and one description is true while the other is subjective, relative, secondary.

5.4 Newton: The Universe as Mechanism

Newton’s *Principia* completed the revolution. The same laws—the laws of motion, the law of universal gravitation—apply to the apple and to the Moon, to the terrestrial and the celestial. There is one physics for the whole universe.

The universe Newton describes is a vast machine: bodies moving through absolute space and absolute time according to mathematical laws. It is determinate, quantitative, homogeneous. There are no natural places, no celestial perfection, no hierarchy of being. Matter is matter; motion is motion; the laws are the same everywhere.

This is a cosmos without teleology. The question “why does the stone fall?” can no longer be answered “because it seeks its natural place.” It can only be answered “because the gravitational force accelerates it according to the inverse square law.” The universe does not care about us; it simply runs according to its equations.

Newton himself was a deeply religious man, and he saw the laws of nature as evidence of divine wisdom. But the universe the laws describe needs no ongoing divine intervention; it is a clock that runs by itself. Leibniz famously objected that Newton’s God was a bad watchmaker, needing to tinker with his creation. But Leibniz’s objection only underscored the point: the natural philosophers had constructed an image of nature as mechanism,

and even those who resisted the image could not escape its terms.

5.5 The New Distance

What the natural philosophers accomplished was a transformation of the Platonic distance. The distance was no longer primarily between the philosopher and the common person, though that remained. It was now between the mathematically described world and the qualitatively experienced world.

This is what we might call cosmological distance. The universe revealed by science is not the world we live in. We live in a world of colors and sounds, of near and far, of up and down, of warmth and cold. The universe is colorless, soundless, indifferent to our orientation, governed by laws that know nothing of warmth.

The universe is also enormously large—first much larger than the ancients thought, then, with subsequent discoveries, almost unimaginably large. We are not at the center; we are on a small planet orbiting an ordinary star in one galaxy among billions. The cosmological distance is literal as well as conceptual.

This distance is not the same as Plato's, but it continues the Platonic structure. There is still a domain of true being and a domain of appearance. There is still a privileged method of access—now mathematical physics rather than dialectic. There is still a gap between the philosopher (now scientist) and the common person who takes appearances for reality.

6 Descartes: Dualism Re-Articulated

The scholarship on Descartes is vast; for philosophical analysis, see Cottingham (1986), Wilson (1978), and Garber (1992). What follows focuses on the structural continuity between Cartesian and Platonic dualism.

6.1 The Cogito and the World

Descartes presents himself as beginning from scratch, doubting everything that can be doubted, finding an unshakeable foundation in the *cogito*. This methodological radicalism has led many to see Descartes as the founder of modern philosophy, a break with the scholastic tradition.

But from the perspective we have been developing, Descartes looks more like a re-articulator than an originator. His dualism—*res cogitans* and *res extensa*, mind and matter, thought and extension—is a new form of the ancient division.

The innovation is the starting point. Plato began with the question of being; Descartes begins with the question of certainty. What can I know for certain? Only that I think,

therefore I am. Everything else—the external world, my own body, other minds—must be reconstructed from this foundation.

This makes the mind the point of certainty and the world the problem. Descartes must prove that the external world exists, that it corresponds to our ideas of it. He needs God as a guarantee: a non-deceiving God would not give us faculties that systematically mislead us.

This is the Platonic structure inverted and interiorized. For Plato, the Forms were objective, out there, and the task was to ascend to them. For Descartes, the mind is the starting point, and the task is to reach out from it to the world. But the structure is the same: two domains, one certain and intelligible, one doubtful and material, with the problem of their relationship.

6.2 The Mind-Body Problem

Descartes' dualism creates the mind-body problem in its modern form. If mind and body are two different substances, with nothing in common, how do they interact? How does my decision to raise my arm cause my arm to rise? How does the impact of light on my eyes cause the experience of seeing?

Descartes' own answer—the pineal gland as the point of interaction—is notoriously unsatisfying. It does not explain how two utterly different substances can affect each other; it just locates the mystery in a particular organ.

This problem is structurally identical to the Platonic problem of participation. How do the sensible things participate in the Forms? How does the Bed itself relate to the beds we see? Plato never solved this problem; the *Parmenides* exposes it mercilessly. Descartes has inherited the problem in a new guise.

The history of modern philosophy can be read as a series of attempts to solve, dissolve, or evade this problem. Occasionalism, parallelism, idealism, materialism, neutral monism, functionalism—all are responses to a difficulty that arises from the dualist structure. None is wholly satisfactory, which suggests that the problem may lie in the structure itself.

6.3 The Mathematization of Matter

One aspect of Descartes' philosophy aligns him firmly with the natural philosophers: his conception of matter as pure extension. The physical world is *res extensa*—extended substance—and nothing more. It has no qualities except those that can be described geometrically: shape, size, position, motion.

This is Galileo's distinction between primary and secondary qualities built into the metaphysics. Color, sound, warmth are in the mind; out there is only geometry in motion. Physics becomes applied geometry.

This vision of matter facilitated the development of mathematical physics. If matter is just extension, then physics can be done with equations. The qualitative categories of Aristotelian physics—earth, water, air, fire, the four causes, natural places—are eliminated in favor of quantitative ones.

But the vision also deepens the Platonic distance. The world described by physics is not the world we live in. Our world is full of colors and sounds; the physical world is colorless and silent. Our world is meaningful; the physical world is mechanism. We are left wondering how the two relate, how the subjective and the objective, the manifest and the scientific image, fit together (the terminology is from Sellars 1962).

7 The Invisible Pillar

7.1 Dualism as Framework

We are now in a position to see the pattern. Plato introduced a dualism between the intelligible and the sensible, correlating the true with the accessible-to-reason and the apparent with the given-to-sense. This dualism was:

- criticized by Aristotle (the separation, not the duality);
- radicalized by the Neoplatonists (into a cosmic hierarchy);
- assimilated by the medievals (as the Great Chain of Being);
- transformed by the natural philosophers (into the mathematically describable vs. the qualitatively perceived);
- re-articulated by Descartes (as mind vs. matter).

At no point was the basic structure seriously questioned. The forms of dualism changed; the dualism itself remained. It became what we have called an invisible pillar: a structure that supports the philosophical edifice without itself being visible.

This invisibility is not accidental. The dualism is tied to the very activity of philosophy as Plato defined it: the pursuit of truth through reason, the ascent from appearance to reality. To question the dualism is to question whether there is an appearance-reality distinction at all, whether reason has a privileged access to the true, whether the sensible is inferior to the intelligible. These are questions that philosophy, constituted as it has been, finds difficult to ask.

7.2 Who First Saw the Pillar?

Arguably, the first philosopher to see the Platonic dualism as a historical structure rather than an obvious truth was Hegel. Hegel historicized philosophy: he saw the development from the pre-Socratics to his own time as a necessary unfolding of Spirit, with each position being both true and one-sided, to be preserved and overcome in a higher synthesis.

For Hegel, Plato's distinction between the intelligible and the sensible was a moment in this development—necessary for its time, but to be transcended. The goal was to overcome the opposition, to see the rational as actual and the actual as rational, to reconcile subject and object, mind and world.

But Hegel's transcendence of dualism is itself conducted in the terms of the *logos*. It is Spirit that reconciles; it is the Concept that is the truth. In a sense, Hegel radicalizes the Platonic move: not just the Forms but the entire process of reality is logical. His solution to dualism is a deeper idealism.

Nietzsche's critique is more radical. Nietzsche sees the Platonic dualism as a *devaluation of life*. The distinction between the true world and the apparent world is, for Nietzsche, a symptom of weakness, of resentment against the body, against change, against becoming. Plato is the enemy because he invented another world to condemn this one.

In *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche traces “How the ‘True World’ Finally Became a Fable” (Nietzsche 1889): from Plato through Christianity through Kant to the final recognition that if the true world is abolished, so is the apparent. There is only the world, the Dionysian flux, the eternal recurrence.

Nietzsche sees the pillar, but his response is demolition rather than reconstruction. He writes in aphorisms because he distrusts systems; he invokes Dionysus and Zarathustra because he distrusts argument. Whether this leaves us with any way to think about being and becoming is unclear.

Whitehead's remark is perhaps the most telling: “The safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato” (Whitehead 1929). Whitehead meant this as a compliment to Plato's comprehensiveness, but it can also be read as a diagnosis. We are still working within the space Plato opened; our problems are transformations of his problems; our solutions presuppose his framework.

7.3 The Question Remains

The original question was about being and becoming: what are *ta onta*, and how do they change? The pre-Socratics asked this directly, about the world out there, using water and fire and atoms as answers.

Plato shifted the question: the really real is not the changing sensible but the unchanging intelligible, and we reach it through *logos*. Aristotle modified the answer but

kept the structure. The medievals built a civilization on it. The natural philosophers mathematized it. Descartes internalized it.

And now? We have physics, which describes the world in equations that most people cannot read. We have neuroscience, which locates mind in matter but cannot explain how. We have analytic philosophy, which analyzes language, and continental philosophy, which interrogates history. We have many sophisticated tools for discussing being and becoming.

But the question itself—what are *ta onta*? what is the structure of the real? how does change happen?—is strangely difficult to ask directly. The Platonic inheritance makes us suspicious of direct questions about the world. We want to ask first about the conditions of possibility, the conceptual scheme, the linguistic framework, the social construction. The world itself recedes behind screens of mediation.

Perhaps what is needed is not another footnote to Plato but a return to the directness of the pre-Socratics—a willingness to ask about *ta onta* without first asking whether we are entitled to ask. Not a rejection of *logos* (we cannot think without it) but a refusal to let *logos* become the measure of the real. Not a denial of the achievements of mathematics and physics but a resistance to the reduction of being to what equations can capture.

This would not be easy. The Platonic dualism is not a mistake that can be corrected; it is a structure that has shaped how we think. But structures can be made visible, and what is visible can be questioned. That, at least, is a beginning.

8 Conclusion: Making the Invisible Visible

This paper has traced a single thread: the emergence and persistence of a dualism between the intelligible and the sensible, between *logos* and matter, between the domain of truth and the domain of appearance. We began with the pre-Socratics, who asked about *ta onta* directly, and we saw how Plato transformed the question by positing a separate realm of Forms accessible to reason. We followed the inheritance of this structure through Aristotle, the medievals, the natural philosophers of the scientific revolution, and Descartes.

The central claim is not that this dualism is false. Philosophical structures are not true or false in the way propositions are; they are frameworks that make certain questions askable and certain answers thinkable. The claim is that this particular framework has become invisible—so deeply embedded that we do not see it as a framework at all.

The natural philosophers—Copernicus, Kepler, Galileo, Newton—were not merely scientists in the modern sense. They were philosophers investigating the structure of nature. Their work transformed the Platonic dualism without abolishing it: the distance between true and apparent became the distance between the mathematically describable and the qualitatively experienced. This new form of dualism has shaped modern thought

as profoundly as Plato's original.

Descartes' dualism of mind and matter is another transformation, not a departure. It creates the mind-body problem, which is structurally the same as Plato's problem of participation. The history of modern philosophy is largely an attempt to solve a problem that may be insoluble within the dualist framework.

What would it mean to step outside the framework? Not to reject reason or mathematics or science, but to refuse the devaluation of the sensible, the reduction of being to what *logos* can grasp, the assumption that the true is always elsewhere, behind, above, beneath the apparent.

Perhaps it would mean returning to the question of the pre-Socratics with the tools of modernity: asking about *ta onta*—about matter, energy, space, time, life, mind—without assuming that the answer must take the form of something eternal and unchanging. Perhaps it would mean taking becoming as seriously as being, process as seriously as substance, relation as seriously as identity.

This paper does not attempt that task. It attempts only to make the pillar visible—to show that what we take for granted has a history, that our problems are inheritances, that the frameworks we think with were constructed and can, in principle, be reconstructed.

That is not nothing. The first step toward freedom is seeing the bars of the cage.

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