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# Aesthetic eros and Athenian political crisis: an interpretation of Plato's Seventh Letter

John Baltes

*Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College*

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*AISTHETIC EROS AND ATHENIAN POLITICAL CRISIS: AN INTERPRETATION OF  
PLATO'S SEVENTH LETTER*

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
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in

The Department of Political Science

by  
John David Baltes  
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## PREFACE

“There are good reasons,” cautions Morrow, “why the writings that have come down to us as the letters of Plato should be viewed with grave suspicion.”<sup>1</sup> No decisive evidence of either individual letters or a collection surfaces before the age of Alexander.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, the epistolary form flourished not in the ancient world, but in the post-classical period, as a “common practice” of the schools of rhetoric, where it was thought that by adopting a master’s style, some of his brilliance might remain with the student.<sup>3</sup> We know also that the founding of the great libraries gave birth to a brisk trade in forgery, as librarians aggressively filled their shelves and unscrupulous scribes ‘invented’ texts.

The paucity of direct evidence of authorship is troubling, but more troubling still is the degree to which questions of authenticity have overshadowed analyses of content. “How many readers of the *Parmenides* know today that there was a time when reputable and intelligent critics (Uberweg in 1861, Shaarschmidt in 1866, Huit in 1891, Windelband in 1901) assumed that it was not Platonic?”<sup>4</sup> Indeed, in the nineteenth century, “the *Parmenides*, *Sophist*, *Cratylus*, and *Philebus* were regarded as doubtful, or distinctly spurious, by these same critics of the *Epistles*; and the *Laws* would most certainly have been condemned if it had not been expressly vouched

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<sup>1</sup>Morrow, 3.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Friedlander, 237.

for by Aristotle.”<sup>5</sup> This is not to suggest that interrogations of the *Letter’s* authenticity should be dismissed, but rather that a balance be struck between questions of origin and questions of interpretation.

We cannot *prove* the authenticity of any document.<sup>6</sup> Logic dictates that we can prove only *inauthenticity*; we can but suggest and support an argument for its valid origin. Cicero does so when he attests to the authenticity of the *Seventh Letter*, as does Aristophanes of Byzantium, who includes the *Epistles* in the canon of Plato in the late third century B.C.E.<sup>7</sup> And the current orthodoxy invests not only the *Seventh Letter* with authenticity, but “looks with indulgence upon even the most suspicious members of the collection.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Morrow, 8-9.

<sup>6</sup>Friedlander, 236.

<sup>7</sup>Morrow, 5.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, 9.

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## ABSTRACT

This paper investigates Plato's solution to political and social disorder by analyzing his advice and epistemology in the *Seventh Letter*. The first of three primary divisions provides the historical context of Platonic philosophy. The second discusses the central themes of his metaphysics, with specific attention to the *Phaedo* and *Republic*. The third analyzes the importance of *aesthetic eros* for the ascent to the *Agathon*, culminating in an interpretation of the relevant sections of the *Seventh Letter*.

**PART ONE:  
THE ATHENIAN POLITICAL, SOCIAL, AND PHILOSOPHICAL CONTEXT**

**I. Athenian Political Crisis as the Context of Platonic Philosophy**

For four hundred years, the *polis* functioned effectively as a political unit. From the ninth to the fifth century B.C.E., the Greek city-state fostered a profound sense of *homonoia*, or like-mindedness, in its citizenry, resulting in a period of stability and prosperity. Economic progress and colonization mitigated dissent, while a powerful feeling of community bound the social and political fabric of the *polis* together.<sup>9</sup>

By the fifth century, however, this unity had begun to dissolve as the economy stalled and Persia emerged to fill the vacuum created by growing Hellenic strife. Opportunities for colonization in Asia Minor were limited as Persia's ability to project power waxed and Hellas' waned. Internal threats from the ambitious rivalry of Thebes, Athens, and Sparta exacerbated the situation, and as a consequence, the *poleis* "grew more jealous of [their] autonomy."<sup>10</sup> Within Athens, "the corrosive questioning of the nature of justice and the assertion of individual standards by the sophists"<sup>11</sup> undercut the traditional morality and order, and the balance between the collective and the individual began to tip toward the latter.

The effect was as apparent in the performance of Athens on the battlefield against Sparta as it was in the Achaean army on the plains of Troy. In 404, after years of bitter war, Sparta emerged victorious over a humbled Athens. Such was the latter's political instability that the

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<sup>9</sup>Starr, 359.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 359.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 360.

former erected a puppet government composed of thirty oligarchs, the Tyrants, led by the extremist Critias. Their brutality was unheralded in Athenian politics: 1,500 dissidents were executed and a further 5,000 exiled. However, even such draconian measures were unable to restore order, and by 401, the Tyrants were deposed in favor of a re-emergent democracy and the exiles returned, vowing vengeance.

In this political milieu, Plato emerges as an aristocratic political hopeful. “When I was a young man,” he records in his *Seventh Letter*,

I had the same ambitions as many others: I thought of entering public life as soon as I came of age. And certain happenings in public affairs favored me, as follows. The constitution we then had, being anathema to many, was overthrown; and a new government was set up consisting of fifty-one men, two groups— one of eleven and another of ten— to police the marketplace and perform other necessary duties in the city and the Piraeus respectively, and above them thirty other officers with absolute powers. Some of these men happened to be relatives of mine, and they invited me to join them at once in what seemed to be a proper undertaking.<sup>12</sup>

Plato insists, though, that he did not join the Thirty Tyrants because of his interaction with Socrates and his growing awareness of their injustice.

Among their deeds they named Socrates, an older friend of mine whom I should not hesitate to call the wisest and justest [sic] man of that time, as one of a group sent to arrest a certain citizen [Leon of Salamis] who was to be put to death illegally, planning thereby to make Socrates willy-nilly a party to their actions. But he refused, risking the utmost danger rather than be an associate of their impious deeds. When I saw all this and other like things of no little consequence, I was appalled and drew back from that reign of injustice.<sup>13</sup>

The newly reconstituted democracy provided an untenable alternative, as evidenced by the trial and execution of Socrates in 399. The seeds sown by sophistry through the development

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<sup>12</sup>Plato, *Seventh Letter*, B9-D4.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 324E1-325A5.

of the *techne politike* had borne their fruit. The impact of the death of his teacher cannot be overstated.

I came to the conclusion that all existing states are badly governed and the condition of their laws practically incurable, without some miraculous remedy and the assistance of fortune; and I was forced to say, in praise of true philosophy, that from her height alone was it possible to discern what the nature of justice is, either in the state or in the individual, and that the ills of the human race would never come to an end until either those who are sincerely and truly lovers of wisdom come into political power, or the rulers of our cities, by the grace of God, learn true philosophy.<sup>14</sup>

For Plato, true politics are born of true philosophy. To fully grasp his position, however, requires an intimate familiarity with that which he opposes – the relativism of Protagoras.

The sophists descending upon Athens in the fourth and fifth centuries promised a new, pragmatic education. Their *techne politike* was fashioned around a core of skills indispensable to an orator whose chief aim was to persuade the Assembly to support his legislation. In place of the “Quadrivium of arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy,” was substituted the

mastery of typical situations and arguments in public debate, a stock of thorough knowledge with regard to the public affairs of the polis in domestic and imperial relations, a ready wit, a good memory improved by training, a disciplined intellect ready to grasp the essentials of an issue, the trained ability of marshaling arguments on the spur of the moment, a ready stock of anecdotes, paradigmata, and sayings drawn from the poets for illustrating a point, general oratory perfection, skill in debate leading to more or less graceful discomfiture of an opponent, a good deal of psychological knowledge in handling people, good appearance and bearing, natural and trained charm in conversation.<sup>15</sup>

These things, it was believed, helped to ensure a successful career, and one can readily agree that they well might. At the pinnacle of this new education stood instruction in the laws of the *polis*.

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<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 326a2-b4.

<sup>15</sup>Voegelin, *Order and History Volume II: The World of the Polis*, 344.

Since the laws were the embodiments of the ultimate principles on which the order of the community rested, the process was crowned by imparting to the young man a thorough knowledge of the laws of his polis.... The appeal to authority in education no longer goes to the conduct of honorable ancestors and heroes, nor to the paradigmatic Aristeia or the paraenetic sections of the epic; it goes, rather, to the laws of the polis as the ultimately obligatory standards of conduct in command and obedience.<sup>16</sup>

The new education constricts the horizons of reality to the *polis*— what the laws of the community insist is right, *is* right. What the laws insist is wrong, *is* wrong. Since the sophists' students are the future political leaders of Athens, and since the purpose of their education is to provide them the tools necessary to persuade the Assembly to pass and change laws as they think best, the sophists inevitably teach that political reality is the product of convention. Such collective relativism erodes the conception of an objective standard of justice by affirming that truth *is* what the Assembly can be convinced it is. In this political milieu, power lies in the hands of those who can argue most persuasively.

The principal proponent of this position appears to have been Protagoras. We know little directly of this arch-sophist, and what little we do know has survived in the corpus of Plato. Can we trust his account?<sup>17</sup>

Arguments from original sources are impossible due to their loss through the ages. As a result, scholars must content themselves with arguments of probability, and indeed, this is all that can be reasonably expected at such remove from the events themselves, absent corroborating originals. Voegelin insists that “as far as the almost complete loss of primary sources permits a judgement in such matters, the most noteworthy contributions to the art of politics [*techne*

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 346.

<sup>17</sup>Cf. David D. Corey, “The Greek Sophists: Teachers of Virtue,” Ph.D. diss., Louisiana State University, 2002.

*politike*] were due to Protagoras.”<sup>18</sup> His renown as an educator can be widely supported by contemporary sources. Furthermore, Plato’s account of Protagoras was universally accepted by ancient writers<sup>19</sup> to the extent that, if Protagoras did not hold the positions maintained in Plato’s writing, the Protagoras whose doctrines *were* on the lips of the ancient politicians is still the only Protagoras who can be discussed. Ultimately, whether the relativist we now examine bears any resemblance to the actual figure has long since lost its importance – Plato’s Protagoras has outlived the man.

There is, nonetheless, an argument to be made for the accuracy of Plato’s description. His attitude toward the sophist in the dialogue bearing his name “is sympathetic rather than critical; and the carefully drawn portraits of various sophists would lose point if Protagoras were not made to speak in character.”<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, in the *Theaetetus*,

it is assumed that the treatise of Protagoras, ‘On Truth,’ was accessible, and could be consulted in verification of any statement that was made. When, therefore, Socrates expressly refers to some saying as having been made by Protagoras, it may fairly be claimed that what is so referred to is the veritable doctrine of the distinguished Sophist.<sup>21</sup>

This is not to say that the matter is closed. Let us say instead that while we should consider this question carefully, enough evidence supports Plato’s account that an analysis of his Protagoras is not unwarranted.

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<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 346.

<sup>19</sup>Watson, 476.

<sup>20</sup>Gillespie, 471.

<sup>21</sup>Watson, 476.

## II. Athenian Education and the Contracting of Existential Horizons

The political education of Athenian youths constricted their horizon of reality to the limits of the *polis*. “All human laws and customs are made *by* man, not *for* man; actual morality is *nomo* and not *fusei*. To this extent, at least, man ‘makes his own reality,’”<sup>22</sup> and as a consequence, collective opinion, understood as truth, becomes the foundation of ethics and politics. On the level of the individual, this grounding of truth in opinion owes its origin to Protagoras’ relativism.

His treatise, *On Truth*, or *Truth*, begins with the premise “Man is the measure of all things: of the things which are, that they are, and of the things which are not, that they are not.”<sup>23</sup> Plato explains that by this, Protagoras means “that as each thing appears to me, so it is for me, and as each thing appears to you, so it is for you – you and I each being a man.”<sup>24</sup> Thus, for all men, what appears to them to be the truth, *is* the truth and consequently, knowledge *is* perception. In ethics and politics, this relativism erodes the foundation of truth, rendering it as transient as the *demos*’ perceptions. From one day to the next, truth is what the many perceive it to be. The seductive appeal of this position to an orator desperate for power is obvious. Persuasion does not imply power, it *is* power. This notwithstanding, Protagorean relativism is logically untenable – as it attempts to render the truth intelligible, it destroys truth, as it attempts to communicate this truth, it destroys communication, and as it attempts to explain reality, it destroys reality. Two essential criticisms can be levied against Protagoras: his doctrine of truth

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<sup>22</sup>Gillespie, 475.

<sup>23</sup>Plato, *Theaetetus*, 152A3-4.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, 152A7-9.

destroys being and communication and renders his 'Truth' untrue. Each will be considered in turn.

Protagoras' epistemology requires a corresponding ontology. If truth is perception, and my perception and your perception differ, the reality apprehended by us must be both true and untrue. This violates the law of non-contradiction. The solution, as Plato explains, is to retreat to an extreme interpretation of Heraclitean ontology that renders being as flux.

"There is nothing which in itself is just one thing."<sup>25</sup> Static 'thing-hood' cannot support Protagoras' claim that my perception and your perception are equally true. Plato's famous example of the breeze will illustrate: a breeze, which you and I both feel, blows. I perceive it to be cold, you perceive it to be hot. The wind *is* cold for me and *is* hot for you. If the thing in question were static, rather than in flux, it would be impossible for it to *be* both hot and cold. It *is* in relation to the perceiver, and as such, all things are not 'just one thing,' but instead are a multitude of things as their being reflects the multitudes of perceptions of the perceivers. As Plato explains,

if you call a thing large, it will reveal itself as small, and if you call a thing heavy, it is liable to appear as light, and so on with everything, because nothing is one or anything or any kind of thing. What is really true, is this: the things of which we naturally say they 'are,' are in a process of coming to be, as the result of movement and change and blending with one another. We are wrong when we say they 'are,' since nothing ever is, but everything is coming to be.<sup>26</sup>

Each perception is unique. The flux necessary to undergird the conception of truth as perception renders constancy impossible. Thus, in each perception, the being of the perceiver,

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<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 152D3.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 152D4-E4.

the perceived, and the perception is singular in its occurrence. The perceived “doesn’t appear the same even to yourself because you never remain like yourself.”<sup>27</sup> The result is an episodic self dramatically parodied by the appearance, argument, and dissolution of Protagoras’ head.<sup>28</sup> “And so, wherever you turn, there is nothing, as we said at the outset, which is in itself just one thing; all things become relatively to something.”<sup>29</sup>

All being subject to flux, we cannot speak of a consistent perceiver, perceived, or perception. “A perception of something else is another perception, and makes another and a changed percipient.”<sup>30</sup> Consequently, we cannot speak of a consistent self, a consistent truth, or a consistent reality. Indeed, Plato shrewdly points out that we cannot speak at all – the verb ‘to be’ and the casual way that we call a thing a thing are impossible should we accept Protagoras’ position.<sup>31</sup> This is because Protagorean epistemology requires an extreme interpretation of Heraclitus’ doctrine of flux. All things, perceiver, perceived, and perception, are constantly in motion and never static. Perceptions are the product of motion between two poles also in motion. Consider sight.

In this event, motions arise in the intervening space, sight from the side of the eye and whiteness from the side of that which cooperates in the production of color [the perceived.] The eye is filled with sight; at that moment it sees, and becomes not indeed sight, but a seeing eye; while its partner in the process of producing color is filled with

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<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 154A9-10.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., 171D.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., 157A10-B1.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., 160A1-2.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 160B10-C2; 183B1-7.

whiteness, and becomes not whiteness but white, a white stick or stone or whatever it is that happens to be colored this sort of color.<sup>32</sup>

The relationship between perceiver and perception is entirely endogenous. “It remains, then, that I and it, whether we are or whether we become, are and become for each other. For our being is, by Necessity’s decree, tied to a partner; yet we are tied neither to any other thing in the world nor to our respective selves.”<sup>33</sup> Being is flux. “Hence, whether you apply the term ‘being’ to a thing or the term ‘becoming,’ you must always use the words ‘for somebody’ or ‘of something’ or ‘relatively to something.’ You must not speak of anything as in itself either being or becoming nor let anyone else use such expressions.”<sup>34</sup>

Furthermore, if my perception *is* true for me, and my perception differs from yours, my truth *is* as true as yours. Thus, contradictory truths are both true and untrue, destroying any claim to expert knowledge. “My perception is true for me,” Plato observes, “because it is always a perception of the being which is peculiarly mine; and I am judge, as Protagoras said, of things that are, that they are, for *me*; and of things that are not, that they are not.”<sup>35</sup> Thus, Protagoras’ doctrine may be true for him and false for me, and by his own argument he cannot deny the truth of my position. All truth is, and is not, true, and no one can lay any claim that another cannot deny.

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<sup>32</sup>Ibid., 156E1-10.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., 160B6-9.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., 160B10-C2.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., 160C7-10.

About this, Plato playfully writes, “I was astonished that he did not state at the beginning of the *Truth* that ‘Pig is the measure of all things’ ...It would have made it clear to us that while we were standing astounded at his wisdom as though he were God, he was in reality no better authority than a tadpole – let alone any other man.”<sup>36</sup>

### **III. Heraclitean Flux and the Transcendent *Logos***

Protagoras’ *Truth* requires that reality be no more independent of the orator than his words, and as a consequence, Heraclitus is dragged into the fray. The necessity of Heraclitean support for Protagoras’ position is obvious, but what is far less so is the appropriateness of his interpretation of the Megarian’s philosophy. What was Heraclitus understanding?

The transient nature of the physical world was well established in Plato’s Athens. Heraclitus’ surviving fragments present a profoundly metaphysical thinker concerned with the rational apprehension of supra-sensible reality. “What he undoubtedly did stress above all else was his discovery of the unity that subsists in apparent opposites; it is with failure to apprehend this unity that he so bitterly reproaches his fellow men.”<sup>37</sup> Thus, while Heraclitus recognizes the transience of the physical world around him, he endeavors to peer behind it and apprehend the unchanging unity at its foundation. Protagoras’ flux renders reality unintelligible. Conversely, Heraclitus reinforces its lucidity.

“You cannot step twice into the same river,” he observes, “for fresh waters are ever flowing in upon you.”<sup>38</sup> Unlike Protagoras, however, for Heraclitus we may speak of the river as

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<sup>36</sup>Ibid., 161C4-D2.

<sup>37</sup>Kirk, 35.

<sup>38</sup>Heraclitus, *Fragment 41-2*, in Laguna, 242.

a coherent 'thing' because of the unity that undergirds it. Its water may flow but the concept of a coherently unitary river remains. "What the river fragments are intended to show... is the regularity, the order, the *metron* or measure, which Heraclitus believed to underlie and control natural change in all its forms. The example of a river is intended to illustrate this *metron*."<sup>39</sup> The flux of Heraclitus is therefore opposed rather than supportive of Protagorean relativism, precisely in that it heralds an unchanging, apprehendable ground beyond the flux of natural change. The truth, for Heraclitus, subsists in this and is not subject to revision by the perceiver.

"Eyes and ears are bad witnesses for the men who have barbaric souls," he writes, suggesting a differentiation between the mean and the excellent, a differentiation facilitating an apprehension of the hidden truth.<sup>40</sup> "The many do not understand such things, even though they run into them; and when learning they do not experience them, though they believe they do."<sup>41</sup> This "hidden harmony is better than the apparent."<sup>42</sup>

Certain people, therefore, are more able than others to apprehend the harmony behind strife of the physical world. The objects of sense perception, therefore, are not absolutely deceptive in their transience, but rather to render intelligible the truth behind them, they require deeper, more considered penetration. *Fragment XIV* supports this interpretation, for in it he gives priority to the unseen measure, insisting that the phenomena of the physical world are

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<sup>39</sup>Kirk, 38.

<sup>40</sup>Heraclitus, *Fragment 4*, in Woodbridge, 360.

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*, *Fragment B17*, in Voegelin, *Order and History Volume II: The World of the Polis*, 309.

<sup>42</sup>*Ibid.*, *Fragment 42*.

necessarily inferior in the ontological-epistemological hierarchy. “Am I to esteem preeminently the things of which there is sight and hearing and learning?” he asks, addressing the division he apprehends between sensible and supra-sensible reality.<sup>43</sup> And yet this in no way denies the capacity of the perceptible to reveal an intelligible nature. That Heraclitus sought meaning beyond *phusis*, accessible not to the senses alone, seems clear.

The object of wisdom thus appears to be inaccessible to the senses *alone*. That it is made accessible to reason is made no less apparent by [Heraclitus’] insistence on the universality of reason... [He] distinguished consciously and definitively between knowledge attained by the senses and knowledge attained by reason, [regarding] an error of previous thought to lie in the failure to make this distinction (emphasis added).<sup>44</sup>

Heraclitus has glimpsed the solution – beyond the flux of the immanent, a transcendent *Logos* provides intelligibility. George Santayana suggests Heraclitus as the progenitor of the differentiation between perceptibles and intelligibles. He “identified matter with fire, which not only moves more restlessly than water flows [thereby surpassing the flux of Thales], but that lives only by dying and perpetually devouring itself... Heraclitus seems to have anticipated Plato in recognizing super-temporal and unchangeable ideas, which existence embodied from instant to instant, but immediately betrayed.”<sup>45</sup> This is not to say, however, that Plato merely reproduces the thought of Heraclitus, for although his philosophy reflects the division between perceptibles and intelligibles, the metaphysical edifice he constructs differs substantially from the Heraclitean.

Plato encapsulates his political advice in the *Seventh Letter* when he writes, “the ills of the human race would never end until either those who are sincerely and truly lovers of wisdom

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<sup>43</sup>Ibid., *Fragment 14*.

<sup>44</sup>Woodbridge, 360.

<sup>45</sup>Santayana, 10.

come into political power, or the rulers of our cities, by the grace of God, learn true philosophy.”<sup>46</sup> Characteristically, this seemingly simple passage conceals far more than it reveals. What is a philosopher? What is the basis of his authority? How is philosophy an antidote to relativistic politics?

The *Seventh Letter*'s epistolary form depends upon its audience's thorough familiarity with Plato's dialogues, and it is from the perspective of these that we must understand his meaning. In his dialogues, Plato uses poetry pedagogically to erect a dramatic edifice around an actual figure, gradually obscuring the man in favor of the character. As Achilles and Odysseus were for Homer, Socrates is for Plato. His character, much as the man, addresses the moral and political decay of his beloved city, struggling against the crumbling educational foundation that can no longer support Athens. In this capacity, he is revealed in the *Apology* as the new Hellenic hero and the successor of “the son of Thetis.”

Like Achilles, Socrates defies death on behalf of what is right and just. But here the resemblance ends. In fact, Socrates implicitly proposes himself as a *successor* of the Homeric hero. The ‘real man’ must give way to the genuine human being. Socrates’ quiet conversations and exhortations to care for prudence, truth, and the good of the soul replace Achilles’ bloody deeds of war. By promoting himself as the new Achilles, Socrates challenges the young men’s attachment to a tradition that endorses the life of manly self-assertion and political ambition.<sup>47</sup>

Socrates professes a rational approach to virtue and human affairs sharply at odds with the Homeric. No longer does Zeus figure as the dispenser of fortune, mixing measures of good

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<sup>46</sup>Plato, *Seventh Letter*, 326B1-4.

<sup>47</sup>West, Introduction to *Four Texts on Socrates*, 20.

and evil from separate amphorae,<sup>48</sup> and no longer does the political take precedence over the personal.<sup>49</sup> Rather, one's fate unfolds through the exercise of an excellence equated with knowledge, and Socrates admonishes his fellow citizens to care more for their souls than their reputations or possessions.

If, as he insists, human affairs are governed best by those who know, inevitable questions arise about the essence of knowledge itself, and the inquiry must transcend the sphere of practical ethics. Socrates, we know from the *Apology*, acquired the reputation that expedited his death by pursuing the first, and less foundational aspect of this question, namely, that of questioning those who claimed to know. The task of interrogating reality itself fell to his student,<sup>50</sup> and the *Phaedo* represents the genesis of this inquiry in Plato's maturity.<sup>51</sup> Much of his genius was to surpass his

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<sup>48</sup>Homer represents Zeus as the ruler of fate in both his *Odyssey* and *Iliad*. See especially *Iliad* 24:527-532 "There are two great jars that stand on the floor of Zeus' halls/ and hold his gifts, our miseries one, the other blessings./When Zeus who loves the lightning mixes gifts for man,/ now he meets with misfortune, now good times in turn./ When Zeus dispenses gifts from the jar of sorrows only,/ he makes man an outcast– brutal, ravenous hunger/ drives him down the face of the shining earth,/ stalking far and wide, cursed by gods and men." Trans. Robert Fagles. See also *Republic* 379D1-E2 in which this passage is addressed.

<sup>49</sup>Plato, *Apology*, 41E.

<sup>50</sup>For the contrary view, namely that Plato serves as Socrates' mouthpiece, see Homer H. Dubs, "The Socratic Problem," *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 36, No. 4, (July, 1927), pp. 287-306.

<sup>51</sup>Paul Shorey, *What Plato Said*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1933) and A.E. Taylor, *Plato: The Man and his Work*, (New York: The Humanities Press, 1926) reflect the general scholarly consensus. Shorey states "such artistic masterpieces as the *Symposium*, the *Phaedo*, the *Phaedrus*, and the *Republic* belong to the period of Plato's full maturity", p. 58. Taylor is also convinced that the *Phaedo* should be considered an element of the middle period of Plato's corpus. These dialogues, he insists, "belong neither to his more youthful nor his later period of literary activity, but to his prime of maturity as a writer (which need not, of course, coincide with his ripest maturity as a thinker)", p. 174. See also Wincenty Lutoslavski, *The Origin and Growth of Plato's Logic*, (New York: Longmans, Grenn, and Co., 1905), Constantin

teacher by providing a metaphysical ground to ethics and politics. “What Plato has done is not so much to idealize his master, as even Burnet, who insists on the importance of our dialogue as ‘an historical document,’ is ready to admit; rather has he transformed the Socrates who knew nothing save his own ignorance by crediting him with a firm metaphysical basis for his moral doctrine.”<sup>52</sup>

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Ritter, *Neue Untersuchungen Uber Platon*, (New York: Arno Press, 1976) and Leonard Brandwood, *The Chronology of Plato's Dialogues*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

<sup>52</sup>Hackforth, 4.

**PART TWO:  
PLATONIC PHILOSOPHY AND THE MIDDLE DIALOGUES**

**IV. The *Phaedo***

It is through a thorough analysis of Platonic metaphysics, as it appears in his middle dialogues, that the meaning of the *Seventh Letter's* political advice and its epistemological digression become clear.

A central theme of his *Phaedo* is the differentiation of the philosopher from the philosome through an analysis of metaphysics. If excellence is in some sense synonymous with knowledge, how is the latter, and thereby the former attained? “Now, how about the acquirement of pure knowledge (*phronesis*)?” Plato asks, “Is the body a hindrance or not, if it is made to share in the search for such wisdom? What I mean is this: Have the sight and hearing of men any truth in them, or is it true, as the poets are always telling us, that we neither hear nor see anything accurately?”<sup>53</sup> That the human senses are untrustworthy and prone to error by nature, and that their corresponding objects of sense are mutable and ever-changing reflects the philosophy of Heraclitus.

In the *Phaedo*, Plato insists that sense perception is incapable of apprehending truth absent reason, but this constitutes a criticism of unmitigated empiricism rather than a renunciation of *aisthesis* as an avenue to knowledge. While cognizant of the inability of unexamined sense perception to render truth, he suggests that the rational penetration of *aisthesis* can produce knowledge. If *aesthetic* objects require rational analysis to divulge their truth, Plato is not indicting sense perception in its entirety but rather crude empiricism. Phenomena require

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<sup>53</sup>Plato, *Phaedo*, 65A10-B4. Plato uses *phronesis* as the term for knowledge and wisdom at 65A, 65C, 66A, 67E-68A, 69A, 69B, 70B, 76C, 79D, and 111B.

noetic interpretation if they are to reveal the truth underlying their flux. This is the basis of Aristotle's attempt to render change intelligible through his category of substance – in the sense that Plato and Heraclitus are searching for an intelligible substrate rendering phenomena intelligible. The specifics of his formulation of this connection between perceptibles and intelligibles will become clear as this essay unfolds.

Sight and hearing, the two most acute senses, are notoriously prone to error, and thus it follows that the subordinate senses of taste, touch, and smell are at least as likely to be mistaken.<sup>54</sup> An ethics or politics thus grounded is necessarily as subject to flux and error as the senses and their perceptible objects. Empiricism cannot provide this necessary metaphysical foundation because, unaided by reason, it contracts to a simple description of transience. Ethics and politics cast adrift from the order provided by the intelligible ground underlying flux themselves reflect this unintelligibility and disorder. The excision of metaphysics from politics facilitates the construction of pseudo-realities in which ideology and preference trump truth and reason. Lest this denunciation be considered hyperbole, consider the racepolitik of Nazi Germany and its philosophical defense. Martin Heidegger, perhaps its most intellectually gifted accomplice, is only capable of defending its positions absent metaphysics and it is for precisely this reason that another infamous defender of the politics of pseudo-reality, Karl Marx, demands that metaphysical questions not be asked.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup>Ibid., 65B1-6.

<sup>55</sup>For an example of Heidegger's extensive rejection of metaphysics, see his "*Über 'Die Linie,'*" re-titled "On the Question of Being," in *Pathmarks*, ed. William McNeill, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998. Marx's refusal to admit philosophical questioning of communism is most apparent in Section II of his "Manifesto of the Communist Party," in *The Portable Karl Marx*, ed. Eugene Kamenka, New York: Penguin Books, 1983. Therein, he writes,

Plato is searching for a science of order grounded in a reality made intelligible through metaphysics. The crisis of Hellenic Greece to which he responds is due in no small part to the rejection of metaphysics. If ethics and politics are directed by Protagorean relativism, can the excellence of human beings be achieved? Adherents of relativism naturally reply in the affirmative, but they do so by insisting that man has no nature, and indeed they must maintain this position, for if human nature is the product of *phusis*, the means of its improvement depend upon nature rather than convention. Relativistic ethics and politics, reflecting the transiency of the perceptible, constructs mores and law through an appeal to opinion. If human nature is indeed “natural,” ethics and politics grounded in convention only reflect the truth of *phusis* accidentally.<sup>56</sup>

In defense of *phusis*, Plato offers the argument of *techne*, an omnipresent theme of the middle dialogues. Plato therein draws an analogy between horsemanship (and the like) and ethics and politics, and he may be rightly criticized for drawing a comparison between something relatively simple on the one hand, and enormously expansive on the other. Indeed, one need not accept the transference of “nature” between horsemanship and politics at all. Nevertheless, even if this analogy is problematic, his argument should be given serious consideration in that it draws attention to the issue of the improvement of human being and how this can be accomplished. His argument may be summarized as follows. If human beings have a “nature,” their excellence can only be achieved through study of their being and the proper application of the knowledge gained

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“The charges against communism made from a religious, a philosophical, and generally, from an ideological standpoint, are not deserving of serious examination....But let us have done with the bourgeois objections to communism,” pp. 225-226.

<sup>56</sup>Plato, *Crito*, 44D7-12.

thereby. Once this “nature” is apprehended, it becomes apparent that only certain actions improve this “nature,” while most actions either have no effect or are deleterious. Horses, for example, have a specific nature and are improved through proper diet, exercise, and care. Only a few men have insight into all things equine sufficient to render proper judgement about these actions. Improper diet, exercise, and care can either result in no effect or harm, and convention, that is, the opinion of those ignorant about equine matters, no matter how numerous or politically powerful they may be, can only strike upon the appropriate actions accidentally. No one is naive enough to believe that a champion horse can be reared under the care of one ignorant in equine affairs, yet relativists argue just this point about human beings.

Horses’ specific natures are improved by appropriate actions, and we typically accept that this holds true for cats and dogs, buildings and machines – indeed we accept that this holds true for everything with which we interact. Even the relativist takes his car to a mechanic, his dog to a veterinarian, and brings a professional to his home for repairs. In each instance, an expert in the specific nature of the thing to be improved is consulted to determine the appropriate action, that is, in every case but human excellence. In the case of ethics and politics, mass opinion trumps expert knowledge, and although each of them attends to the advice of a physician or trainer for the improvement of his body, none seeks the advice of an expert for his soul. For the relativist, human beings are improved by whatever we opine to be appropriate. Do all things except human beings have a “nature?” The inconsistency of this position, revealed by Plato in his *Theaetetus*, but foreshadowed in many earlier dialogues, renders it untenable and makes clear the necessity of a metaphysical ground (reality) as the foundation for ethics and politics.

If the soul is encumbered in its apprehension of reality by *aisthesis*, *dianoesis* will be most effective when separated from sense perception. As Plato explains, the soul “thinks best when none of these things troubles it, neither hearing nor sight, nor pain nor any pleasure, but [when] it is, so far as possible, alone by itself, and takes leave of the body, and avoiding, so far as it can, all association or contact with the body, reaches out toward reality (*ton onton*).”<sup>57</sup> This is the “purification” of the philosopher espoused by Socrates, facilitating the apprehension of truth. The supra-sensible reality that imparts comprehensibility to the physical world transcends *aisthesis*, thereby engendering the differentiation between the intellection of transcendent reality and the sense perception of immanence.

The reality toward which *dianoesis* reaches is introduced in the *Phaedo* at 65d. “Do we think there is such a thing as absolute justice (*dikaion*),” Socrates asks Simmias, “And absolute beauty (*kalon*) and goodness (*agathon*)?”<sup>58</sup> These forms/essences are the appropriate objects of intellection, transcending *aisthesis* and the immanent reality that reflects them. The philosopher who wishes to apprehend them

approaches each thing, so far as possible, with the reason (*dianoia*) alone, not introducing sight into his reasoning (*dianoeisthai*) nor dragging in any of the other senses (*aisthesis*) along with his thinking (*tou logismou*), but who employs pure, absolute reason (*dianoia*) in his attempt to search out the pure absolute essence of things (*ton onton*), and who removes himself, so far as possible, from eyes and ears, and, in a word, from his whole body, because he feels that its companionship disturbs the soul and hinders it from attaining truth (*aletheian*) and wisdom (*phronesin*)<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup>Ibid., 65C4-9.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., 65D3-6.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid., 66A1-10.

A common misconception may enter unannounced at this point. Although Plato differentiates between perceptibles and intelligibles, referring to the latter as the “actual realities,” or “that which most truly is,” he is not suggesting that this differentiation is one of degree. Both the perceptibles and the intelligibles exist, just as the beautiful flower is and beauty itself is. Being does not admit degrees and the attempt to attribute degrees of being to Plato’s metaphysics is untenable. Existence is “yes” or “no,” never “more” or “less.” Beauty itself does not exist more than the beautiful flower. Instead, it exists differently, that is, different attributes may be predicated of it. Thus, the only internally consistent way to read Plato on this issue is to render the “is” predicative rather than existential.<sup>60</sup>

Perceptibles participate in, or in some unexplained way, reflect the forms.<sup>61</sup> “We say there is such a thing as equality,” reminds Plato, “I do not mean one piece of wood equal to another, or one stone to another, or anything of that sort, but something beyond that – equality in the abstract.”<sup>62</sup> Two pieces of wood, or two stones, may participate in or reflect equality in the

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<sup>60</sup>Gregory Vlastos, in *Platonic Studies*, (Princeton University Press, 1981); p. 65n31, lends support to this argument, noting “in context where [Plato’s] need to express existence in our common use of the term... is most urgent he tends to eke out ‘to be’ with locatives,” that is, by qualifying his use of *estin* with “somewhere” or “nowhere” as in *Republic* 592B.

<sup>61</sup>Plato is unclear about precisely how this participation works. The *Parmenides* opens with an assault on this theory, and although scholarly consensus is divided, I suggest that Plato recognizes the inherent problems of participatory metaphysics. A.E. Taylor insists that the criticism of the forms attributed to Parmenides is a comical *tour de force*. “The *Parmenides* is, all through, an elaborate *jeu d’esprit*, and... all interpretations based on taking it for anything else (including an earlier one by the present writer), are mistaken on principle” (351). A more sober interpretation suggested by Samuel C. Rickless is that Plato intends all of the objections Parmenides offers to be taken seriously. See Samuel C. Rickless, “How Parmenides Saved the Theory of Forms,” *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 107, No. 4, (October 1988), pp. 501-554 for a thorough discussion of this point.

<sup>62</sup>*Ibid.*, 74A8-12.

abstract, but in neither case are the perceptibles equality *simpliciter*. Equality in the abstract is not an instance of equality in a perceptible, but instead the concept to which the perceptibles may be compared to render the predicates “equal,” “roughly equal,” etc., or the juridical “equal to” or “not equal to.” “This thing that I see aims at being like some other thing that exists,” Socrates explains, “but falls short and is unable to be like that thing, but is inferior to it.”<sup>63</sup>

Furthermore, the *Phaedo* presents the perceptibles as composite, juxtaposing them to the simple intelligibles. By this Plato refers not only to the physical composition of perceptibles which by nature makes them subject to dissolution, but also to the capacity of perceptibles to embody various, even diametrically opposed, intelligibles. For instance, in the case of a beautiful flower, one can consider its physical complexity. It is composed of various parts which, by nature, are separable. Furthermore, the flower is capable of having beauty and ugliness as attributes. Today the flower is beautiful, tomorrow it will be ugly -- perceptibles are capable of having opposite intelligibles predicated of them.

Conversely, by definition, intelligibles have no physical nature and thus are not composite in this sense, nor can an intelligible be other than what it is. The form of beauty itself, beauty *qua* beauty, cannot be ugly. “Now we say that the abstract concept of an opposite can never become its own opposite, either in us or in the world about us.”<sup>64</sup> Intelligibles, therefore, are only and ever what they are, and for this reason Plato speaks of them as *that which most truly is*. Only the forms always are what they are and nothing else.

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<sup>63</sup>Ibid., 74D8-E4.

<sup>64</sup>Ibid., 103B4-6.

As he instructs, “I think it is evident not only that greatness itself will never be great and also small, but that the greatness in us will never admit the small or allow itself to be exceeded.”<sup>65</sup> Rather than admitting its opposite form, greatness “either flees or withdraws when its opposite, smallness, advances toward it, or it has already ceased to exist by the time smallness comes near it.”<sup>66</sup> Whether the participation in or reflection of the form greatness by the perceptible ceases temporarily or permanently, the form greatness itself continues to exist.

Intelligibles are eternal and immutable. As such, they fulfill the necessary conditions of the objects of “pure” knowledge, and Socrates reinforces this point by asking:

Is the absolute essence (*ousia*), which we in our dialectic process of question and answer call true being, always the same or is it liable to change? Absolute equality, absolute beauty, and absolute existence, true being—do they ever admit of any change whatsoever? Or does each absolute essence, since it is uniform and exists by itself, remain the same and never in any way admit any change?”<sup>67</sup>

This series of questions is immediately juxtaposed to a similar series treating perceptibles. “But how about the many things, for example, men, or horses, or cloaks, or any such things, which bear the same names as the absolute essences and are called beautiful or equal or the like? Are they always the same? Or are they, in direct opposition to the essences, constantly changing in themselves, unlike each other, and, so to speak, never the same?”<sup>68</sup>

The reference to the inherence of ‘absolute essence,’ *ousia*, in perceptibles brings to the fore their capacity to cause the *psyche* to apprehend (or remember) an intelligible and thus to

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<sup>65</sup>Ibid., 102D6-9.

<sup>66</sup>Ibid., 102D10-E2.

<sup>67</sup>Ibid., 78D1-8.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid., 78E1-9.

serve as epistemological bridges between opinion and knowledge, perception and intellection.

“If a man, when he has heard or seen or in any other way perceived (*aisthesin*) a thing, knows not only that thing, but also has a perception of some other thing, the knowledge of which is not the same, but different, are we not right in saying that he recollects (*anamnesthe*) the thing of which he has the perception?”<sup>69</sup> Perceptibles apprehended through *aisthesis* can engender conceptual linkages producing knowledge of forms. While perceptibles themselves are not the proper objects of knowledge, they are connected by their capacity to act as mnemonic devices capable of spurring anamnesis.

## **V. The *Republic*– The Divided Line**

The *Phaedo* is not alone in its treatment of these themes, for indeed, the depth of Plato’s discussion of the relationship between *aisthesis* and intellection is a central theme of the middle dialogues. The *Republic* explores this relationship with a degree of complexity impossible in a shorter work because its breadth allows Plato the space necessary to perform the dialectic that makes possible his audience’s intellection of the ideas therein. He reveals the metaphysical ground of ethics and politics through an elaborate pattern of discussion and digression. Indeed, the central books of the *Republic* constitute a departure from, and eventual return to, a discussion of politics.

In Book VI, Glaucon requests that Socrates “go through the good just as you went through justice, moderation and the rest,” placing the good on par with justice, moderation and the other virtues.<sup>70</sup> Indeed, Glaucon is correct to do so, for nothing has been said through

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<sup>69</sup>Ibid., 73C7-D1

<sup>70</sup>Plato, *Republic*, 506D4-5.

Socrates that suggests this approach is inappropriate. Socrates hesitates however, and insists that a discussion of the good itself is beyond them at present and that in its place they should engage in a discussion of its offspring. Continuing the language of commerce initiated by Glaucon, Socrates explains, “I could wish... that I were able to pay and you were able to receive it itself, and not just the interest, as is the case now. Anyhow, receive this interest and the child of the good itself.”<sup>71</sup>

The good is beyond discussion because, as will become apparent, it transcends understanding. Socrates, must instead discuss its effects and he begins by reminding his audience of the differentiation of perceptibles from intelligibles. “We both assert that there are and distinguish in speech, many fair things, many good things, and so on for each kind of thing.”<sup>72</sup> Perceptible objects to which the predicates fair, good, just, etc. may be applied, exist. Over and above these, we recall, are the fair, the good, the just, etc. *simpliciter*. “And we also assert that there is a fair itself, a good itself, and so on for all the things that we then set down as many,” Socrates continues, “Now, again, we refer them to one *idea* of each as though the *idea* were one; and we address it as that which really *is*.”<sup>73</sup>

This division is identical to that of the *Phaedo* and it serves several purposes. First, by again differentiating the perceptibles from the intelligibles, Plato maintains the simple unity and immutability of the latter in contradistinction to the former. The intelligibles are eternal and unchanging while material objects are constantly subject to flux and decay. This simple division

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<sup>71</sup>Ibid., 507A1-3.

<sup>72</sup>Ibid., 507B2-3.

<sup>73</sup>Ibid., 507B5-8.

is necessary so that no confusion exists on the part of his audience as to the nature of perceptibles and intelligibles. As Plato begins what is arguably the most difficult passage of the *Republic*, we cannot hold the mistaken position that anything apprehendable through *aisthesis* is beautiful, just, good, etc. in itself, because the distinction between perceptibles and intelligibles is a firm fixture of the metaphysics to follow. Second, he reinforces the intelligible's transcendence of *aisthesis*. The perceptibles are apprehendable through sense perception, the intelligibles through reason,<sup>74</sup> and only in *dianoesis*, we shall see, are these epistemological categories seen to blur. The skill with which Plato navigates this difficult passage results not in logical contradiction, but rather in a sublime account of the ability of objects of *aisthesis* to articulate the intelligibles symbolically. Thus, portions of the *Symposium* and *Phaedo* can be understood to represent alternative attempts to articulate the ontological-epistemological ascent embodied in *dianoesis*.

To express the new relationship of the good to the forms and the mind, Plato pens the famous Analogy of the Sun. As the sun is to the eyes and the perceptible, so is the good to the mind and the intelligible. Given the perceiver and the perceived, "a third class of thing" enables apprehension of the appropriate object.<sup>75</sup> Neither the eye nor its object is the sun, and neither the mind nor its "knowable" is the good. The sun and the good are a third part of the equation, providing the medium of apprehension and intellection.

Like all analogies, this one is only as sound as its constituent parts, and too much can be made of a comparison between the attributes of the sun and the good. The sun is not, as Robert

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<sup>74</sup>Ibid., 507B10-11.

<sup>75</sup>Ibid., 507D12.

Fogelin suggests, a perceptible object. Fogelin insists that “the Sun is something we see.”<sup>76</sup> On the contrary, turning the agents of sight on the sun destroys the faculty of sight in them, destroying their virtue. The sun, as a consequence of its brilliance, transcends the faculty of sight and thus also the objects of perception. Instead, it is known through its energy, its reflection in other objects, its nutritive and generative effects. “The sun not only provides what is seen with the power of being seen, but also with generation, growth, and nourishment although it itself isn’t generation.”<sup>77</sup> Separable from its effect on its patient, the sun as agent transcends the nature of that which it affects. Similarly, the good, separate from its effect on its patient, transcends intellection and thereby the intelligibles as well. The good is not an object of knowledge. It must be apprehended as it is reflected in being and knowing, for in the good paradoxically, they are simultaneously united and transcended. The good itself is beyond being, or as Socrates says, “not only being known is present in the things known as a consequence of the good, but also existence and being are in them besides as a result of it, although the good isn’t being but is still beyond being, exceeding it in dignity and power.”<sup>78</sup>

Thus he insists that we can only speak of the offspring of the good, not the good itself. The good itself is not knowable, nor can it be adequately understood. The reality the good renders intelligible, conversely, can be known and discussed. As Paul Friedlander explains, “While there is still knowledge about being, though not purely conceptual knowledge, there can

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<sup>76</sup>Fogelin, 372.

<sup>77</sup>Plato, *Republic*, 509B2-4.

<sup>78</sup>Ibid., 509B6-9.

be no knowledge about what is ‘beyond’ being.”<sup>79</sup> Indeed, because the good causes being and knowing, thereby transcending both, its nature cannot be adequately grasped or expressed.

Socrates cannot say anything about the good; he has to be ignorant because something ineffable has here come into view. There is a paradoxical tension in this antithesis: on the one hand, the *Logoi*, and only the *Logoi*, are the keys to the world of being– “It appeared to me as if one ought to seek refuge in the *Logoi*, and perceive through them the true nature of being” (*Phaedo* 99e)– on the other hand, above this world of being towers that which is beyond everything and, therefore, cannot be grasped even by the *Logoi*.<sup>80</sup>

“The highest goal thus fades into mystery,” Friedlander emphasizes.<sup>81</sup> We may speak about the real but never the good.

The reality made possible by the “being beyond being” is investigated through Plato’s construction of the Divided Line. Transcending being and knowing, the good by definition transcends the Divided Line. It “provides the truth to the things known and gives the power to the one who knows.”<sup>82</sup> To place the good among the forms, indeed, to place the good within the compass of the Line in any position, is to render the good as being, and thus as knowable. This cannot be done without deforming Plato’s metaphysics.

The Divided Line reveals the nature of knowledge generically by revealing its appropriate objects and their modes of apprehension. As an account of reality, it is constructed geometrically by separating line AE into segments AC and CE, the former being twice the length of the latter. AC is further subdivided, maintaining the proportions of AC-CE into AB and BC. CE is

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<sup>79</sup>Friedlander, 63.

<sup>80</sup>Ibid..

<sup>81</sup>Ibid..

<sup>82</sup>Plato, *Republic*, 508E1-2.

subdivided identically, rendering line AE with segments AB, BC, CD, and DE. Notice that the geometric proportions render CE half of AC, BC half of AB, and DE half of CD. Notice also that BC and CD are thereby equal in length.

The length of each segment indicates its relative clarity.<sup>83</sup> Thus, AB is the most clear by nature, DE the least clear. Segments BC and CD, being equal in length, are equal in clarity. Of the two primary segments, AC is more clear than CE. Socrates explains that this longer segment is “for the class that is intellected;” the shorter segment is “for the class that is seen.”<sup>84</sup> The intelligibles are more clearly perceived in and of themselves than the perceptibles, and Plato represents this distinction in clarity through the distinction in length.

The smallest segment, DE, represents the objects least clear by nature, the images. “Now in terms of relative clarity and obscurity, you’ll have one segment in the visible part for images. I mean by images first shadows, then appearances produced in water and in all close-grained, smooth, bright things, and everything of that sort, if you understand.”<sup>85</sup> These images are the reflections of ordinary perceptible objects such as trees, stones, horses, etc. Segment CD, the longer subdivision of segment CE, represents the objects reflected in the images of segment DE, “that of which this first [segment] is a likeness – the animals around us, and everything that grows, and the whole class of artifacts.”<sup>86</sup> Socrates then adds, “And would you also be willing to

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<sup>83</sup>Ibid., 509D9-10.

<sup>84</sup>Ibid., 509D7-8.

<sup>85</sup>Ibid., 509D9-510A2.

<sup>86</sup>Ibid., 510A4-6.

say that with respect to truth or lack of it, as the opinable is distinguished from the knowable, so the likeness is distinguished from that of which it is the likeness?"<sup>87</sup>

Images correspond in their relative clarity to the objects of which they are an image, just as opinion corresponds to truth. Consequently, images are at the farthest remove from objects capable of supporting knowledge, and less inherent permanence and resistance to flux can be predicated of them than even the perceptible objects they reflect. Plato has solid empirical and philosophical grounds for asserting this relationship, for the reflection of a tree in water, or a person in a mirror, depends for its existence on both the object itself and the reflective medium. Its existence is thus more contingent than the existence of a simple object. Indeed, its nature is more composite than the even the most complex perceptible object because in addition to the natural complexity of the object itself, always over and above this is the inherent complexity of the reflecting medium. This holds true also for non-reflective imaging, such as pictorial representation. Furthermore, if each perceptible object has certain essential predicates which define it, as for instance a hammer may be defined by its capacity to drive home a nail, the image of a hammer, irrespective of the reflective medium, is incapable of the essential activity constituting a hammer, and thus while maintaining the appearance of the perceptible object, is inferior to it in "hammeriness."

Plato similarly subdivides segment AC. The shorter of the two subdivisions, segment BC, is equal in length to segment CD, and thus is equal in clarity as well. Plato's intention thereby is revealed in his description of this intelligible segment. In it, "a soul, using as images the things that were previously imitated, is compelled to investigate on the basis of hypotheses

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<sup>87</sup>Ibid., 510A8-11.

and makes its way not to a beginning but to an end.”<sup>88</sup> The objects represented by segment CD, reflected in the images of segment DE, are now used as images facilitating rational investigation. If attention is focused on this equivalency of clarity further, the definition of these image-objects becomes clear.

Nicholas Smith presents the persuasive argument that segment BC represents physical objects which are capable of symbolically representing the forms.<sup>89</sup> Thus, segments BC and CD bridge the gap between perceptibles and intelligibles by joining the two in the capacity of objects to function symbolically. An example of such an object is the index finger, a perceptible object that can also function symbolically as the representative for the mathematical concept of “oneness.” The perceptible object has a dual existence, in that it is both perceptible and intelligible when considered differently. Consequently, intelligibles and perceptibles are unified while remaining separate, for the object in question is both finger and concept, but not continuously finger and concept, being separable in the mind. This can be demonstrated simply by considering an injured index finger, for at the moment of injury, it is most definitely considered anatomically rather than symbolically by its owner.

## **VI. *Dianoetic* Ascent and Philosophical Authority**

*Dianoesis*, ascending to the intelligibles through *aisthesis*, operates through both symbolism and deduction. Beginning with hypotheses, *dianoesis* ascends to demonstrable conclusions through syllogistic logic productive of *episteme*. *Noesis*, represented by segment AB, occupies the highest position on the Divided Line and corresponding to the length of its

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<sup>88</sup>Ibid., 510B5-7.

<sup>89</sup>Smith, 25-45.

segment, is the most clear. Contrary to *dianoesis*, *noesis* makes its way not to an end, that is a conclusion originating in an hypothesis, but is instead productive of the beginning, an *arche* which is itself indemonstrable.<sup>90</sup>

Go on to understand that by the other segment of the intelligible [AB] I mean that which argument itself grasps with the power of dialectic, making the hypotheses not beginnings but really hypotheses— that is steppingstones and springboards— in order to reach what is free from hypothesis at the beginning of the whole. When it has grasped this, argument now depends on that which depends on this beginning and in such fashion goes back down again to an end; making no use of anything sensed in any way, but using the forms themselves, going through forms to forms, it ends in forms too.<sup>91</sup>

*Noesis* apprehends the forms and the *arche* from which syllogisms are constructed, doing so entirely in the realm of intelligibles without any reference whatsoever to perceptibles and *aisthesis*. *Noesis* fully transcends the perceptibles, unlike *dianoesis*, and although both apprehend the intelligibles and thus produce knowledge, the former is the more “pure.” No component of *noesis* is contingent, mutable, or transient. Consequently, *noesis* achieves a degree of certainty transcending *dianoesis*. *Noesis* produces “pure” knowledge, transcending the practical knowledge implied in *phronesis*, and I suggest that for this reason Plato provides an alternative to the *Phaedo* in the *Republic*, differentiating these two modes of knowing and the knowledge.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>90</sup>Plato, *Republic*, 510B7-9.

<sup>91</sup>Ibid., 511B3-C2.

<sup>92</sup>A consequence of this differentiation is that Plato’s account is not and cannot be analogous to Aristotle’s famous analysis of concept formation in his *Posterior Analytics*, Book II.19. Aristotle’s description makes explicit reference to *aisthesis* and is constructed around an ascent from experience of particulars to an apprehension of universals. These universals are indeed productive of the hypotheses that allow demonstration, however, they are the products of sense perception and not of a dialectic investigation of the forms, through the forms, ending in the forms as *noesis* is for Plato. This debate, however, lies beyond the scope of the present

*Dianoesis* and its accompanying symbols are, nonetheless, epistemological tools, and the Divided Line itself is such a symbol. Verbal description, as much as visual representation, is an artifact of *mimesis* and thus not “true” in and of itself no matter how well-wrought.<sup>93</sup> Plato’s dialogues are such artifacts, imperfectly imitating truth in an effort to draw his audience closer to an experience of the original. Like the lyre of the lover in the *Phaedo* that brings to mind the young beloved, the Divided Line is intended to point to the idea it represents, fulfilling its *telos* as a dianoetic symbol by facilitating the apprehension of reality in the *psyche*.

By apprehending reality, the philosopher discovers a template to which he can compare his soul and his society. By reflecting the transcendent *logos*, by opening his soul in receptivity to the unseen measure, he is provided the foundation relativism lacks.<sup>94</sup> Furthermore, since Plato insists that the *polis* is man writ large, reflecting the order or disorder of the souls of its constituent citizens, politics as well may be brought into concord with truth. In this manner, *logos* and *ergos* may indeed find their Doric harmony.

These experiences become the source of a new authority. Through the opening of the soul the philosopher finds himself in a new relation with God; he not only discovers his own psyche as the instrument for experiences transcendence but at the same time discovers the divinity in its radically nonhuman transcendence. Hence, the differentiation of the psyche is inseparable from the a new truth about God. The true order of the soul

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analysis. For a thorough discussion, see David D. Corey, “Voegelin and Aristotle on *Nous*: What is Noetic Political Science,” in *The Review of Politics*, Vol. 64, No. 1, (Winter, 2002), pp. 57-80., Thomas J. McPartland, *Loneragan and the Philosophy of Historical Existence*, Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001., and two essays by Eric Voegelin, “*Reason: The Classical Experience*,” in *Anamnesis*, Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1978, and “Anxiety and Reason,” in *What is History? and Other Late Unpublished Writings*, Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 1990.

<sup>93</sup>Plato, *Republic*, 595C-599A.

<sup>94</sup>Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics*, 143.

can become the standard for measuring both human types and types of social order because it represents the truth about human existence on the border of transcendence. The meaning of the anthropological principle must, therefore, be qualified by the understanding that what becomes the instrument of social critique is, not an arbitrary idea of man as a world-immanent being, but the idea of man who has found his true nature by finding his true relation to God. The new measure that is found for the critique of society is, indeed, not man himself, but man insofar as through the differentiation of his psyche he has become the representative of divine truth.<sup>95</sup>

By discovering the transcendent *logos* providing order both for the soul and society, the philosopher discovers his measure in *phusis*, through the tension towards the *agathon* and apprehension of reality.

Aristotle's well-known criticism of the universal good, the knowledge of which is presumed to improve human action, is only rendered salient if Plato is misunderstood on this point.<sup>96</sup> The good that Aristotle eschews transcends knowing and thus is not the template to which human action can be compared. Rather, the tension towards the *agathon*, knowable only through its effects, renders reality intelligible. Thus reality, and not its cause, is the measure of the soul and society. The good is neither due to its radical transcendence. Indeed, only if the good is brought within the compass of the Divided Line can it be spoken of in the manner Aristotle's argument necessitates, and thus either he is mistaken or he excoriates the view of someone other than Plato.

In light of this, the *Seventh Letter*'s puzzling requirement that philosophers become kings, or kings philosophers, becomes comprehensible. The specific nature of the philosopher (and *philokalon*) includes an experience of the truth of *phusis* (or the *phusis* of truth), which when

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<sup>95</sup>Ibid., 141-142.

<sup>96</sup>Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1096B35-1097A14.

applied to human behavior, facilitates its improvement. It is this *technecal* expertise of human being that establishes his privileged position within the *polis*.

## VII. The *Republic*– The Allegory of the Cave

Can this expertise be taught, and if so, how, and by whom? The philosopher has emerged as the expert on human nature, and as a consequence, on political nature as well, yet the process by which this expertise is developed remains veiled even after Plato’s introduction of the Allegory of the Cave in Book VII. He begins his account of education by describing the context in which human beings initially, and for the most part, find themselves. “See [them] as though they were in an underground cave-like dwelling with its entrance, a long one, open to the light across the whole width of the cave.”<sup>97</sup> The width of the opening allows light from the outside to penetrate the cave at all points. This light, tenuous as it is, represents the tension toward the *agathon* present in the souls of burgeoning philosophers. The faint shafts of light penetrating the darkness are potentially perceptible to all, though this potential languishes unrealized in most. All men “are in [this cave] from childhood with their legs and necks in bonds so that they are fixed, seeing only in front of them, unable because of the bond to turn their heads all the way around.”<sup>98</sup> Their field of vision is greatly reduced, limited entirely to the interior wall of the cave opposite the opening. “Their light is from a fire burning far above and behind them. Between the fire and the prisoners there is a road above, along which see a wall, built like the partitions puppet-handlers set in front of the human beings and over which they show the puppets.”<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>97</sup>Plato, *Republic*, 514A3-5.

<sup>98</sup>*Ibid.*, 514A5-B1.

<sup>99</sup>*Ibid.*, 514B1-4.

Their source of illumination is an artifact of *mimesis*, the gift of Prometheus, making perceptible the objects of sight, albeit without the clarity provided by the sun.<sup>100</sup> Things are seen dimly in the cave as the fire is a poor substitute for that which it imitates. Puppet-handlers march before this fire, carrying with them objects whose shadows, cast by the fire, can be seen by the prisoners on the wall before them. These objects are also artifacts of *mimesis*, mere semblances of “men and other animals wrought from stone, wood, and every kind of material.”<sup>101</sup> They are not the originals, but reproductions designed to cast believable shadows, just as puppets may be constructed to believably resemble people and animals we perceive in nature. Chained as they are, the prisoners see nothing but shadows, and lacking comparison, believe these shadows to exhaust reality. Indeed, as a consequence of the limited horizon of their perception, they are denied even self-knowledge, for their only apprehension of the self is as one dancing shadow amongst many others. “Do you suppose such men would have seen anything of themselves and one another other than the shadows cast by the fire?” Socrates asks Glaucon.<sup>102</sup> Chained, confused, unaware, helpless, these prisoners live out their lives convinced of the truth of images. Some of the puppet-masters speak as they carry their artifacts, and these words are assumed by the prisoners to be the voice of the things themselves.<sup>103</sup> These voices may represent the utterances of the gods as manifest in the work of the divine poets. Such acrimony comports well

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<sup>100</sup>The fire is an artifact of *mimesis* in that it mimics some of the characteristics of the sun, and in that its existence in the cave is artificial.

<sup>101</sup>Ibid., 514C1-2.

<sup>102</sup>Ibid., 515A5-7.

<sup>103</sup>Ibid., 515B10-12.

with Plato's criticism of Homer and his ilk in the *Republic*, reinforcing the need for censorship introduced in Book II by further alluding to the damage untruth causes in the soul.

The interior wall of the cave with its play of shadow and voice reflects the lowest segment of the Divided Line. Here, the images of objects are apprehended by *aisthesis*, and the ephemerality and transience of this class of objects is made apparent. These shadows, contingent as they are on the light of the fire and the craftsmanship inherent in the artifact, are the least eternal and immutable of all that is. While they share many predicates with the objects to which they owe their existence, they are least like *that which is*. Nonetheless, the hapless prisoners are unaware of the uncertainty of their "knowledge," believing what they perceive in the shadows to be true. "Such men," Socrates explains, "would hold that the truth is nothing other than the shadows of artificial things."<sup>104</sup>

The progression of artifacts held by the puppeteers represents the next highest segment of the Divided Line. The artifacts symbolize the composite objects of the physical world, manipulated by the poets and the politicians. Who has constructed the artifacts, laid the fire, and built the wall? Are the puppet-masters complicitous in the imprisonment of their fellows? Again, Plato's criticism of poets and politicians lends credence to this interpretation, for these puppet-masters do rule their prisoners in some sense, compounding their ignorance with "divine" utterances.

The artifacts are far less contingent than the shadows they cast and yet their truth still depends on the artisans. Although more permanent than a fleeting shadow, they are constructed

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<sup>104</sup>Ibid., 515C1-2.

from physical material, rendering them composite. Of the things within the cave, the artifacts are the most true, but they are far removed from *that which is*.

Now consider what their release and healing from bonds and folly would be like if something of this sort were by nature to happen to them. Take a man who is released and suddenly compelled to stand up, to turn his neck around, to walk and look toward the light; and who, moreover, in doing all this is in pain and, because he is dazzled, is unable to make out those things whose shadows he saw before. What do you suppose he'd say if someone were to tell him that before he saw silly nothings, while now, because he is somewhat nearer to what is and more turned towards being, he sees more correctly; and, in particular, showing him each of the things that pass by, were to compel the man to answer his questions about what they are? Don't you suppose he'd be at a loss and believe that what was seen before is truer than what is now shown?<sup>105</sup>

Freed from his irons and forced to turn, the ex-prisoner is dazzled by the dim light of the fire. It is agony to stand, to stretch, to turn his eyes from the dancing shadows on the wall towards the comparative brilliance of the sun's distant rays. There is, Plato assures us, discomfort inherent in this education. This physical distress reflects the *psychic* distress of the neophyte philosopher who finds his 'sureties' no longer sure. His familiar "reality" has now been brought into question, and the ex-prisoner's inability to perceive effectively is paralleled by his inability to think effectively. The radical dislocation of liberation is burdensome. Confronted with two versions of reality, the easily understood shadows on one hand and the unfamiliar progression of artifacts on the other, the ex-prisoner's pain and confusion militate for the former.

Nevertheless, the ex-prisoner is dragged "away from there by force along the rough, steep, upward way," until at last, he emerges into the full light of the sun.<sup>106</sup> Temporarily blinded

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<sup>105</sup>Ibid., 515C4-D7.

<sup>106</sup>Ibid., 515E6-7.

by the brilliant light, he is “unable to see even one of the things now said to be true.”<sup>107</sup> The realm beyond the cave’s entrance reflects segment AC of the Divided Line. Here, the images of ideas and the originals themselves are apprehended through reason. Accustomed to *aisthesis*, the ex-prisoner is initially unable to see what is before him, for what is most true in itself is what is most difficult to apperceive.

I suppose he’d have to get accustomed, if he were going to see what’s up above. At first he’d most easily make out the shadows; and after that the phantoms (*eidolon*) of human beings and the other things in water; and, later, the things themselves. And from there he could turn to beholding the things in heaven and heaven itself, more easily at night—looking at the light of the stars and the moon— than by day— looking at the sun and sunlight.<sup>108</sup>

These shadows and phantoms are the images of the forms, apprehended through *dianoesis*. Reflecting segment BC of the Divided Line, these images are equal in clarity to the artifacts of the puppet-masters, segment CD. They are “seen” darkly by the dim light of the stars and the moon rather than by the brilliance of the sun. This slow adjustment prepares the eyes and the mind.

Then finally I suppose he would be able to make out the sun— not its appearances in water or some alien place, but the sun itself by itself in its own region— and see what it’s like... And after that he would already be in a position to conclude about it that this is the source of the seasons and the years, and is the steward of all things in the visible place, and is in a certain way the cause of all those things he and his companions have been seeing.<sup>109</sup>

This passage does not contradict our earlier conclusion that the sun, and by analogy the good, transcends perception and intellection, respectively. What the ex-prisoner apprehends

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<sup>107</sup>Ibid., 516A2-3.

<sup>108</sup>Ibid., 516A2-B2.

<sup>109</sup>Ibid., 516B4-C2.

about the sun is that it is the origin of the natural order, the steward of being, and the ultimately prior cause. The sun and the good, therefore, remain beyond being and knowing. As the origin and cause of being and knowing, the good transcends both, fading into mystery.<sup>110</sup>

The intellection of the *things that are*, illuminated by the direct light of the sun, reflects segment AB of the Divided Line. It is here that the philosopher discovers the template of order to which ethics and politics can be compared, for here the truth of *phusis* is revealed. This is the goal of education, its fundamental experience. What remains unanswered, however, is the process by which this experience is engendered, and for that, we must turn to the *Symposium*.

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<sup>110</sup>Friedlander, 63.

**PART THREE:**  
***AISTHETIC EROS AND THE ONTOLOGICAL ASCENT***

**VIII. The *Symposium***

Therein, Plato's mastery of dramatic poetry allows him to express the interconnectedness of *eros* and education. Nowhere does his literary genius shine more brightly than in the *Symposium*. A product of his maturity as an artist, it preserves a harmony between drama and philosophy unequaled by any other of his works. Indeed, the power of its dramatic elements is such that its philosophical depth is obscured absent close attention to them.

The dramatic action of the *Symposium* parallels its philosophical development. The dialogue is set on the eve of Agathon's private party, celebrating his victory over the other poets of Athens. Socrates, uncharacteristically, has "just bathed and put on his fancy sandals," and Aristodemus, whose account Apollodorus relates to Glaucon, asks Socrates "where he is going, and why he was looking so good."<sup>111</sup> In every other instance, Socrates' homeliness is highlighted by his interlocutors, and I suggest that in breaking from the established dramatic norm, Plato subtly but firmly insists that we consider this change. Why has Socrates taken such pains to improve his appearance, and if we can assume that this is more than empty drama, what philosophical weight does this carry?

"I'm going to Agathon's for dinner," Socrates replies, "I managed to avoid yesterday's victory party – I really don't like crowds – but I promised to be there today. So, naturally, I took great pains with my appearance; I'm going to the house of a good-looking man; I had to look my

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<sup>111</sup>Plato, *Symposium*, 174A.

best.”<sup>112</sup> “*Agathon*,” the Good, is Socrates’ amorous interest for the evening and this obvious play on words reveals the duality of the *Symposium*’s dramatic elements. Just as his appearance is intended to arouse the erotic attention of his good-looking host, it is a response to the tension Socrates experiences towards him, and symbolically, towards the Good as well.<sup>113</sup> This erotic tension provides the cohesion between Socrates (as philosopher) and the Good, just as it does between Socrates (the lover) and Agathon.

Socrates desires Agathon as the existential representative of the Good. His erotic tension is manifest in his desire to impress and explicit in his dramatic movement toward Agathon, “who, as it happened, was all alone on the farthest couch.”<sup>114</sup> The *Agathon* is at the furthest remove from the initial position of Socrates, the condition of human being in everydayness. The spatial movement of Socrates’ body across the room to the far couch parallels the metaphysical movement of his soul ascending to the pinnacle of Being. Simultaneously, the young poet Agathon is Socrates’ beloved, and the erotic tension extant between them has produced a desire for close association that while overtly sexual, is highly philosophical. “Socrates, come and lie down next to me,” Agathon entices, “Who knows, if I touch you, I may catch a bit of the wisdom

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<sup>112</sup>Ibid., 174A 5-8.

<sup>113</sup>For additional discussion of the importance of *eros* in Platonic philosophy, see Dante Germino, “Voegelin’s Theory of Interpretation as Applied to Plato and Aristotle” and Zdravko Planinc, “The Erotics of Recognition in Plato,” both presented as papers for the seventeenth Annual Meeting of the Eric Voegelin Society, San Francisco, California, Aug. 31-Sept. 2, 2001.

<sup>114</sup>Plato, *Symposium*, 175C 6-7.

that came to you under my neighbor's porch."<sup>115</sup> Thereby, Agathon expresses his desire for both Socrates the man and Socrates the teacher, for both sex and knowledge.

The *eros* between Socrates and Agathon, while more than physical, owes its genesis to *aisthesis*. Plato reveals this through Socrates' speech and demeanor, for if the tension between them were "Platonic" in its common sense, why should Socrates care about his appearance? Why the sexual banter and blatant innuendo? – but the importance of *aesthetic eros* comes fully to light only in Socrates' speech, because only there does Plato provide the metaphysical explanation that his dramatic genius flirtatiously reveals.

Socrates' speech has two purposes. First, it presents an ontological ascent complementing the *Republic's* Divided Line. Second, it clarifies the process of education, including the necessity of mentor-ship. The ontological ascent *is* the process of education, made possible through the erotic tension of lover and beloved. Consequently, these subjects are inseparable, but due to the limitations of written communication, they must be treated sequentially.

Young Socrates has come to Diotima for instruction about *eros*. Although common opinion holds love to be beautiful and good, by cross-examining her pupil, she draws from him two realizations. First, love is always a love of *something*, meaning that love always has an intentional object, and second, love's nature is privative – love is a desire for what the lover lacks. Even when the lover comes to possess the object of his desire, his love longs for the temporal continuation of possession, *ad infinitum*. Thus, since lovers desire the beautiful and

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<sup>115</sup>Ibid., 175C 7-8.

good, love cannot be beautiful and good. This presents a problem for philosophers which must be addressed briefly.

Since philosophers, by definition, love *sophron*, they cannot be wise. Are philosophers, then, ignorant? Diotima insists that the ignorance-wisdom dichotomy is instead a continuum. Lovers of wisdom cannot be ignorant in that their rightly attuned *eros* is something better than this. Nonetheless, they cannot be wise either, and therefore occupy the middle ground, the *metaxy*, between ignorance and wisdom, closer to the former than the latter. Socrates' elusive insistence on his relative ignorance in the *Apology* now becomes clear – he expresses his distance from wisdom not his proximity to ignorance.<sup>116</sup>

Appropriately attuned *eros* desires what *is* best. To be metaphysically precise, it desires *that which is*. “It is what is really beautiful (*to toi onti kalon*) and graceful that deserves to be loved, and this is perfect and highly blessed (*makarion*).”<sup>117</sup> The proper object of *eros* is *that which is beautiful*, Beauty itself, and the metaphysical task at hand is the illumination of the process by which *aesthetic eros* ascends to *eros* for the *Kalon*.

The ontological ascent described by Diotima details the movement of the soul from the pursuit of a beautiful body, a perceptible, to Beauty itself, an intelligible. For this ascent to complement the Divided Line, Beauty must be synonymous with or a predicate of the same reality as the Good. Plato expresses precisely this harmony of Forms through Diotima's insistence that “what everyone loves is really nothing other than the good.”<sup>118</sup> She arrives at this

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<sup>116</sup>Plato, *Apology*, 21A-23A

<sup>117</sup>Plato, *Symposium*, 204C 5-7.

<sup>118</sup>Ibid., 206A 1.

conclusion by reasoning that all love is directed at a final end: happiness.<sup>119</sup> “The lover of beautiful things has a desire,” she explains to Socrates, “What does he desire?”<sup>120</sup>

The purpose of loving is to fulfill the lover, to make him happy (*eudamonia*). This humanly achievable happiness is actualized through the possession of the lover’s object of affection, namely, the beautiful thing. Diotima (safely) assumes that no one wishes to possess what is bad, and thus, all beautiful things desired by the lover are, at least, *perceived* to be good. Thus, the beautiful and the good are brought into harmony and the kinship of the Good and Beauty is clarified. As a result, Diotima asserts that the Good “is always the object of love.”<sup>121</sup>

Love ascends to the final end from *eros* for a beautiful body. Diotima’s account of the ontological ascent begins with proper boy-loving. “First, if the leader [Love] leads aright, he should love one body and beget beautiful ideas there.”<sup>122</sup> While in his youth, the lover, appropriately, is erotically attracted to his beloved, a younger boy.<sup>123</sup> Spending time with him, the lover is led to beautiful thoughts by his *psyche*, aroused by the presence of a beautiful body. From the *eros* for the beloved springs inadvertently *eros* for the Good, because even here, Beauty and Good are one.

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<sup>119</sup>Ibid., 205A 3-5.

<sup>120</sup>Ibid., 204D 6-7.

<sup>121</sup>Ibid., 206B 2.

<sup>122</sup>Ibid., 210A 7-8.

<sup>123</sup>See also Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff’s introduction to Plato, *Phaedrus*, Indianapolis: Hackett, 1995; p. xvi.

A great cognitive leap occurs, however, with the recognition of the inherence of Forms in perceptibles as their predicates. All perceptibles have intelligibles as their predicates: beautiful, ugly, large, small, etc. Consequently, the burgeoning philosopher realizes that Beauty inheres in many objects, not only the body of his beloved. He can therefore fulfill his *eros* through the possession of many beautiful things. As Diotima relates,

he should 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 come to be 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.<sup>124</sup>

Nonetheless, the lover's *eros* remains directed towards perceptibles, although a tangible shift towards the intelligibles has begun. The transference of his attention completely to the intelligibles is intimately connected to the discussion of *dianoesis* and the mathematical of the Divided Line. Recall that *dianoetic* objects, represented by segment BC, are also perceptible objects, represented by segment CD. Their duality arises from their ability to function symbolically, and thereby to bridge the ontological chasm between the perceptibles and the intelligibles. Something akin to the ability of a perceptible finger to represent the intelligible form of 'oneness' occurs in the *Symposium*.

In Diotima's account, the neophyte philosopher, having discovered the 'fraternal' nature of Beauty, begins to consider its inherence in beautiful objects. Therein, he discovers the differentiation of transcendence and immanence, and consequently discovers the duality of human being as the locus of both. With the recognition of the transcendence of the *psyche*, the

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<sup>124</sup>Ibid., 210A1-B5.

dual nature of his beloved is revealed. Consequently, Agathon, previously a lover of Socrates' body, becomes a lover of Socrates' soul and its activity. In the general sense, the object of affection remains Socrates. Now, though, Socrates' body represents the presence of his soul, an instance of a perceptible representing an intelligible. In this way, a connection is forged and an ascent to Beauty made possible.

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 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 of no great importance.<sup>125</sup>

In the course of his desire, the lover has discovered super-sensible reality. Originating in *aisthesis*, *eros* has transcended the perceptible, and awake to the transcendent, the lover undertakes to learn about as many beautiful ideas as possible.

The result is that he will see the beauty of knowledge and 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 theories, in unstinting love of wisdom, until having grown and been strengthened there, he catches sight of such knowledge, and it is the knowledge of... something wonderfully beautiful in its nature.<sup>126</sup>

This something *is* Beauty – the form of Beauty, represented by segment AB of the Divided Line. As *that which is what it is*, it is completely free from contingency and perceptibility. As Diotima describes it,

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<sup>125</sup>Ibid., 210B6-C7.

<sup>126</sup>Ibid., 210D1-211A1.

First, it always *is* and neither comes to be nor passes away, neither waxes nor wanes. Second, it is not beautiful in this way and ugly in 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.<sup>127</sup>

The lover has completed the ascent from perceptibles to intelligibles, culminating in an experience of the eternal form of Beauty. The erotic tension of the soul towards the *Kalon* parallels the tension of the lover and his beloved, with the significant exception that the *philokalon* exists permanently in the *metaxy* of *eros*, never fully possessing that which he desires. The synonymy of the Good and Beauty renders the *philokalon* and the *philosophron* (philosopher) twins, and by virtue of their fraternity, and the fraternity of their beloved, they are equally denied the total actualization of their *eros*. Consequently, as lovers they pursue, they entice, but they do not possess. The Good and the Beautiful retreat into mystery, glimpsed but not seen.<sup>128</sup>

Without the erotic *metaxy* between teacher and student, the close association and dialectic of the Socratic/Platonic method are impossible. The necessity that one be “led by another” is explicit, but this ‘leading’ is not osmotic.<sup>129</sup> Instead, the pupil’s *psyche* must be formed into receptivity to the *Agathon* through careful and patient discourse, guiding the student through his own discoveries.

The Socratic *elenchos* can only become effective in conversation. It is a step on the way to *paideia*. To educate means to evoke knowledge. But knowledge is not something

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<sup>127</sup>Ibid., 211A 1-7.

<sup>128</sup>Friedlander, 63.

<sup>129</sup>Plato, *Symposium*, 211S2.

which, as in communicating pipes, ‘runs from the full to the empty’ (*Syp* 175d). It is the wrong kind of educators who believe ‘they can put into the soul knowledge that was not there before, like sight into blind eyes’ (*Rep* 518b).<sup>130</sup>

Furthermore, and of no less importance, without the erotic tension of the pupil towards his master, the *eros* for the *Kalon* cannot be stimulated within the soul. *Eros* kindles the passionate fire in the soul for the *Agathon*. Without it, no ascent is possible.

The ontological ascent of the *Symposium* affords an experience of transcendent reality that reveals the nature of *that which is*. This apprehension of the *phusis* of the *Kalon* “gives birth not to images of virtue (because [the *philokalon* is] in touch with no images), but to true virtue (because he’s in touch with true Beauty).”<sup>131</sup> The *philokalon/philosophron*’s authority to challenge the ethics and politics of society grows as the soul rises in this ascent.

### **IX. The Seventh Letter**

This analysis has clarified the central themes of Plato’s middle dialogues to the point that the *Seventh Letter* may now be directly examined. Four principal aspects of his epistle shall be considered: his political views, his pedagogical philosophy, his exhortation against a written account of first principles, and the metaphysics of his ‘epistemological digression.’

Earlier in this essay, Plato’s denunciation of the Thirty Tyrants particularly, and despotic rule more generally, was introduced. Although initially attracted by the promise of radical change and driven by the impetuosity of youth, Plato gradually became cognizant of the terrible nature of this oligarchy through his experience of its injustice. As Plato matured philosophically,

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<sup>130</sup>Friedlander, 156.

<sup>131</sup>Plato, *Symposium*, 212A5-7.

his criticism *necessarily* expanded to encompass not only the intentionally tyrannical, but also the benevolent, evolving into a critique of politics universal in its scope.

I came to the conclusion that all existing states are badly governed and the condition of their laws practically incurable, without some miraculous remedy and the assistance of fortune; and I was forced to say, in praise of true philosophy, that from her height alone was it possible to discern what the nature of justice is, either in the state or in the individual, and that the ills of the human race would never come to an end until either those who are sincerely and truly lovers of wisdom come into political power, or the rulers of our cities, by the grace of God, learn true philosophy.<sup>132</sup>

The impetus as well as the solution for this criticism can be found in his metaphysics.

The differentiation of the perceptibles from the intelligibles and the analysis of the interrelatedness includes the imperfect embodiment of the transcendent in the immanent. For Plato, matter and form are locked in eternal strife, in that the immanence of the perceptible essentially betrays the transcendence of the form inherent as its predicate. Only the intelligible forms *are what they are* – the unceasing flux of the perceptibles precludes such purity and constancy. Thus, if we consider political regimes as objects of the perceptible realm attempting to embody such intelligible forms as justice, we recognize immediately that for Plato the total actualization of justice is metaphysically impossible. No regime, however well devised, can achieve the permanence and perfection of the transcendent intelligibles. Consequently, ‘all existing states are badly governed and the conditions of their laws practically incurable.’ Why then laud the benefits of true philosophy and the rule of the ‘lover of wisdom?’

The ascent to the forms, made intelligible by the *Agathon*, consists of an apprehension of reality. This experience, while neither infallible nor perfectly applicable to the perceptible world, provides a template for the comparison of the extant with the paradigmatic. Thus, while the rule

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<sup>132</sup>Plato, *Seventh Letter*, 326A2-B4.

of the philosopher is an imperfect solution, it is nonetheless to be preferred to the rule of the non-philosopher.<sup>133</sup> Furthermore, this political prescription necessarily follows from the premise that one must understand justice in order to craft good laws. The priority of philosophy becomes apparent when the following syllogism is considered: if justice is a necessary condition of good law, and philosophy is a necessary condition of justice, then philosophy is a necessary condition of good law. Platonic metaphysics, we have seen in the preparatory analysis, insists upon the minor premise, and thus in the *Seventh Letter*, because of its epistolary assumption of familiarity with his dialogues, Plato feels it unnecessary to defend this position. From the perspective of philosophy “alone [is] it possible to discern what the nature of justice is.”<sup>134</sup> A true *technē politike* is a result of the philosopher’s pursuit of truth, and in this sense, Plato is an unlikely pragmatist.

What is more difficult to understand, however, is the purpose of this autobiographical digression. How does this political advice come to bear on the *Seventh Letter* generally and Plato’s involvement in Syracuse specifically? The answer to these questions lies in historical context and in Plato’s clarification of his goal in Syracuse. Sharply critical of his association with both the elder and younger Dionysius, Plato’s contemporaries found ample justification for their indictments, at least ostensibly. “Money and prestige were to be gained at the courts of these enemies of democracy; and it is hardly possible that the members of the Academy who

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<sup>133</sup>Lest my description of the rule of the philosopher-king as ‘imperfect’ be attacked as un-Platonic, it must be remembered that the Cycle of Decline described in *Republic* Book VIII begins with the rule of the philosopher, suggesting that even the most perfect practical constitution is necessarily imperfect.

<sup>134</sup>*Ibid.*, 326A5-6.

visited them, even with the most disinterested motives, could have escaped criticism and slander.”<sup>135</sup> Indeed, “Diogenes the Cinic criticized Plato for his love of Sicilian luxury; and Epicurus is said to have called the Platonists *Dionusokolakes*.”<sup>136</sup> It is therefore understandable that Plato feels it necessary to defend his decision to travel to Syracuse and to associate with the Syracusan tyrants.

His clarification begins almost immediately, as he insists to Dion’s friends and associates that he will assist them if, and only if, their “views and purposes are really the same as his.”<sup>137</sup> Dion, we discover, believed “the Syracusans... ought to be free and live under the best laws.”<sup>138</sup> We know that Plato’s view is that this is only possible given the rule of a philosopher, and thus we should be little surprised when, of his decision to attend the court of Dionysius, he writes, “What tipped the scales eventually was the thought that if anyone ever was to attempt to realize these principles of law and government [freedom and justice], now was the time to try, since it was only necessary to win over a single man and I should have accomplished all the good I dreamed of.”<sup>139</sup> In light of this, we understand Plato’s purpose – to free Syracuse from tyranny and give birth to good law by converting the one man in power to the side of philosophy. The possibility of a complete regime change through the ‘conversion’ of one man was a great temptation.

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<sup>135</sup>Morrow, 47.

<sup>136</sup>Ibid., 47.

<sup>137</sup>Ibid., 324A3.

<sup>138</sup>Ibid., 324B2-3.

<sup>139</sup>Ibid., 328B6-C3.

Dion, Plato's beloved student,

had come to love virtue more than pleasure and luxury... [and] he conceived that these convictions which he himself had got from proper instruction might arise in others beside himself; and observing that they were in fact making their appearance in the minds of some, at least, of his associates, he thought that by the help of the gods Dionysius himself might be counted among this number.<sup>140</sup>

Significantly, Plato expresses that Dion's love for virtue was the product of 'proper instruction,' just as his own attitude towards the political misadventure of the Tyrants owed a great deal to his association with Socrates. That Plato chose to immortalize the persona of his loving mentor as the voice of philosophy must be recognized as a tribute to the respect he so obviously felt. In the *Seventh Letter*, Plato makes more than casual reference to their relationship between himself and Dion, a reflection of his own relationship with Socrates, and to grasp his conception of education, it is to this description that we must now turn.

"In my association (*suggenomenos*) with Dion, who was then a young man, I imparted to him my ideas of what was best for men and urged him to put them into practice; and in doing so I was in a way contriving, though quite unwittingly, the destruction of the tyranny that later came to pass."<sup>141</sup> The specific term Plato chose to describe this 'association' carries not only the weight of 'keeping company' and 'holding conversation with,' but also 'having sexual intercourse with.' Thus, Plato's *double entendre* may be rendered idiomatically 'when I was *with* Dion' or 'when Dion and I were *together*' given the recognition that the 'with' or 'together' carry sexual overtones obvious to the reader. The difficulty, as any translator will attest, is that English lacks a word to express both meanings.

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<sup>140</sup>Ibid., 327B2-C4.

<sup>141</sup>Ibid., 327A2-6.

Of the effects of this relationship, Plato writes, “he recalled our conversations (*sunousian*) together and how effectively they had aroused in him the desire for a life of nobility and virtue.”<sup>142</sup> Again, the specific verbiage chosen by Plato carries two meanings: ‘being with/conversing with a teacher,’ and ‘sexual intercourse.’<sup>143</sup> I suggest that for his contemporaries, these sexual overtones were not only obvious, but also expected and normal.

The ‘dramatic action’ of Plato and Dion’s relationship parallels its ‘philosophical development,’ much as these two movements were linked in the *Symposium*. Dion admires and is admired by Plato to the degree that he represents the transcendent *Agathon/Kalon*. Much like Apollodorus, Dion’s affection compelled his rejection of the life of luxury then dominating Syracuse. Like Apollodorus, Dion came to admire the philosophical life, and Plato as its epitome, to the exclusion of all others.

The purpose of this erotic relationship was the subject of the *Symposium*. The *Kalon/Agathon* is Dion’s true erotic object, but until his psyche achieved sufficient self-awareness, Plato stood as a surrogate immanent beauty/good, the same role Socrates played for Agathon. Indeed, while it would be remiss to consider Dion’s attraction to Plato as prurient, it would be equally mistaken to ignore the erotic element of their mutual attraction. Through the *Symposium* we discover that the ascent to the *Kalon/Agathon* begins in erotic *aisthesis*, and Plato, by drawing our attention to Socrates’ concern for his (and Agathon’s) appearance,

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<sup>142</sup>Ibid., 327D1-3.

<sup>143</sup>For other uses by Plato of this word, in which the sexual meaning is certainly primary, see his *Symposium*, 193C3 and 206C3.

reinforces this. Dion's nature must accord with the object of his affection,<sup>144</sup> and thus if he is to pursue the *Kalon*, he cannot be inherently insensitive to immanent beauty. On the contrary, Dion must be drawn to the beautiful with greater intensity than most.

Plato describes Dion as a superior student, worthy of his affection.

[He] was in all things quick to learn, especially in the matters upon which I talked to him; and he listened with a zeal and attentiveness I had never encountered in any young man, and he resolved to spend his life differently from most Italians and Sicilians, since he had come to love virtue more than pleasure and luxury.<sup>145</sup>

Dion, therefore, has demonstrated qualities of soul resulting from a natural affinity with the *Agathon*. Should Plato feel no special attraction to such a young man? Consider his description of Theaetetus in the dialogue bearing his name.

Theodorus says to Socrates,

he is not beautiful at all, but is rather like you, snub-nosed, with eyes that stick out; though these features are not quite so pronounced in him. I speak without any qualms; and I assure you that among all the people I have ever met – and I have got to know a good many in my time – I have never seen anyone so amazingly gifted. Along with a quickness beyond the capacity of most people, he has an unusually gentle temper; and to crown it all, he is as manly a boy as any of his fellows... [He] approaches his studies in a smooth, sure, effective way, and with great good temper; it reminds one of the quiet flow of a stream of oil. The result is that it is astonishing to see how he gets through his work, at his age.<sup>146</sup>

Two aspects of this comparison are especially important. First, notice Theodorus' ironic introduction – 'he is not beautiful at all, but is rather like you' – to Socrates, the character whose beauty of soul has captured the attention of Alcibiades, Agathon, and Phaedrus. Theodorus

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<sup>144</sup>Ibid., 343E2-3.

<sup>145</sup>Ibid., 327A6-B3.

<sup>146</sup>Plato, *Theaetetus*, 143E9-144D3.

demonstrates his slavish eroticism and his unsuitability for philosophy by failing to find either Theaetetus or Socrates beautiful. Concerned that Socrates will think his affections inappropriate, he denies this possibility on the grounds of Theaetetus' aesthetic poverty. In doing so, however, he confirms the audience's suspicion that the only *eros* possible for him is that of the *philosoma*. Second, Theaetetus and Dion share the beauty of soul to which a philosopher must be drawn. As much as Socrates and the audience come to admire the former, so too should we and Plato admire Dion. Rather than propriety, a lack of affection on Plato's part would speak of an unphilosophical insensitivity.

In this sense, the *Symposium* provides a catalogue of human types. Principal among them are the *daimonios aner* and the *amathes* – as Voegelin explains, “the man who lives in the erotic tension to his ground of being [the *Kalon/Agathon*] is called *daimonios aner*, i.e., a man who consciously exists in the tension of the in-between (*metaxy*), in which the divine and human partake of each other.”<sup>147</sup> Juxtaposed to this type is the *amathes*, the ‘ignorant’ or ‘unfeeling’ man.<sup>148</sup> “Insofar as the call of the new humanity is not heard at all or even rejected, the man whom the call addresses sinks down to the status of spiritually dull being, the *amathes*.”<sup>149</sup> The spiritually sensitive man is particularly receptive to the siren-song of *eros*, in contradistinction to

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<sup>147</sup>Voegelin, *Anamnesis*, 154.

<sup>148</sup>See also Voegelin's *Order and History Volume IV: The Ecumenic Age*, Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000., pp. 244-245, where he writes, “...the spiritual man (*daimonios aner*) who is in search of truth is somewhere between knowledge and ignorance (*metaxy sophias kai amathias*) (202A),” and opposed to the *thnetos*, or merely mortal man, with whom the divine “does not mingle.”

<sup>149</sup>*Ibid.*, 154.

the spiritually dull man who is unreceptive to *aisthesis* and thereby the possibility of the philosophical ascent to the *Kalon*.

The *daimonios aner* occupies the *metaxy* defined by the poles of human and divine (or immanent and transcendent) as well as the one defined by the poles of lover and beloved (or teacher and pupil). In both instances, the human and the divine ‘partake of each other’ – in the first case this participation takes the form of the a finite being’s experience of the infinite (or immanent being’s experience of transcendence). In the second, the participation takes the form of the opposite partner’s participation symbolically in the transcendent divine. As immanent, *aesthetic* articulations of the *Agathon/Kalon*, they facilitate an experience of the transcendent in their partner.

A proper philosopher,

one who has seen much in heaven – when he sees a godlike face or bodily form that has captured Beauty well, first he shudders and a fear comes over him with the reverence due a god, and if he weren’t afraid people would think him completely mad, he’d even sacrifice to his boy as if he were the image of a god. Once he has looked at him, his chill gives way to sweating and high fever, because the stream of beauty that pours into him through his eyes warms him up and waters the growth of his wings. Meanwhile, the heat warms him and melts the places where the wings once grew, places that were long ago closed off with scabs to keep the sprouts from coming back; but as nourishment flows in, the feather shafts swell and rush to grow from their roots beneath every part of the soul (long ago, you see, the entire soul had wings). Now the whole soul seethes and throbs in this condition. Like a child whose teeth are just starting to grow in, and its gums are aching and itching – that is exactly how the soul feels when it begins to grow wings. It swells up and aches and tingles as it grows them. But when it looks upon the beauty of the boy and takes in the stream of particles flowing into it from his beauty (that is why it is called ‘desire’ [*himeros*-from *mere* (particles), *ienai* (go), and *rhein* (flow)]), when it is watered and warmed by this, then all its pain subsides and it replaced by joy. When, however, it is separated from the boy and runs dry, then the openings of the passages in which the feathers grow are dried shut and keep the wings from sprouting. Then the stump of each feather is blocked in its desire and it throbs like a pulsing artery while the

feather pricks at its passageway, with the result that the whole soul is stung all around, and the pain simply drives it wild... This is the experience we humans call love.<sup>150</sup>

Thus, the relationship and its advantage is not unidirectional. When the philosopher/lover beholds his beloved, “his memory is carried back to the real nature of Beauty, and he sees it again where it stands on the sacred pedestal next to Self-control.”<sup>151</sup> For Plato, his beloved Dion is an immanent link to the transcendent *Kalon*, facilitating his own ascent to the *Agathon*. The purity of this relationship lies not in the absence of eroticism, but in the restraint of the lovers. Philosophers rather than philosomes, they obey the constraints of *sophrosune* and avoid intercourse. Nonetheless, the tension is essentially erotic.

This tension is productive of the close association between teacher and student necessary for dialectic. Binding them to one another, grounding the *metaxy* of lover and beloved, *eros* provides mutual pleasure through association, and they are thereby inclined by nature to share discussion. *Eros* also reinforces the progress of the student in his ascent, just as Dion and Theaetetus earn the praise of Plato through their philosophical disposition and pursuit. It is no wonder then that Plato takes great pains to defend the relationship between men and boys in the *Symposium*, the *Phaedrus*, and the *Seventh Letter*.

Plato relates, however, that he was unable to convert Dionysius to the cause of philosophy. He refused “to have anything to do with justice, though he possessed every resource for making it prevail throughout his entire domain.”<sup>152</sup> Unlike Dion and Theaetetus, Dionysius

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<sup>150</sup>Plato, *Phaedrus*, 251A1-252B3.

<sup>151</sup>Ibid., 254B6-8.

<sup>152</sup>Plato, *Seventh Letter*, 335C6-7.

lacks the predisposition necessary of a proper student. Of his unbridled arrogance during their encounters, Plato writes “I did not explain everything to him, nor did he ask me to, for he claimed to have already a sufficient knowledge of many of the most important points because of what he had heard others say about them.”<sup>153</sup> Dionysius insisted that Plato had nothing to teach which he did not already know, and yet, he was not insensitive to Plato’s beauty. “With the passage of time, Dionysius, I must truly say, did become more and more attached to me as he became more familiar with my manner and character; but he wanted me to praise him more than I did Dion and value his friendship more highly, and he was marvelously persistent toward this end.”<sup>154</sup> Thus, while Dionysius shows some of the necessary conditions of a good pupil, he lacks others.

Most importantly, Plato’s description reveals that he lacks *eros* for the *Agathon*. Through Socrates and Diotima, Plato teaches that *eros*’ nature is privative, desiring what it lacks. Dionysius believed that he already knew everything Plato might teach, and thus did not desire knowledge, but rather claimed to already possess it. If the *Agathon/Sophron* is pursued from within the *metaxy* of ignorance and knowledge, and Dionysius claims to occupy the latter pole, then Dionysius cannot be in pursuit of the *Agathon/Kalon*. In other words, if he claims to already know, he has no need to learn.

But the final, and most convincing, indictment to Plato’s mind was Dionysius’ treatise on first philosophy. “Later, I hear, he wrote a book on the matters we talked about [and he claimed to know], putting it forward as his own teaching, not what he had learned from me. Whether this

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<sup>153</sup>Ibid., 341A7-B2.

<sup>154</sup>Ibid., 330A3-7.

is true I don't know. I know that certain others also have written on these same matters; but who they are they themselves do not know."<sup>155</sup> In an allusion to the Socratic 'know thyself,' Plato encapsulates the lack of self-understanding that contributes to these author's conceit. Ignorant of their own ignorance (when compared to knowledge), they think themselves wise and propound their fallacious doctrines in treatises.

Plato's condemnation of these authors is unyielding.

So much at least I can affirm with confidence about any who have written or propose to write on these questions, pretending to a knowledge of the problems with which I am concerned, whether they claim to have learned from me or from others or to have made their discoveries themselves: it is impossible, in my opinion, that they can have learned anything at all about the subject. There is no writing of mine about these matters, nor will there ever be one. For this knowledge is not something that can be put into words like other sciences; but after long-continued intercourse between teacher and pupil, in joint pursuit of the subject, it is born in the soul and straightway [sic] nourishes itself.<sup>156</sup>

They are pretenders who know nothing of these matters as demonstrated by their pedagogical gaffes. Plato insists that a written account is not difficult, but inherently impossible, given the nature of the subject. Why?

The first, and easier, explanation involves a critique of writing in general. For the Greeks, "*Logos* is oral speech, and... the oral *Logos* always retained a status of priority over the written word."<sup>157</sup> Writing is a foreign invention, a Phoenician trick.

No god gave to mankind the art of writing as Apollo discovered verse or playing the lyre. Writing was brought by a Phoenician and, before the influx of the Oriental world during the age of Alexander, it was hardly ever thought of as possessing a sacred or magical power. The Greeks did not use 'hieroglyphics'; they did not know the sacred book of the

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<sup>155</sup>Ibid., 341B2-6.

<sup>156</sup>Ibid., 341B6-D1.

<sup>157</sup>Friedlander, 109.

Eastern religions, or rather they knew it only in Orphic circles, that is, at the limits of what is genuinely Hellenic.<sup>158</sup>

Writing was not the gift of the gods, like music or fire, but the gift of man, and thus had no rank conferred by the immortals like these others. The written word was useful mnemonic and pedagogical device, but the power of verse and thought took form only in the mouth of the skilled orator. Only then did the words come to life.<sup>159</sup> “The written language for centuries was an auxiliary, not a substitute, for the spoken word.”<sup>160</sup>

Plato expresses the subordination of the written to the spoken word mythically, although he confers a divine origin. Theuth, or Thoth, the Egyptian god, speaks to Thamus, the King of Egypt. “O King,” the god says, presenting his gift of writing, “here is something that, once learned, will make the Egyptians wiser and will improve their memory; I have discovered a potion for memory and for wisdom.”<sup>161</sup> But Thamus, as the mouthpiece of the philosopher replies,

Since you are the father of writing, your affection for it has made you describe its effects as the opposite of what they really are. In fact, it will introduce forgetfulness into the soul of those who learn it: they will not practice using their memory because they will put their trust in writing, which is external and depends on signs that belong to others, instead of trying to remember from the inside, completely on their own. You have not discovered a potion for remembering, but for reminding; you provide your students with the appearance of wisdom, not with its reality.<sup>162</sup>

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<sup>158</sup>Ibid., p.109.

<sup>159</sup>Ibid., 109.

<sup>160</sup>Ibid., 109.

<sup>161</sup>Plato, *Phaedrus*, 274E6-8.

<sup>162</sup>Ibid., 275A2-9.

By differentiating remembering from reminding, Plato makes a subtle point. If we recall his anamnetic theory of learning, in which the *psyche* ‘learns’ by remembering the forms it perceived prior to incarnation in a body, it seems that writing cannot spur this recollection. Instead, it serves as a mnemonic device temporally subordinate to anamnesis – until the initial recollection has occurred in the soul, writing is useless.

Furthermore, he suggests that dependence on writing provides the appearance, but not the substance of wisdom, “only a coating of opinions, like men whose bodies are tanned by the sun,” rather than deep knowing.<sup>163</sup> The wise, Plato argues, look inward for their wisdom, finding it in the possessions of the *psyche*. Writing, on the other hand, ‘is external and depends on signs that belong to others.’ This external contingency parallels the contingent nature of the perceptibles. Just as the lowest level of perceptibles are less *what they are* by virtue of their dependence on the external, i.e. a reflection in a mirror is less *what it is* because of the contingent nature of its *being*, so too are those dependent on the external ‘memory’ of writing. Without their books, being ‘wise’ is impossible. Plato’s opposition to this contingent knowledge reflects his metaphysics – he desires to *be* wise, not to *appear* so, and thus wisdom must be made as free from contingency as possible.

Platonic metaphysics bear another consequence for the mimetic character of writing. As an artifact of *mimesis* like painting, writing is at the third remove from the truth.<sup>164</sup> The primary essence of form is truly *what it is*. A mimetic artifact, embodying an intelligible form in matter, is at one ‘remove’ from truth, in that its essence is more contingent and less pure than the

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<sup>163</sup>Plato, *Seventh Letter*, 340D6-7.

<sup>164</sup>Plato, *Republic*, 595A1-598C4

intelligible. An interrogation of its *being* intended to reveal the truth of its essence is substantially more difficult than an interrogation of the original form, in the sense that *by nature* the form is truly *what it is*, while the artifact of *mimesis* is not. An artifact of mimetic art, like painting, is at a third 'remove' from truth, being an image of the object which is itself an image of the form made immanent. Thus, *mimesis* renders not truth, but seeming.

Writing is a mimetic art, sharing a similar nature with painting. Plato expresses this similarity through Socrates, who says

You know, Phaedrus, writing shares a strange feature with painting. The offspring of painting stand as if they were alive, but if anyone asks them anything, they remain most solemnly silent. The same is true of written words. You'd think they were speaking as if they had some understanding, but if you question anything that has been said because you wanted to learn more, it continues to signify just that very same thing forever. When it has once been written down, every discourse roams about everywhere, reaching indiscriminately those with understanding no less than those who have no business with it, and it doesn't know to whom it should speak and to whom it should not. And when it is faulted and attacked unfairly, it always needs its father's support; alone, it can neither defend itself nor come to its own support.<sup>165</sup>

Words set to paper become static. If the reader fails to understand and attempts to interrogate their meaning, they remain voiceless, requiring the assistance of their writer to defend them. Writing, like painting, presents a meaningful portrait of an idea, but like the painting, lacks the truth of the original thought. An added complication is that the words themselves, rather than the thoughts they try to express, can become the object of scrutiny.

Symbols function as vehicles of experiential truth. When a symbol is confused with the content that it attempts to communicate, and the symbol, rather than its experiential origin, subjected to verification, not only will the symbol and its articulation be destroyed, but also the

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<sup>165</sup>Plato, *Phaedrus*, 275D4-E6.

truth that the symbol represents. A symbol is ‘adequate’ when it conveys its intended content accurately, but strictly speaking, a symbol can never be ‘true’ or ‘false.’ Juridical assessments are reserved for the experience they convey, determined through the dialectic comparison of the truth apprehended in being illuminated by the *Agathon* and the truth expressed by the symbol. When these are in harmony, and the symbol is ‘adequate’ and its content true.

When, however, the process of verification focuses on the symbol and not its content, and substance subsumed by seeming, the truth or falsity of the experience behind its articulation is rendered insignificant. In these instances, the purpose of the symbol is forgotten and its meaning obscured. As Plato cautions, ‘when it is faulted and attacked unfairly, it always needs its father’s support; alone, it can neither defend itself nor come to its own support.’ Only the symbol’s author, whose experience is encapsulated in it, can defend the substance the symbol represents. Symbols themselves are merely a calcification of a living, breathing truth in the *psyche*.

Finite beings, confronted with an experience of the infinite, attempting to communicate the ineffable to a finite audience, are at a loss to create new symbols or adapt existing ones to their purpose. When asked to give an account of first principles, Plato insists “anyone who wishes to refute has the advantage, and can make the profunder of a doctrine, whether in writing or in speaking or in answering questions, seem to most of his listeners completely ignorant of the matter on which he is trying to speak or write.”<sup>166</sup> For “it is not the mind of the speaker or writer which is being refuted,” but the symbols through which he expresses his truth.<sup>167</sup> Two criticisms of communications emerge – the first of writing as inferior to speech but the second of symbolic

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<sup>166</sup>Plato, *Seventh Letter*, 343D1-6.

<sup>167</sup>*Ibid.*, 343D7-8.

communication in general. These ‘highest truths,’ Plato explains, can be grasped only within the erotic *metaxy* of teacher and pupil, and only through the dialectic conversation they share. Given enough time, enough effort, enough natural predilection on behalf of the student, the spark of knowledge may be kindled within his soul, bursting into self-sustaining flame.

“There is a true doctrine (*logos alethea*),” he writes, “that confutes anyone who has presumed to write anything whatever on such subjects, a doctrine that I have often before expounded, but it seems that it must now be said again.”<sup>168</sup> “Every existing object (*estin ton onton*) has three things which are necessary means by which knowledge (*episteme*) of that object is acquired; and the knowledge (*episteme*) itself is a fourth thing; and as a fifth one must postulate the object itself which is cognizable and true (*gnoston te kai alethea estin*).”<sup>169</sup>

From the preparatory analysis of his metaphysics, the phrase ‘*estin ton onton*’ conveys his desired meaning – the only *things that are* (in the predicative sense, of course) are the transcendent forms. Evidence that Plato intends this connection can be found in his specific description of the *thing that is* as ‘cognizable and true.’ Only the forms, by virtue of their being *what they are*, are essentially knowable. Similarly, only the forms are *only what they are*, and thereby ‘true’ in the sense of transcendent immutability.

Three inter-related components comprise knowledge (*episteme*) of the forms, and Plato explains that this knowledge, while a product of these components, is separate from them.

“First of these comes the name (*onama*); secondly the definition (*logos*); thirdly the image (*eidolon*); fourthly the knowledge (*episteme*). If you wish, then, to understand what I am now saying, take a single example and learn from it what applies to all. There

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<sup>168</sup>Ibid., 342A2-5.

<sup>169</sup>Plato, *Seventh Letter*, (Loeb Trans.) 342A7-B1.

is an object called a circle, which has for its *name* the word we have just mentioned; and, secondly, it has a *definition*, composed of names and verbs; for ‘that which is everywhere equidistant from the extremities to the centre’ will be the definition of that object which has for its name ‘round’ and ‘spherical’ and ‘circle.’ And in the third place there is that object which is in course of being portrayed and obliterated, or of being shaped with a lathe, and falling into decay; but none of these affections is suffered by the circle itself, whereto all those others are related inasmuch as it is distinct therefrom.<sup>170</sup>

For the *thing that is* ‘circle,’ there is a name, just mentioned. As the foundation of the epistemological ascent, the name clarifies the ‘object’ for the *psyche*, separating the specific form in question from others. By clarifying, naming delineates, drawing the *thing that is* in question into sharp relief from a cluttered background.

Nevertheless, the name is at the farthest remove from the *thing that is* because of the limit of its capacity to clarify. Naming requires a referent. Without a *something* known to the audience, a name is meaningless. For instance, if I say ‘Socrates purchased an X,’ my audience has no idea what he purchased. Naming predicates – in the simplest terms is says ‘this *something* is an X.’ But to do so, naming requires a referential *something*, and this limitation is further compounded by the incredible variety of names extant for any given *something*. As Plato cautions, “...none of the objects, we affirm, has any fixed name, nor is there anything to prevent forms which are now called ‘round’ from being called ‘straight,’ and the ‘straight’ ‘round.’”<sup>171</sup> Paralleling the lowest segment of the Divided Line and play of shadows on the interior wall in the Allegory of the Cave, naming is the most contingent and least constant epistemological rung

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<sup>170</sup>Ibid., 342B1-C4.

<sup>171</sup>Ibid., 343A10-B4.

in the ascent to knowledge and the *thing that is*. Like the image in a mirror or the shadow on a wall, a name's meaning depends for its existence on an experiential datum.

As we ascend the *Seventh Letter's* epistemological ladder, the rungs increase in clarity and self-sufficiency. The second tier, the *logos*, exemplifies this when compared to the *onoma*. Composed of 'names' and 'verbs,' a definition carries the *psyche* much closer to its goal of knowledge. *Logoi* paint pictures in words, describing the principal features of the *thing that is*. In this way, defining creates its own referent. If I were to say 'Socrates purchased *something* with four legs, constructed of sturdy material, designed to support his weight while seated,' my audience, although lacking or disagreeing about the name of this *something*, has a good idea what it is. Definitions clarify the essential attributes of the *thing that is* towards which they direct the *psyche*, substantially increasing the coherence of the *psyche's* picture of the form.

*Logoi*, however, have as their constituent parts a series of logically connected 'names,' and thus *onoma* are necessarily prior to *logoi*. While having an increased capacity for clarity, definitions are grounded in naming, and thus share the latter's limitations. "...Inasmuch as [definitions are] compounded of names and verbs, [they are] in no case fixed with sufficient firmness."<sup>172</sup> Indeed, this reflects their ontological nature as perceptibles.

The third epistemological tier, that of the *eidolon*, shares this transience as well. *Eidolon* reflect *that which is* 'in the course of being portrayed and obliterated.' That is, images embody the forms as perceptible objects, but by virtue of their immanence, necessarily betray the transcendent perfection of the intelligibles, 'obliterating' them as they 'portray' them. All perceptibles, as immanent matter, decay and suffer affection from without – only intelligibles are

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<sup>172</sup>Ibid., 343B4-6.

eternal and immutable. Thus, the *eidolon* are distinct from *that which is*. Of the *eidolon* of ‘circle,’ Plato writes, “Every one of the circles which are drawn in geometric exercises or are turned by the lathe is full of what is opposite to the fifth, since it is in contact with the straight everywhere; whereas the circle itself, as we affirm, contains within itself no share greater or less of the opposite nature.”<sup>173</sup>

In the preparatory analysis, we discovered that Plato uses this term in the Allegory of the Cave to describe the ‘phantoms’ of the *things that are* reflected in water.<sup>174</sup> The neophyte philosopher, emerging from the darkness of the interior, cannot look upon the brilliance of the *true* and the *real*. Until his eyes adjust, he substitutes their dimmed reflections, their *eidolon*, paralleling segment BC of the Divided Line. If we recall the discussion the nature and function of the dianoetic object, Plato’s use of this word in the *Seventh Letter* becomes more clear. The *eidolon* of ‘circle’ is not transcendent, but it does symbolically represent *that which is*, just as did the *logos* and the *onama*. In this capacity, all three epistemological rungs function symbolically as dianoetic objects— perceptible objects portraying transcendent forms. They share a dianoetic kinship with one another, and in combination, are productive of *episteme*. “It is the methodological study of all these stages,” writes Plato, “passing in turn from one to another, up and down, which with difficulty implants knowledge, when the man himself, like his object, is of a fine nature.”<sup>175</sup>

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<sup>173</sup>Ibid., 343A5-9.

<sup>174</sup>Plato, *Republic*, 516a4.

<sup>175</sup>Plato, *Seventh Letter*, 343E1-3.

“Fourth comes knowledge (*episteme*) and intelligence (*nous*) and true opinion (*Alethea te doxa*) regarding these objects (*peri taut’ estin*); and these we must assume to form a single whole, which does not exist in vocal utterance or in bodily form but in souls.”<sup>176</sup> *Episteme* does not inhere in names, definition, or images, and this and only this necessitates its ineffability. Knowledge, for Plato, can only take form and inhere in the soul.

Thus, Plato has Socrates insist

...only what is said for the sake of understanding and learning, what is truly written in the soul concerning what is just, noble, and good can be clear, perfect, and worth serious attention: Such discourses should be called [the philosopher’s] own legitimate children, first the discourses he may have discovered already within himself and then its sons and brothers who may have grown naturally in other souls insofar as these are worthy; to the rest, he turns his back.<sup>177</sup>

## **X. Conclusion**

Plato bore his children in a *polis* ripe with crisis. Under the influence of relativism, drunk with the success of the Sophists, staggering on the crumbling Homeric foundations that had grounded politics and society for four-hundred years, Athens desperately needed a savior. Socrates had attempted a cure by questioning the political and social elite and revealing their ignorance, but despite his philosophical fame, he was unable to elicit a tenable alternative.

Plato was thrust into this *milieu* as a promising young poet and aristocrat. Due to the influence of his mentor, however, he discerns the philosophical and ethical poverty of the Thirty Tyrants, and elects not to join their number. Instead, he turns his considerable literary talent to

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<sup>176</sup>Ibid., 343C4-9.

<sup>177</sup>Plato, *Phaedrus*, 278A3-B2.

the task of rescuing his *polis* by doing what Socrates did not – evoking an experience of reality capable of grounding a politics and ethics of order.

By analyzing the reality made apparent by his own ontological ascent, Plato provides his audience the tools not only to resist the corruption of Sophistic relativism, but also to critique the extant political and social order. As modern civilization has not outgrown relativism, but rather embraced it, and as we continue to suffer the politics and ethics of disorder, Plato's philosophy has not outlived its usefulness.

The philosopher's experience of the transcendent, illuminated by the *Agathon/Kalon*, provides him the authority to question society and resist its corruption. Nevertheless, as Plato cautions, this ascent requires an affinity of soul for the Good and the Beautiful, as well as the patient tutelage of a philosophical mentor. Without the heightened sensitivity of the *philokalon*, an erotic ascent is impossible, for only within the erotic *metaxy* of lover and beloved can the erotic *metaxy* philosopher and *Agathon* be occupied.

Through the mediation of the teacher, the student's *aesthetic eros* is gradually elevated to the conscious *eros* for the *Agathon/Kalon*. It is this basis in experience, as well as the inherent limitation of dianoetic symbolism, that prevent the writing or teaching of philosophy axiomatically. Only the erotic ascent can engender the birth of knowledge in the *psyche*. Thus, while it may be impossible to awaken the *eros* for the *Agathon* in the masses, it may be possible to awaken the *psyche* of the political elite, or to elect one whose *psyche* is so disposed to guide and rule.

The *Seventh Letter* grounds Plato's philosophy in historical reality. It reinforces the pedagogical position necessitated by his metaphysics, and perhaps most importantly, it elaborates

the essential limitations of the written and spoken word. Indeed, the importance of the *Seventh Letter* for Plato's corpus cannot be doubted – without his dialogues, the *Letter* lacks philosophical support, but without the *Letter*, his dialogues lose their pragmatic ground.

The significance of this study for political science can be summarized as follows. First, it informs the tension between the desire for mass political representation and arguments for elitist, aristocratic government. While the attractiveness of representative institutions grounded in individual human beings as articulable units is undeniable, Plato questions its practicability. If the masses are more akin to *amathes* than *daimonios aner*, regimes dependent entirely upon the will of the people must come to ruin. One solution is an appeal to higher law grounded in an experience of transcendent truth, providing bounds within which the general will may operate.

Second, this paper reinforces the necessity that politics and ethics be grounded in reality. Dislocated from the real, they quickly degenerate into the political and ethical fantasy of the 'second reality,' seen most vividly in the disparity between the truth and the facade of Soviet Communism. Irrespective of what the political elite may wish to be true, the transcendent *logos is*, and for thought and action to achieve their Doric harmony, the underlying *phusis* of existence must be ascertained and used as an experiential referent.

Third, and finally, the danger of collapsing the existential horizons of society to its own political horizons, that is, of narrowing the bounds of existential reality to the political, is clarified in this analysis. Convinced of the flexibility of being, Sophists like Protagoras taught aspiring Athenian orators that what the *demos* could be convinced was true *was* in fact true. Consequently, persuasion became power, opinion became truth, and existential reality contracted to the bounds of the *polis*, engendering chaos and obscuring the experiential ground of order.

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## VITA

Although born in Hampton, Virginia, John Baltes has spent the majority of his life in Louisiana. After receiving his Bachelor of Arts in 1994 from Louisiana State University, he was employed as a State Trooper by the Department of Public Safety. In 1998, he returned to school and is currently at work on doctoral studies. His interests in political theory include both the Greek philosophers of antiquity and the German thinkers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.