The Unspeakable and the Ineffable:
The Appearance and Reception of Secrecy in Plato's Dialogues

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Introduction and Outline

Secrecy, even though one might think it exists at the periphery, remains consistently relevant. The restricted access to information drives forward economy, and, as the sociologist George Simmel noted, human relationships.[1] Perhaps because of this ubiquity of circumstances where secrecy serves a necessary social function, there are many different types of secrecy. A preliminary account might include examples of political secrecy, the role of secrecy in legal issues, economically motivated issues of secrecy (patents), the intimate secrets of families and lovers, secrecy as advertisement (as in the iconic examples of secrets of weight loss or wealth augmentation that fill self-help shelves), epistemological secrets (as when we say things on the order of "the secret to understanding such and such"), as well as cases of obscurantism and equivocation, the deliberate hiding of evidence, or even a lack of evidence, through deceptive means. The disputed categories of mysticism and esotericism, particularly important for our current purposes, should also be added to such a list, but their inclusion depends on whether or not the specific features of their doctrines truly understand themselves as secret, even if only retrospectively.

Each of these broad categories can be determined by the content of the secret, with the mystical or esoteric, possessing two different levels of meaning. On the one hand there is a symbolic level, with the secret possessing an actual content. On the other hand, this content is, at the level of discourse, simultaneously revealed and concealed. The secret is thus, empty, and acts

[1] Simmel, citation needed.

only as a means of highlighting the importance of the individual who possesses it.[2] In turn, each of these categories seems to be interwoven with different strategies of secrecy. Therefore, the intersection and interactions of these types of and strategies for specific secrecies may explain some of the confusions that arise when one explores the history of a phenomenon like Platonism.

This presentation deals with the appearances of secrecy in the writings of Plato uses these instances to argue for the creative interpretation of secrecy on the part of the Neoplatonists as well as on their reception in authors and figures closer to our own times, such as those in the field of western esotericism. The end result of this essay will be a recognition (I hope) of the gap between this reception and the actual textual features of secrecy.

In order to capture a sufficient amount of data in the limited amount of time available to me, I have utilized modern technology to select instances of "secret," (αρρητ*, κρυπτ*, and κρυφ*, λαθρ*, σιωπ*) in the writings of Plato.[3] My goal is to compare this data and attempt to ask the question whether there are any passages in Plato's own writings that could possibly have motivated later commentators into a belief in an esoteric Plato, that is, in a Plato with secret religious traditions. Due to constraints on time, this paper cannot present all possible evidence, and so I will restrict the focus to only the most interesting cases.

The theme of a Plato with secrets has been a particularly prevalent one and has been tied up with the notion of a religious Platonism, which in turn has been constructed variously as a religion in and of itself, as a pre-Christian doctrine which carries Christian revelatory material, and as an expression of pagan religiosity that found its way into Christianity due to the perceived weakness of certain Patristic fathers who could not be satisfied with just the "simple" teachings

[2] Such has been argued to be the case in certain esoteric societies whose rituals, thought to contain the secrets of a non-discursive teaching, e.g. Freemasonry, are revealed in the end to be actually devoid of any content. Urban, "The Adornment of Silence"

[3] These words were generated using Woodhouse.

of Jesus and needed the intellectual puzzle that Platonism offered. As one early 19th century author put it:

> The Christian priesthood, finding the doctrines of Christ leveled to every understanding, and too plain to need explanation, saw, in the mysticisms of Plato, material with which they might build up an artificial system, which might from its indistinctness, admit everlasting controversy, giving employment for their order and introduce it to profit, power and preeminence[4]

In the fields of religious studies and the religious study of Platonism the notion that Plato had unwritten doctrines and taught certain religious beliefs grounded in his own philosophical idealist idiom has found considerable purchase, because it allows for lines of continuity between the Orphic, Pythagorean, and Platonic doctrines.[5] Let it not be mistaken, these historical lines of continuity were well recognized in late antiquity, but these connections were forged some four or five hundred years after the fact. If Plato was an initiate of secret teachings, Orphic or otherwise, we would expect him to refer to them with great reverence and in hushed tones. This is not the case in seemingly every instance of λαθρ* and σιωπ* . When Socrates uses these terms it is with reference to banal issues of legality (the proper punishment of secret crimes, for instance)[6], issues of shame (especially with reference sexuality)[7], and issues of rhetoricians hiding or obscuring their arguments, a favorite trope of Socrates' method of elenchus.[8]

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[4] Thomas Jefferson 1817 letter to John Adams in: Cappon, *The Adams-Jefferson Correspondence*, 2: 433, cited by Smith, *Drudgery Divine*, pp. 8-9.
[5] see, e.g. Feibleman, *Religious Platonism*, (1959), pp. 45-66.
[6] *Rep*. 344a-c, 345a; 360e-361b, 365c-d, 367b-c
[7] Phileb. 66a
[8] Phaedr. 261e, 271c; Charm. 174b; Laches 196b; Phileb. 14. Parmenides defends himself against such an implied claim in Parm 128c; Protagoras is an exception and reveals his skill, advertising himself as a sophist (Protag. 349a)

When we come to instances of the form απορρητ* the situation changes slightly. Some appearances of απορρητ* are of the same nature as the preceding instances of λαθρ* and σιωπ*, revealing only that people should hide children of unfortunate parentage[9], that harsh fines should not be precluded out of mercy,[10] that candidates for inclusion in the fictional secret ruling order of philosophers in the Laws should remain unaware of their candidacy,[11] and that extreme crimes (lit. "unspeakable crimes" ἀπορρήτων ἀδικιῶν) should be punishable by death.[12] Aside from these, there are four instances that deserve closer attention as possible instances where Plato comes close to implying acceptance an esoteric doctrine. I will argue that while such doctrines resemble, at least partially, the Orphic traditions such as we understand it, an alternative and possibly better explanation is gleaned through the use of modern social theory of secrecy.

Probably one of the more important pieces of evidence to the construction of a secret relationship between Plato and various mystery cults, including Orphism,is the following famous passage. When explaining why it is wrong, even for those for whom it is better to die, to commit suicide, Plato writes:

> Καὶ γὰρ ἂν δόξειεν, ἔφη ὁ Σωκράτης, οὕτω γ' εἶναι
> ἄλογον· οὐ μέντοι ἀλλ' ἴσως γ' ἔχει τινὰ λόγον. ὁ μὲν οὖν
> ἐν ἀπορρήτοις λεγόμενος περὶ αὐτῶν λόγος, ὡς ἔν τινι
> φρουρᾷ ἐσμεν οἱ ἄνθρωποι καὶ οὐ δεῖ δὴ ἑαυτὸν ἐκ ταύτης
> λύειν οὐδ' ἀποδιδράσκειν, μέγας τέ τίς μοι φαίνεται καὶ οὐ
> ῥᾴδιος διιδεῖν· οὐ μέντοι ἀλλὰ τόδε γέ μοι δοκεῖ, ὦ Κέβης,
> εὖ λέγεσθαι, τὸ θεοὺς εἶναι ἡμῶν τοὺς ἐπιμελουμένους καὶ

[9] Rep. 460c
[10] Laws 932c
[11] Laws 961b
[12] Laws 854e

> ἡμᾶς τοὺς ἀνθρώπους ἓν τῶν κτημάτων τοῖς θεοῖς εἶναι.[13]
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> [Indeed, said Socrates, it does seem unreasonable when put like that, but perhaps there is reason to it. There is the explanation that is put in the language of the mysteries, that we men are in a kind of prison, and that one must not free oneself or run away. That seems to me an impressive doctrine and one not easy to understand fully. However, Cebes, this seems to me well expressed, that the gods are our guardians and that men are one of their possessions.][14]

As Cornford, Harrison, Burnet, Feibleman and others of the myth-ritual school of Platonic interpretation sought to prove, the notion of a prison for the soul is seemingly Orphic, which can especially be demonstrated by the fact that prior to Orpheus there was no apparent doctrine of the immortality of the soul.[15] Still, I think we should exercise caution in seeing here a legitimation of Orphic teachings and an enthusiasm for secret religions, especially when the secret has clearly been revealed, as Plato emphasizes a purely dogmatic interpretation, "this seems to me well expressed, that etc.," which seems to remove altogether the need of offering the mythic background in the first place. This skepticism is well warranted when we consider the other passages where απορρητ* appears such as Republic 378 and Laws 968. In both of these instances, secrecy is maintained not out of deference to a spiritual tradition, but rather out of the very practical, socio-political need to maintain a proper relationship to the gods---and therefore a proper relationship to the state (Republic) ---and out of the pedagogical need to make sure people learn things in a systematic order without being overburdened (Laws).[16] Indeed, in this latter

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[13] Phaed. 62b
[14] trans. Grube in:Cooper 1997, p. 54.
[15] Burnet, *Early Greek Philosophy* (London 1930), 84 cited in Feibleman, *Religious Platonism*, 55.
[16] For a similar case of a rereading an author's supposedly mystical and esoteric doctrines as a more straightforward pedagogical strategy, see Brakke, "Mystery and Secrecy in the Egyptian Desert: Esotericism and Evagrius of Pontus" pp. 203-219 in: Bull, Live, Turner (eds.), *Mystery and Secrecy in the Nag Hammadi Collection and Other Ancient Literature: Ideas and Practices*

case, it is directly stated that it would be wrong to treat them as great secrets of earthshattering import, or, as the translator renders it, “inviolable secrets”. No esotericism here.

The examples of Cratylus 413a and Theaetetus 152c still need to be explained, and their explanation will help to shed light upon the social function of secrecy in Phaedo 62b. In Cratylus 413a, while discussing the various etymologies that make up the majority of the discussion in the dialogue, Socrates states,

> ἐγὼ δέ, ὦ Ἑρμόγενες, ἅτε λιπαρὴς ὢν περὶ αὐτοῦ, ταῦτα μὲν πάντα διαπέπυσμαι ἐν ἀπορρήτοις, ὅτι τοῦτό ἐστι τὸ δίκαιον καὶ τὸ αἴτιον – δι' ὃ γὰρ γίγνεται, τοῦτ' ἔστι τὸ αἴτιον – καὶ “Δία” καλεῖν ἔφη τις τοῦτο ὀρθῶς ἔχειν διὰ ταῦτα.
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> As for myself, Hermogenes, because I persisted at it, I learned all about the matter in secret---that this (the god Zeus) is the just and the cause, since that through which a thing comes to be is the cause. Indeed, someone told me that it is correct to call this “Dia” (‘Zeus’) for that reason.[17]

It is striking that, after having given this authoritative line of support to Cratylus, the figure in the dialogue who most strongly believes that the morphological construction of words provides insight into their natural objects’ role and function, Socrates goes on to dismiss entirely just this notion. It seems to be the case that Socrates is playing with Cratylus, trying to beat him at his own game in the first instance, before revealing the complete futility of the task in the second; That Socrates must engage in this battle of wits is apparent, for the field of etymological ruminations was considered “to be among the most important” intellectual pursuits (427e). This interpretation is borne out further when we consider Hermogenes’ original complaint to Socrates which drew him into the conversation in the first place. Hermogenes says he does not understand

[17] Trans.Reeve in: Cooper 1997, p. 130.

what Cratylus means when he says that his (Hermogenes') name is not his proper name. As Hermogenes asserts:

> He (Cratylus) responds sarcastically and makes nothing clear. He pretends to possess some private knowledge which would force me to agree with him and say the very things about names that he says himself, were he to express it in plain terms.[18]

So, it seems that Socrates, in coming to the defense of his friend and out of the desire to conquer Cratylus in debate, draws on the same tactic of pretending to possess private knowledge. Indeed, Socrates highlights, as he so often does, his actual ignorance of these matters, he has only taken the introductory course offered by Prodicus on etymology (384c) and yet he can play the game with the best of them, churning out example after example of creative etymology. Again, it seems, there is no esotericism here, just the baiting of a fool.

Theaetetus 152c is similarly scornful of those who pretend to deliver the core of their wisdom in secret teachings. Here Socrates mocks the notion that Protagoras spread his knowledge through exclusively oral transmission. The irony is all the more apparent because in referring to the question of whether or not Protagoras "revealed the *Truth* as a secret doctrine to his own pupils" it is clear that Protagoras's book, a public document, is intended. Therefore, while this passage may be an example which raises the possibility of there being teachers who delivered the main parts of their teachings in secret, the overall mocking tone suggests that Socrates does not approve of such things.

It is worthwhile at this point, to offer a brief interlude and reminder of why such an analysis has been necessary. As recently as 2002, Thomas McEvilley attempted to identify parallels between Greek and Indian philosophy. His argument depends on the fact that Plato had

[18] Crat. 384a

a secret teaching[19] and that Plato's teaching was basically the same as Pythagoras, was basically the same as Orpheus, who in turn derived his doctrine from the teachings of India. McEvilley's project is in no way unique and may be thought of as a species of the same strategies of Madame Helena Petrovna Blavatsky the founder of the Theosophical Society and inadvertent founder of the modern new age movement.[20] By referencing whatever tradition comes to mind with ancient philosophy, and with the favorite idol of historians of philosophy, one can find ways of connecting any tradition to Platonism. This strategy is especially effective when one cites the fact that Plato had unwritten or secret doctrines, thereby allowing one to insert whatever tradition one feels to be best attributed to Plato. Will Rasmussen thoroughly debunks McEvilley's statements, noting the variety of different interpretations that prevailed after Plato's demise, as well as the problems of accepting later extra-textual accounts of Plato's teachings from sources like the Neoplatonists.

The preceding has been an attempt to both debunk and broaden. On the one hand I have attempted to, through a selection, comparison, analysis and categorization of instances of secrecy in Plato's work interrogate and debunk at least one possible avenue through which one could claim that Plato had a content filled doctrine of secrecy. My analysis has shown that in the vast majority of cases, and especially where Plato uses words of the form λαθρ* and σιωπ* the actual meaning of the text has precluded such a possibility. In the rare instances where secrecy has appeared and approached esotericism, I have stepped in to note both the possibilities of Socratic irony as well as to include other possibilities of secrecy, thereby broadening our understanding of what constitutes secrecy and getting us away from esotericist interpretations that support questionable projects of philosophical ecumenicism.

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[19] McEvilley, *The Shape of Ancient Thought:Comparative Studies in Greek and Indian Philosophies* (New York: Allworth Press, 2002), 158.
[20] See Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled*, I: xii.

Though it was necessary to focus for the sake of a textual analysis on just several words that can be translated as secrecy, it is possible that this analysis misses broader themes of secrecy. This is an admitted flaw. Nonetheless, I contend that this may also be a different way to attack some of these problems and potentially arrive at different conclusions.

Further research in this would have to compare these findings with similar analyses of pseudo-Platonic writings as well as directly with the writings of the Neoplatonists themselves. An especially interesting project would be to isolate and analyze instances of intertextuality where Proclus comments on what I have claimed to be banal instances of secrecy and to see if the later Neoplatonic tradition, which is enamored with its own secrecy, over-interpreted these rather bland statements to mean something more along the lines of the esotericist doctrine.