

PLATO'S THEORY OF KNOWLEDGE

My previous reply suggests that modern science is supportive for Platonism, and I hope the reason why will appear by the time I finish this. "Knowing things by means of images" has two meanings, by the way: a harmless one, that we use images as a crutch to keep our attention on abstract processes, and a deluded one, that knowledge is actually formed out of images drawn from sensation.

Epistemology is the heart of Plato's philosophy. Plato lived in an articulate society where plausible opinions were being taken for knowledge all the time. How could he contradict sophists unless he could say what knowledge really is? One needs sound scholarship here. From your footnotes, it looks as though you are still reading Findlay, a "Platonist" who blindly believed everything said by Aristotle, and never thought that Aristotle's words could just as well be a front for his own unwritten doctrines, which are probably pantheistic.

Plato was led to the Theory of Forms by hard realities: if there was such a thing as knowledge, under what conditions could it be possible? He discovered four basic criteria, namely, *universality* (or else no use for science), *immutability*, *exactitude*, and *necessity*. However, everything in the sense world and its images is just the opposite, i.e. *individual*, *ever-changing*, *inexact*, and *contingent*. The disjunction between the sense world and the intelligible is complete, and from

thence comes Plato's two-world conception, which is no mere flight of fancy, therefore. Thus knowledge cannot be based on images of the natural world, no matter how much it may be about them; there is no truth where all is in flux.

Modern philosophers who were not Platonists have found powerful reasons supporting this view of nature, as I explained in Ch.2 of *Self and Spirit*. One of the best-argued positions in modern thought is that we do not know the external world in itself, because what we know is our subjective experience of it. On that level, we can never escape from our individual representations. That would rule out all knowledge other than that of our own subjectivity, but for the fact that the soul has an intellectual faculty which is capable of "cognitive transcendence to absolute objectivity" (Colin McGinn). There, we escape relativities and engage with intelligible objects at first hand, and we find ourselves close to the source of everything in the world.

Our complete self transcends its ego precisely by having this extra-phenomenal reach, going beyond all cultural artefacts, and given this condition, transcendence of sensory reality by our intellect and its intelligible objects, knowledge will be possible. Plato thought that nothing less than this "immanent transcendence" in us, as you might call it, could suffice for there to be such a thing as known truth, albeit at the price of doing some violence to our common sense idea of concrete reality.

That price was too high for Aristotle, of course, but

his denial of transcendence to the Forms was never consistent, as F.M.Cornford points out, and had he been consistent, his system would have been simply one of materialism. That is more or less what the Catholic Church thought it was, until Aquinas combined it with Christian doctrines, even though it could not afford them any reality on its own principles. It should have been perfectly clear to all concerned that there is nothing Christian about the idea that the Forms are only immanent.

This is not wholly a matter of theory. In *The Essentials of Mysticism*, Evelyn Underhill says that mystics who experience a transition from the natural world to God experience the Platonic Forms in an intermediate state between them, which is exactly what should be expected if Plato is right.

However, a lot of psychology is involved here. Plato's independent Forms and the representational or semi-subjective nature of the sense-world are both widely resisted, even where no effective argument is brought against them. One thing they have in common is that they both require one to take a detached attitude to sense-experience instead of a closely-engaged one, and that could raise problems for those who think in terms of a struggle for physical survival amidst unseen dangers. Besides, the Forms would be a kind of spiritual "free zone" or wild frontier, being invisible, universal, and yet objective. They are outside anything that can be controlled or acted on by society, and this causes a problem for many people, even among the most devout us,

who cannot feel secure in their faith unless they can believe it completely encloses them, as with the pearl in the oyster.

The idea that we can have private access to the essences of things clearly reduces our dependence on the external world, but makes some people think that that must reduce our dependence on, or involvement in, our religion as well, if their idea of religion is formalistic. This is why they prefer to reject our extra-individual possibilities, except at second-hand, in the case of a few great mystics. The price of this is to equate one's self with one's ego, which is at the basis of the thinking of materialists and unbelievers, so creating some very strange bedfellows. The fact that this is done in a religious setting limits its potential ill-effects, but the essential falsehood remains. Materially speaking, persons are thereby reduced to objects, no matter how much care for personality is professed.

Besides opening up a realm where the norms of society and of religious practice have no application, Platonism is also resisted because it reverses the common sense relations of ideas and things, so excluding common sense materialism, both for those with and without religious beliefs. Something is at stake for the status of philosophy itself here, since the objective and independent reality of the Forms would mean that philosophy was about true realities, whereas otherwise, it might only be about terms and definitions. The related idea that what we call abstractions are *powerful* is

resisted even in the light of the fact that operations with abstractions can result in a nuclear bomb.

The better to get rid of Platonism, the Scholastics taught that there was nothing in the intellect except what was first in the senses, and accordingly Aquinas denied the existence of innate ideas, on the grounds that someone born blind has no idea of colour. That was believed to be an argument, although you can only say a blind person has no idea of colour if it is true that we have no ideas except for what we get from the senses. But one is supposed to be *proving* that, not assuming it. Similarly, St. Bonaventure denied innate ideas, and then reintroduced them under another name. It looks as though no one ever tried to ask by which sense we perceive that all we know is from the senses, and that indicates the popularity of empiricism. In reality the contents of sensation convey nothing to us until we connect them with our *innate ideas*.

Similarly, it was not asked which sense shows us that we have an intellect or a soul, and what do our senses tell us about the existence of God? Actually, nothing; if reality was sense-objects, there could not be a God. Theology depends entirely on the higher abstractions and reason. Besides, we know we cannot hear vision, and we cannot see hearing, but sight and hearing do not give us those conclusions, either.

The late-Medieval doctors saw nothing much in Platonism (or "Ultra Realism") beyond matters of personal preference, which they were thus free to sideline. That it was the expression of *an eternal cosmic standard* was

not even considered, so they thought it could be quietly buried. Then, after two or three centuries of official disuse, Platonism exploded all over Europe, i.e. the Renaissance happened, but then it combined with the materialist theory of the Ockhamists, resulting in modern science. Although science today is not directed to spiritual realities, it is unmistakably ruled by the Platonic principles of knowledge, i.e. universality, immutability, exactitude, and necessity. A deviant or materialized Platonism, you might say.

In philosophy and theology, there is no reason to think that attempts to dig a grave for the Platonic idea of knowledge and reality will be given up in any foreseeable future, because such attempts are determined by organic and instinctive needs, including the desire for power over others. Besides that, for those who wield power, the true nature of knowledge is not an issue, because they are only interested in information, its most utilitarian form. Sense perception is also favoured as the source of knowledge because it is well suited to programmes of socialization, and because it covers over the difference between the intelligent and the unintelligent.

***Plato and Discourse.*** Having discussed some of the ideas which Plato inherited from Pythagoras, there is one development of the idea of Logos which deserves separate consideration, and that is the function of discourse, the formation of true statements. Plato's development of the theory of Forms was to take them into

the sphere of thought and speech. In the *Sophist*, Plato shows that to make a statement of any kind is to weave Forms together, and that if it is to be a true statement, the Forms in question must be ones which really do combine in the manner indicated by one's words. The range and power of this conception can be seen from the fact that it must govern anything one can say, from statements about the hypostatic union between human and Divine natures to statements like "It's a nice day today!" In this way, Plato made philosophy into a science for the study of Forms or universals in a way which has analogies with chemistry, because the ways in which it studies which elements will or will not combine, and under what conditions.

In the same dialogue, it is maintained that every statement involves the weaving-together of at least two Forms, once the possibilities that no Forms combine and that all Forms combine have been disposed of. Even in cases such as a simple statement about an individual, like "Socrates argues," the attributed Form is implicitly interactive with other Forms which must relate to it, and with those which it excludes. Thus the making of a true statement is understood in terms of combinations of invariants, no matter whether one is speaking of unchanging realities, or whether of things that are clearly in a state of change. This is because truth requires invariance, and where this is applied to changing subjects, the time-scale for its relevance must contract in proportion to the rate of change. Nevertheless, if the statement is true, it is so to speak eternally true for the segment of the change to which it is applied. Since all mental activities are ultimately discourse, the Platonic theory of knowledge is clearly a difficult one to replace.

Here, as elsewhere, Platonism professes to make us conscious of processes which belong to our essence, and which have existed

long before the name of philosophy was heard of. One thing this requires is that the Forms be present in minds as well as in the outside world where they are materially instantiated. In minds they are present in a way which is individualized, but in a much freer state than that of instantiation, so that this state is intermediate by nature between the Forms in their purely objective subsistence and their captive and imperfectly-achieved position in the outside world. Our individual knowledge of them is very far from exhausting their content, even though it is perfectly exact within its limits, when we have to disengage essences from the things in which we can recognize them.

This three-fold disposition of the Forms implies that true empirical knowledge involves a triadic relation in which our individual possession of the Forms has the mediating function between the Forms in their absolute state and their instantiated state in the material world. Forms are in any case combined in innumerable ways in the outside world, and these combinations have their parallels in thought. Reading the Forms in material things is thus not very different from what we do when we read thoughts expressed in writing. The point of this kind of theory of knowledge in relation to practical knowledge appears wherever there is a question of objective intelligible realities, as opposed to thoughts which happen to occupy people's minds. This has been an issue in the Modernist controversies in the Catholic Church, for example, and it appears that without a Platonic theory of knowledge, theological realities cannot be disengaged from the social, cultural and historical artifacts among which they exist. Without it, there fore, relativism and Modernism would be almost impossible to resist.

(Ltr. To S.C. 1.8.2011)



