

**IN PRAISE  
OF  
PHILOSOPHICAL  
IGNORANCE**

**D. R. Khashaba**

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# **IN PRAISE OF PHILOSOPHICAL IGNORANCE**

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**“This book will perhaps only be understood  
by those who have themselves already thought  
the thoughts which are expressed in it ...”**

**(Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, Preface, tr. Ogden)**

**2018**

**To**

**Dr. Geoffrey Klempner**

**You gave me nearly all the readership I have had  
till now**

**This is to say Thank You**

## **NOTE**

**Early in August 2018, pressed by multiple untoward circumstances, I uploaded a seriously defective version of *Back to Socrates: in praise of philosophical ignorance*.**

**This was to be a corrected version of that book, with typos and other faults expunged and with the subtitle adopted for title, but otherwise unchanged. That was my original intention; gradually however it became a thorough revision with considerable additions.**

**D. R. Khashaba**

**September 2018**

## **PREFACE**

**Socrates was the first philosopher to understand the true nature and boundaries of philosophy propr. Others, confusing and mixing philosophy with cosmology and physics or mathematics, blurred the pure and clear Socratic understanding encapsulated in the Principle of Philosophical Ignorance'. That involved philosophical thinking in damaging error, throwing philosophy into a maze from which she has not to this day found her way out. This is the first fundamental tenet of this book.**

**Even Plato apparently found it difficult to be confined to the austere Socratic diet; and though Plato won for philosophers a widening of the scope of legitimate philosophizing, yet that was a gain fraught with grave danger that next to none have succeeded to evade. But Plato is paradox incarnate. Not only is it true that it is only in the works of Plato that we can trace the elements of a pure Socratic philosophy but we also find that in wriggling**

**out of the Socratic constraint Plato worked something that is nothing short of a miracle: a genuine development of philosophy on the metaphysical plane without infringing the Principle of Philosophical Ignorance. (Chapter Seven below.) This is the second fundamental tenet of this book.**

**I have to apologize for the above cryptic paragraph; I only hope it has not put you off, dear Reader. I could only make it less cryptic at the cost of making it stale. For it takes the whole of this (fortunately short) book to decipher the crypt.**

**The failure of philosophers (beginning with Aristotle) to absorb the Socratic-Platonic insight into the true nature and proper limits of philosophy has cost us dearly. Foolishly vying with science or mathematics the penury of philosophy was scandalously exposed. To rescue philosophy and pull her out of the mire into which she has fallen we have to go back to Socrates.**

**By accepting and respecting the Socratic-Platonic boundaries set for her, philosophy instead of sneaking to stand shame-facedly among the sciences, only to be exposed as an impostor, would be gracefully and with dignity seated among the ancient sages of India and China**

**who intimated their spiritual insights in myth and parable and paradox.**

**\*\*\***

**Plato has left us some thirty dramatic pieces which, in my opinion, cover the alpha and the omega of philosophy properly understood. In those thirty-odd dramatic works the philosophy of Socrates and its Platonic development are commingled, kneaded into an integral whole, so that no one can confidently and assuredly draw a dividing line to separate what we owe to Socrates from what we owe to Plato. For the purposes of this book I have arbitrarily drawn the line. For the implied division I do not argue and will not fight; the ensuing whole however sums up an original, radically unorthodox, reading of Plato that I have been advocating throughout two decades in various books and other writings and which, I earnestly believe, is badly needed to heal the ailments of philosophy that continue to expose her to disdain and ridicule.**

**\*\*\***

**A necessary word of caution: This book is not a work of scholarly learning. Like all of my writings this is a philosophical essay. I make no pretence of learning and have never sought to mimic a scholarly dissertation. I have**

**little interest in ‘secondary literature’ and only refer to such works when it is utterly unavoidable (which was not the case at any point in this book).**

**Dear Reader, if on reading these lines you decide you have no use for this book, that’s your unquestionable prerogative and I wish you good reading elsewhere.**

**D. R. Khashaba  
Independent philosopher  
September 2018**

**PS: “Back to Socrates” was the domain name for a website I had for several years beginning, if I remember correctly, in the year 2000. For this revised version I chose as title the subtitle of the earlier version.**

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**PART ONE**  
**SOCRATES**

## **PART ONE**

### **SOCRATES**

#### **Chapter One**

##### **The Sum of All Wisdom**

**For Socrates all wisdom is summed up in the Delphic injunction: *gnôthi sauton*, know yourself. In the *Phaedrus* mention having been made of the legend of Oreithyia being carried off by Boreas, his young companion asks Socrates if he believes such tales. Socrates says it would be no wonder if he disbelieved the tale and sought a rational explanation for it; but then he would have to seek similar explanations for all the popular tales and myths; then he says,**

**“But I have no time for such things; and the reason, my friend, is this. I am still unable, as the Delphic**

**inscription orders, to know myself; and it really seems to me ridiculous to look into other things before I have understood that. This is why I do not concern myself with them. I accept what is generally believed, and, as I was just saying, I look not into them but into my own self: Am I a beast more complicated and savage than Typhon or am I a tamer, simpler animal with a share in a divine and gentle nature?” (229c-230a, tr. A. Nehamas and P. Woodruff).**

**Plato sums up Socrates’ stance in these few lines. Socrates’ exclusive concern with probing his soul (mind) and helping others care for their souls followed consistently from his understanding of the special nature of a human being. For human beings, in addition to the needs and drives they have in common with other members of the animal kingdom, are further characterized by being governed in their action – for good or for ill – by ideas born in the human mind, having neither source nor abode other than the human mind. The best and noblest deeds of human beings everywhere and at all times are motivated by ideals, aims, and purposes engendered in and by the human mind; but so also, alas!, are the vilest deeds and atrocities.**

**All intentional ills perpetrated by humans, from disregard of the feelings and needs of others to horrendous acts of terrorism, are rooted in false values, illusions, and delusions. Socrates made it his life-mission to help people look into their minds to clear up confusions and disentangle entangled values, aims, and purposes. When in the early dialogues of Plato we find Socrates questioning Euthyphro about the meaning of piety, or leading the lad Charmides to examine the idea of temperance, his aim is just to help the one or the other to explore their minds, bring out into the light their hidden values and presuppositions. Those early dialogues never, not even once, end in reaching a definition; yet we, blindly following Aristotle, say they aim at reaching definitions. They regularly lead to the identification of the ‘virtue’ examined with ‘knowledge’ (*epistêmê*), but when we go on to ask ‘what knowledge?’, ‘knowledge of what?’, we find no satisfying answer. The dialogue ends in *aporia* (perplexity) and that is indeed the aim and purpose of the Socratic discourse, for that pregnant perplexity, when it meets with a receptive nature, stirs it up, prompting it to self-examination which, hopefully, leads to the habit of constantly looking inwards, constantly tending one’s soul and tending virtue as Socrates admonished.**

**At his trial Socrates makes all of this unmistakably clear. Addressing his judges he says that if they offer to release him on condition that he should stop philosophizing he would say to them:**

**“Men of Athens, I thank you and am grateful to you, but will obey God rather than you, and as long as I breathe and am able, I will not cease from philosophizing and admonishing you and urging every one of you I ever happen to meet, saying as I am used to saying, ‘O worthy man, ... are you not ashamed of exerting yourself to obtain as much as possible of money and reputation and honour, while you neither care for nor give thought to wisdom and truth and how to become as excellent as possible in your soul?’ And if any of you contest this and say that he does care, I do not straightaway let him go, but question him and examine him and test him, and if he appears to me not to possess virtue yet says he does, I reprove him for caring least about what is of most worth, and caring most about the least worthy of things. I do this with whomever I chance upon, young or old, citizen or foreigner ... This is what God has set me to do, and I believe that no greater good**

**has befallen you in the city than this service of mine in obedience to God. I have no business other than going around, exhorting you, both young and old, to care for neither body nor material goods before, or so much as, caring for being as excellent as possible in the soul.”**

***(Apology, 29d-30a.)***

**The key principle in Socrates’ moral philosophy is that the only thing that is absolutely good, good without any qualification, is a healthy soul. To my mind, Kant’s saying that the only thing that is simply and absolutely good is a good will differs from Socrates’ principle only in words. Hence, to care for one’s soul, doing what makes her flourish and shunning what makes her wither, is the sum of wisdom and is “all ye know on Earth and all ye need to know” — Socrates would gladly endorse Keats’ words , for what is more beautiful than a beautiful Soul?**

**A wholesome soul is not only the most precious thing in us but, as we shall further on see, is the only immediate, self-evident, and utterly indubitable reality we know or can ever know. Other than that we know nothing and can know nothing: all other so-called knowledge is embroiled in falsehood. Socrates does not say this explicitly but I find**

**it implied in Socrates' insistence that only he who clearly sees that he knows nothing enjoys the only wisdom possible to human beings. This I call the Socratic Principle of Philosophical Ignorance and we shall find this to be the core and heart of all true philosophy.**

## **PART ONE**

### **SOCRATES**

#### **Chapter Two**

##### **The Intelligible Realm**

**[Dear Reader, in this chapter I have somehow been led to take too much space and time in discussing preliminaries. You may, if you wish, start reading at # 6.]**

### **1**

**At the outset let me prepare the Reader for two shocks that this chapter and the next are likely to give her or him and let me beg them, rather than laughing bemusedly at what they will read, to make a determined effort to give due consideration to views radically opposed to the prevailing attitude of empirical science. The first shock may be roused by the affirmation that the intelligible ideas**

are, in the strictest sense of the word, creations of the human mind. This is the gist of the present chapter. Anthropologists, psychologists, philologists will try to trace the origin and development of language. Their worthy efforts have their undeniable value, but they will never breach the mystery of mind or language. Language, thought, ideas come with the mind, one total mystery. This is not a dogmatic assertion but follows consistently from an intrinsically coherent philosophical outlook that will, I hope, be made clear as we go along. The second shock may come from the assertion that despite the astounding achievements of modern science, theoretical and practical, Plato's belittlement of empirical knowledge (mainly in the *Phaedo* and the *Republic*) stands and, rather than needing alteration or revision, requires confirmation and emphasis. This claim will be advanced in the next chapter.

## 2

There is a big divide, an impassable chasm in the *Phaedo* between the parts of the dialogue arguing for immortality and Socrates' 'autobiographical' account (95e-102a), and, if we take the 'autobiography seriously, and I am convinced that we have to take it most seriously, reversing the neglectful attitude of the learned host, then we need

**some explanation for the rest. However I will not go into that at this point but I expect to touch on the problem at various parts of Part Two devoted to Plato. (In Part Two of this book, devoted to Plato, we will find the *Phaedo* fulfilling yet another weighty role.)**

### **3**

**The ‘autobiographical’ passage in the *Phaedo* presents two distinct insights of utmost philosophical importance (the provenance of the two ‘shocks’ alluded to in the opening paragraph), both of which, as far as I know, have been inexplicably ignored by scholars and philosophers. The two insights interlock in the *Phaedo* passage so that it is not easy to divide the text into two parts dealing with the one insight and the other in succession. The first is the far-reaching Socratic insight into the radically distinct and different nature of physical (scientific, objective) investigation of objects on the one hand and on the other hand the philosophical examination of ideas. To my knowledge the only modern philosopher who re-discovered this insight (apparently independently) was Immanuel Kant. But Kant so smothered this vital insight under the daunting architectonic of his transcendental system that no one could pick up the simple truth out of the heaps of junk,**

**so that we still have philosophers doing bad science and scientists doing bad metaphysics and when no one finds satisfaction in the outcome no one knows where the fault is. I take this up in the following chapter. In this chapter I deal with the other profound Socratic insight of the intelligible idea as the ‘cause’ not of the being of a thing but of the thing being what it is for us. This was the origin of Plato’s Forms. And again the one modern philosopher who tried (consciously or unconsciously) partially to revive this insight was Kant, in his doctrine of the Concepts of the Understanding. And again, scholars and philosophers diligently trying to unravel the convolutions of Kant’s transcendental structures completely overlooked the vital insight, just as they had overlooked the Socratic insight.. Why did Kant do this to himself? Perhaps finding the genuine insight so simple he could not believe it could be that simple and kept adding layer upon layer of analyses and deductions to lend the simple the respectability of not being simple!**

#### **4**

**Unfortunately the examples of problems for which Plato makes Socrates seek answers and the examples of what he makes Socrates hope to find in the book of Anaxagoras**

**obscure the Socratic insight and the conclusions Socrates reaches. I said somewhere that understandably Plato would dramatize Socrates' account; unfortunately he overdid it, which makes it no easy task to pick up the genuine Socratic views. Still I don't think this explains or excuses the general failure of scholars and philosophers to grasp the meaning and the importance of this somewhat enigmatic text.**

## **5**

**The two crucial insights are given in a few lines each which are easily stamped into oblivion by the peripheral material. (1) The separation of investigation into nature and investigation into ideas (a) is hinted at in 96c-d (cause of growth) and then (b) developed at 98b-99a (cause of staying in prison). (2) Ideas as *aitiai*. (a) The above-noted 96c-d (growth) essentially belongs here. Its development is dispersed over 100b-101a but Plato goes on to mix it with his method of hypothesis and puts it in the service of the 'final proof' of immortality. (See "Plato's Greatest Hoax".)**

## **6**

**Socrates was primarily concerned with moral values and ideals. But the purely intelligible nature of these ideas and ideals of itself posits the distinction between the intelligible**

and the perceptible. When in the *Phaedo* we read of two kinds (*duo eidê*) – intelligible and perceptible (79a) – into which all things are divided, there is no point in asking whether this comes from Socrates or from Plato. In the *Phaedo* these two *eidê* constitute two opposed worlds. Philosophy is solely concerned with the intelligible:

“When the soul (mind) all by itself reflects, it moves into that which is pure, always is, deathless, and constant, and being of a like nature to that, remains with that always, whenever it is possible for it to be by itself, and then it rests from wandering, and in the company of that, is constant, being in communion with such; and it is this state that is called *phronêsis*” (79d).

Despite the somewhat mystical tone (at any rate when read in Plato’s winged words) this is a strict delineation of the scope of philosophical thinking. Philosophy is the exploration of intelligible ideas within the mind by the mind.

In contrast to this, “when the mind (*psuchê*) makes use of the body in considering anything, it is dragged by the body into the changeable and is then led into error and is confused and dizzied and is drunken” (79c). Plato further explains that by ‘the mind making use of the body’ he

**means: when the mind examines perceptible things. This, make no mistake, includes the most advanced and most sophisticated empirical knowledge. Scientists themselves are beginning to see that their earlier dreams of absolute certainty and absolute accuracy were delusive dreams. But I am anticipating what has its place in following chapters.**

## **7**

**In a most important section of the *Phaedo* Plato makes Socrates give an ‘autobiographical’ account of his philosophical journey. (See note at end of Chapter Three and in Chapter Six.) At one point in the discussion both of Socrates’ young interlocutors had raised objections to the arguments for immortality proposed thus far. After dealing with Simias’s problem and recapitulating that of Cebes, Socrates pauses for a while, thinking it over, then says to Cebes: It is no trifle that you have stirred up. “The whole question of the cause of generation and corruption will have to be examined.” Despite all of these red lights and emergency sirens, Platonic scholars have not found in the subsequent passage (95e-102a) much deserving special attention. Unfortunately Plato, for some hidden reason, has mixed and mingled with the essential substance much that is irrelevant and confusing. In this and the following**

**chapters I will comment on parts of this crucial and pregnant text.**

## **8**

**After saying that the problem posed by Cebes involves “the whole question of the cause of generation and corruption”, Socrates says he will relate his own experience in search for this cause (95e-96a). Let us here marginally note that when Socrates says that in his youth he was interested in physical investigations, this flatly contradicts his denial at his trial that he had anything to do with such investigations. This should alert us always to keep in mind that Plato would go to any length for dramatic effect.**

## **9**

**The search for physical causes, he says, made him blind even to things which he had previously thought he clearly knew. He continues:**

**“By Zeus, so far am I from thinking that I know the cause of such things, that I will not even admit that when somebody puts one beside one, that either the one to which the addition was made has become two, or that the one added and that to which it was added,**

**by the placing of the one beside the other have become two, for I find it strange that when each of them was separate from the other, each was one and they were not then two, but when they approached each other, this was the cause for them to become two, the togetherness of being placed beside each other. Neither if somebody splits one, can I yet be convinced that this again – the splitting – has been the cause of the becoming of the two, this being the opposite of what was then the cause of becoming two, for then it was the bringing them together and placing each beside each, now it is the taking away and separating each from each. Nor do I yet admit to myself that I know the cause of the becoming of one, nor, in short, do I know of anything else through what it becomes or perishes or is, according to this method of inquiry, but I concoct for myself my own method, for that other I will in no way approach.” (96e-97b.)**

**What Socrates says here and further on implies that number and the number series are not things in the natural world nor do they owe their (purely intelligible) being to anything happening in the natural world. The accidental juxtaposition of two things does not make them two. A primitive human being may possibly know ‘one’**

**and ‘two’ but three or five or ten are for him equally ‘many’. It is the idea ‘two’ that makes the two to be two for us as Socrates says explicitly further on. It is this same view that is implied in Kant’s saying that  $5+7=12$  is a synthetic *a priori* statement. Thoroughbred Empiricists will say it is not so and it is difficult to convince them because it is an article of their faith that all knowledge comes from outside us.**

**As against this, the Platonic position I have been expounding in all my writings and will expound in this book maintains that all empirical knowledge is the product of the mind dressing the meaningless presentations of the outer world in intelligible creations of the mind. Fundamentally both Plato and Kant are in agreement on this.**

## **10**

**The oddness of the examples chosen by Socrates and the quaintness of the expression may partly explain but will not excuse the general learned failure to appreciate the profound importance of what we have just been considering and of other points in the ‘autobiography’ that we will consider in the rest of this chapter and the next chapter. Hence I have quoted and will be quoting from this**

passage at considerable length since its message, though of utmost importance, has not yet been generally absorbed. It is the message that Plato has been harping on earlier in the dialogue, namely, that it is by the ideas emanating from the mind that things in the world surrounding us acquire meaning, acquire the character by which they are known to us. This is what Kant re-discovered, what he meant when he said that we only find in the external (phenomenal) world what we ourselves have put there. In other words, the mind understands nothing but its own ideas, or let me say: in all knowledge and all understanding the mind knows nothing and understands nothing but its own creations. (To clear a possible misunderstanding: Plato does not say that the ideas are engendered by the mind; I am responsible for this development. Plato asserts that the ideas do not come from the natural world; to emphasize this he creates the myth of *anamnêsis*, reminiscence.)

## 11

Immediately before the above-quoted passage Socrates says:

“I knew before about many other things and specifically about how men grew. I thought before that

**it was obvious to anybody that men grew through eating and drinking, for food adds flesh to flesh and bones to bones, and in the same way appropriate parts were added to all other parts of the body, so that the man grew from an earlier small bulk to a large bulk later, and so a small man became big. That is what I thought then (96c-d, tr. Grube).**

**The example Socrates gives of what he had earlier taken ‘growth’ to mean may strike us as naïve but it is actually a true example of what any empirical science ever gives or ever can give. Anticipating what I will be discussing in the following chapter, let me say that all empirical science can give us is a descriptive account of states of being and of successive states of being, but to say that this gives understanding is a misuse of language. Just as the mind does not know of two objects that they are two until the mind itself has endowed the two objects with the idea of ‘twoness’ created by the mind, so we can watch a thing growing and somehow vaguely feel that the thing today is the same yet not quite what it was the day before; we remain in a state of baffled amazement until the mind says: This is growth! It is growing! Even then we will not have ‘entered’ into the mystery, but the creative idea of ‘growth’ will have enabled us to welcome the idea into our**

**special intelligible sphere. The collection of intelligible ideas in a particular person's mind constitutes that person's special universe of discourse in terms of which she or he understands, reflects, and communicates.**

## **12**

**Understanding is never a passive reception of foreign matter from outside the mind. Understanding is not imprinted, like Locke's 'ideas', by sensation from outside the mind but is a creative contribution of the mind. That is why in the elenctic discourses of Socrates all definition in terms extraneous to the notion under examination is found to fail. The *aporia* (perplexity) to which the elenchus regularly leads is meant to direct the interlocutor to seek understanding in the luminous immediacy of the idea in the mind.**

## **13**

**Towards the end of the crucial 'autobiography' passage Plato unfortunately, to serve the purposes of the 'final argument' for immortality, intrudes his method of 'argument by hypothesis'. Yet we can still extract the gold from the dross. We read:**

**“This ... is what I mean. It is nothing new, but what I have never stopped talking about, both elsewhere and in the earlier part of our conversation. I am going to try to show you the kind of cause with which I have concerned myself. I turn back to those oft-mentioned things and proceed from them. I assume the existence of a Beautiful, itself by itself, of a Good and a Great and all the rest” (100b, tr. Grube).**

**I break the quotation here to say that when Socrates speaks of ‘ideas’ (forms) as a kind of cause, naturally ‘cause’ here cannot have the sense of physical causation, that is, the cause of something coming into being, but the ‘cause’ of something having for us the character it has for us. We are concerned here with meaning and the understanding of meaning. (A physical thing, as such, cannot have meaning and hence can never, in itself, be understood. More on this in the following chapter.)**

**Further on we read:**

**“... I think that, if there is anything beautiful besides the Beautiful itself, it is beautiful for no other reason than that it shares in that Beautiful, and I say so with everything. ... I no longer understand or recognize those other sophisticated causes, and if someone tells**

**me that a thing is beautiful because it has a bright color or shape or any such thing, I ignore these other reasons ... but I simply, naively and perhaps foolishly cling to this, that nothing else makes it beautiful other than the presence of, or the sharing in, or however you may describe its relationship to that Beautiful we mentioned, for I will not insist on the precise nature of the relationship, but that all beautiful things are beautiful by the Beautiful. That, I think, is the safest answer I can give myself or anyone else. And if I stick to this I think I shall never fall into error. This is the safe answer for me or anyone else to give, namely, that it is through Beauty that beautiful things are made beautiful.”**

**Once more, let us not be misled by Socrates’ irony or perhaps Plato’s hesitancy. What Socrates is expressing here (a) is neither foolish nor simple but profound philosophical insight; (b) nor does it imply banning aesthetic inquiry and art and literary criticism. It means that no extraneous considerations will ‘explain’ the beauty of the beautiful just as no amount of objective investigation will explain the growth of a plant from a seed. I recall I read somewhere that a musician having played a sonata on the piano was asked: “But what does it mean?” In answer**

**the musician simply resumed his seat at the piano and played the sonata all over again without uttering a word. He was repeating Socrates' dictum in another language.**

**The hesitation about the manner of relating the form to the incarnate instance (“the presence of, or the sharing in, or however you may describe its relationship to that Beautiful”) is what ‘Parmenides’ takes to pieces in the first part of the *Parmenides*. There can be no ‘correct’ manner of expressing the ‘relationship’ because the form is not a thing attached to the instance but is our understanding of the instance.**

**It might help us grasp the Socratic notion of the intelligible, which Plato refers to by the term *eidos* or *idea* (‘form’) to remember that Plotinus somewhere says that only a soul made beautiful can see beauty in anything.**

## **14**

**Let me give one more illustration, dressed as a parable, of the power of the idea (form) to infuse meaning into the neutral object and make it understandable (intelligible). ‘John’ has been wronging ‘Tom’ in many ways and at different times. Then John falls into a tight spot. All those around him stand watching, for he had never been good to any of them. But ‘Tom’ goes to John’s help at considerable**

**sacrifice to himself. All find this puzzling. But someone says, “That’s magnanimity” and the pieces fall together. Magnanimity can never be found as a thing in the world. The mind does not derive it from any source outside the mind. Like the example of ‘growth’ given by Socrates, it is a pure creation of the mind.**

## **15**

**In the ‘autobiography’ Socrates again and again says that the large is large by Largeness and the small is small by Smallness. This sounds quaint to us and I dare say that Platonist scholars pass over this as just another one of Socrates’ oddities that does not deserve any special attention. Far from it! These seemingly simple and seemingly foolish statements enfold within them a subtle, profound, and original insight. When Socrates says that he will accept no cause (*aitia*) of the becoming or being of two other than the idea (form) of Twoness, the word ‘cause’ is misleading. The idea Two is the cause not of two objects becoming two in the actual world, but of the objects becoming two to us and for us. Socrates in saying that the large becomes and is large by Largeness does not have in mind the actual world but the intelligible world whose whole reality and whole being is within the human mind.**

**Socrates' thought is wholly and solely concerned with the intelligible sphere of human beings within which they have their characteristically human life and this – and this alone – is the proper sphere of philosophical thought. On this last point we will hear more in the following chapter. It might help us grasp the purely intelligible nature of the terms Large and Small to consider that nothing in nature is simply and absolutely Large or Small. I might see a rat and exclaim: What an enormous beast! And I might see an elephant just born and say: How small and dainty! The sun is the largest body in our Solar System but it can be dwarfed by one in a distant galaxy.**

## **16**

**The very special sense in which 'ideas' (forms) are causes for Socrates at once removes 'physical causation' (whatever that may be) from the domain of philosophy, and shows all the arguments for the immortality in the *Phaedo* to be mere play (see *Phaedrus* 278a-b) or (as I said in a paper that angered some of my friends) to be a hoax played by Plato on his readers, perhaps to test them to see whether they have the presence of mind required in a student of philosophy.**

**To speak of “the real existence of ideas” completely turns Socrates’ philosophy upside down. This is the corrupt understanding propagated by Aristotle.**

**PART ONE  
SOCRATES**

**Chapter Three**

**Knowledge and Understanding**

**1**

**In the same ‘autobiographical’ passage of the *Phaedo* that I have been commenting on in the preceding chapter there is another profound insight that has somehow queerly escaped the notice of scholars and students of philosophy although it sets up a principle that should be of prime importance to both philosophers and scientists. Let us follow the flowering of the insight and the principle as Socrates relates the experience that has given rise to both.**

**Socrates says that he happened to overhear someone reading from a book by Anaxagoras where it was said that**

**it is Mind that directs everything and is the cause of everything. He eagerly obtained the book, but what he expected to find there was not there. His hopes, he said, were wiped out when he found that Anaxagoras neither made use of the mind nor gave it any role to play in the management of things, but counted as causes “air and ether and water and many other strange things.” This episode is related by all who comment on the *Phaedo* but all, to my knowledge, have been blind to the far-reaching conclusions Socrates derives from it though he details, explains, and exemplifies these conclusions explicitly and unequivocally. He continues:**

**“That seemed to me much like saying that Socrates’ actions are all due to his mind, and then in trying to tell the causes of everything I do, to say that the reason that I am sitting here is because my body consists of bones and sinews, because the bones are hard and are separated by joints, that the sinews are such as to contract and relax, that they surround the bones along the flesh and skin which hold them together, then as the bones are hanging in their sockets, the relaxation and contraction of the sinews enable me to bend my limbs, and that is the cause of my sitting here with my limbs bent.**

**“Again, he would mention other such causes for my talking to you: sounds and air and hearing, and a thousand other such things, but he would neglect to mention the true causes, that, after the Athenians decided it was better to condemn me, for this reason it seemed best to me to sit here and more right to remain and to endure whatever penalty they ordered” (98b-e, tr. Grube).**

**According to my reading of this passage – supported by what Socrates says explicitly further on – Socrates is setting up two radically distinct realms of thinking or of investigation – the philosophical and the scientific – each of which seeks to answer questions of a specific kind that the other mode of thinking or investigation cannot approach. Let me say again: according to the view I am ascribing to Socrates and which I implicitly endorse, philosophy has no access to, and should not tamper with, scientific questions; similarly and equally science has no access to, and should have nothing to do with, philosophical questions. I am being verbose on purpose because what I read in Socrates’ words, and which I see as of the utmost importance, has not, to my knowledge, been read there by men and women who are definitely more learned and possibly more intelligent than I.**

**In the preceding chapter we saw Socrates waiving aside the physical account of ‘growth’ in favour of the ‘idea of growth’ which pertains to the meaningful sphere of intelligible ideas. Here we see him putting aside the physical account of his body’s posture and movements in favour of the teleological account in terms of will, aims, and values. He is not denying the validity of the physical account; he is rejecting it as irrelevant to, let me say, a WHY question. Socrates is in fact making a radical and total separation of, on the one side, the kind of question that can be dealt with by, and only by, physical investigation and, on the other side, the kind of question that can only be examined by pure reason looking into pure ideas. This is what Kant was to re-discover and re-assert and which both scientists and philosophers continue to ignore. In effect Socrates is telling us that Science and Philosophy are two worlds wide apart and cannot mix without harm to both.**

**This is a lesson that the modern mentality, completely in the grip of the objective outlook of science, finds it very hard to grasp, so that daily we are told of science explaining this and explaining that, when it is not for science to explain anything at all. Of all modern thinkers it was only the ever-perplexed Wittgenstein who saw clearly**

**that science explains nothing (*Tractatus* 6.371). We will come back again to this important and commonly ignored issue. Let us see what Socrates has to say next.**

## **2**

**At this point Socrates says something that I would not hesitate to call the most critical statement in the whole history of philosophy, though it is in fact simply a crystallization of what has been said already.**

**Unfortunately Socrates' irony combined with Plato's prolixity particularly at this spot in addition to the failure of scholars to grasp Socrates' creative insight (a failure amply evidenced by the hesitant timidity of translators in dealing with this text) — unfortunately, I say, all of that conspired, it seems, to keep the meaning of Socrates' crucially radical statement in the dark.**

**The Socratic statement we are concerned with here immediately follows Socrates' differentiation and separation of the two distinct accounts of Socrates being in prison, on the one hand, the physical account in terms of bones and sinews, and on the other hand, the philosophical account in terms of principles and aims and purposes. This fresh statement is indeed the logical conclusion of that differentiation. Socrates has shown that physical**

investigation does not answer questions about aims, purposes, and values. He goes on to say that having given up the investigation of actual things, things in the natural world, *epeidê apeirêka ta onta skopôn* (99d) — then instead of telling us what followed when he had given up investigating things in the natural world, Plato makes him go into a long digression about damaging one's eyes by looking directly at the sun when there is an eclipse, which he himself says is not an apt analogy — at last near the end of 99e he resumes: It seemed to me I must take refuge in ideas (*eis logous*). In view of the extreme importance of this statement and of its total neglect on the part of scholars and professional philosophers permit me to take it up once more.

Jumping over the digression and putting together *edoxe toinun moi ... meta tauta, epeidê apeirêka ta onta skopôn* (99d) and *edoxe dê moi chrênai eis tous logous kataphugonta en ekeinois skopein tôn ontôn tèn alêtheian*. 99d+99e. Translation of this bit of text is very tricky because of the words that have a special meaning in Plato. Thus *ta onta* for Plato does not mean 'the realities' in the ordinary connotation, i.e. physical 'realities' which for Plato are shadows, but intelligible realities. Again *alêtheia* which commonly means 'truth', in Plato more often than not means 'reality' so that *tôn ontôn tèn alêtheian* may be

rendered by the quaint phrase ‘the reality of realities’. Further since *logos* hospitably shelters a whole family of meanings, it may be necessary to render it differently in different contexts. Perhaps we can escape the worst errors of translators if we say: “I thought that as I had given up the examination of actual things ... I thought that I should take refuge in ideas, and examine in them the truth of realities.” In any case what Socrates means to say is crystal-clear. Seeing that the investigation of things in the natural world does not yield answers to the questions that concerned him most he renounced that mode of investigation and resorted to investigating ideas in the mind as the only mode of investigation relevant to the moral questions he was interested in.

### 3

Thus we have clearly and unmistakably the assignment of investigation into things exclusively to science and of the investigation into ideas to philosophy; and again we find the parallel in Kant: empirical science investigating phenomena using concepts of the Understanding and Pure Reason exploring ideas though Kant, betraying his better judgment, makes Practical Reason reach objective conclusions.

As I see it, Socrates makes a clear and radical distinction between natural (physical, empirical, scientific) investigation on the one hand and the philosophical

**investigation of ideas on the other hand. The questions posed by science have no point of contact with philosophical questions. The failure of both philosophers and scientists to absorb this Socratic insight is responsible for philosophers seeking in vain to reach factual knowledge about the world and for scientists seeking in vain to find answers to questions about ultimate reality, ultimate beginnings and ultimate ends and about meanings and values. When Kant in the eighteenth century spoke of awaking from his dogmatic slumber he was re-discovering the Socratic insight. but both scientists and philosophers failed to understand Kant as they had failed to understand Socrates.**

**For the good of both philosophy and science these should never mix and neither should encroach on or tamper with the sphere of the other. To help avoid this harmful mixture we need to limit the connotations of each of the terms ‘knowledge’ and ‘understanding’: scientific investigation of objective things yields knowledge, philosophical probing of ideas and nothing but ideas gives us understanding. This specialization of meaning for ‘knowledge’ and ‘understanding’ though arbitrary, is based on a true radical distinction and is badly needed.**

**I know that in these last few pages I have been writing diffusely and with many repetitions but what can I do when in a text that is, in my opinion, of the utmost importance I read conclusions that no one else seems to find there?**

#### **4**

**In the introductory words to the ‘autobiography’ Plato seems to be telling us plainly that what follows is radically different from all that has gone before. Socrates says to Cebes, “It is no simple affair that you are seeking. The whole question of the cause of generation and corruption will have to be broached.” These are not words to be passed by in serene equanimity especially when we find Socrates in the sequel decisively renouncing all physical investigation as distinct from and irrelevant to the investigation of values and aims and purposes with which he was exclusively concerned. I beg the reader to bear with me if I revert repeatedly to this question which I find of utmost importance and find it nevertheless completely ignored by mainstream scholars and philosophers.**

**Socrates goes on to speak of his youthful interest in physical investigations and relates his misadventure with the book of Anaxagoras. How can we reconcile this with**

**Socrates' emphatic denial at his trial that he had any interest in such investigations? I think the problem can easily be resolved if we put together (1) that Socrates in his youth, like any intelligent Athenian at the time, could not avoid paying attention to the many works *peri phuseôs* that were the rage then; (2) by the time of his trial when he was seventy, he could truthfully deny that he was ever engaged in such investigations; (3) Plato would not miss the opportunity of dramatizing the venture with Anaxagoras' book.**

**Be that as it may, what we have to pay attention to and take most seriously is the vitally important conclusion Socrates arrives at, holds on to, and amply explains and illustrates in the 'autobiography'. In the example of the 'cause' of his staying put in prison rather than fleeing he shows plainly that what physical investigation of his body and his position may yield can be useful in diverse ways but can never answer questions of values, aims and purposes. Socrates makes this explicit and clear and it is this that we need to comprehend. The theories of the late Stephen Hawking and the probing by NASA into distant galaxies will not answer the question whether it is morally right to pour wealth into, say, interstellar research projects when there are human beings suffering and dying**

**from hunger and disease not only in the poorer countries but even in New York and London. It is this that we have to learn from Socrates' renunciation of physical investigation which – and this is very important – he does not censure: let scientists keep carrying on their work, but let them and let us all understand that over and above all that science can give – and it gives us much – we need to understand ourselves, our values, our aims, our purposes and for this it is not science nor science-mimicking psychology, sociology, etc., that will help us but good old philosophy and poetry and art, and when I say philosophy I do not mean the husk-splitting Analytical Philosophy nor the philosophy-turned-into-science such as the pompous Philosophy of Mind. What will help us is the good, humble, Socratic examination of ideas in our mind.**

**\*\*\***

**NB: The interpretation I have presented in the preceding chapter and this one of the 'autobiographical' passage, I have been advancing in my writings over a period of two decades. (Due to extraordinary circumstances my first book was only published when I had passed seventy.) In my confessedly limited readings I have not found any one philosopher or scholar agreeing with my interpretation or**

**even simply according to the passage anything like the importance I ascribe to it. I have commented on this at greater length in Chapter Six below.**

**PART TWO**  
**PLATO IN FIVE ASPECTS**

**PART TWO**  
**PLATO IN FIVE ASPECTS**

**Chapter Four**

**Dramatist**

**1**

**After the execution of Socrates in 399 BC Plato left Athens and spent some considerable time travelling from place to place. Neither the exact stretch of time thus spent nor the countries and cities visited can be determined with accuracy and certainty. What can be confidently stated is that the journey was first and foremost a soul-searching journey within Plato's own mind. He had admired, loved, and revered the old man who spent his whole life calling people – young and old, Athenian and foreigner – to examine their souls and to practise virtue. Socrates saw that as his life-mission, a mission assigned to him; and**

**Plato deeply and earnestly felt morally bound to continue that mission. But how?**

**Socrates, notwithstanding his dominant rationality, had no set doctrine or any tenets of dogmatic teachings. His method, as illustrated in the so-called elenctic dialogues of Plato, was to help his interlocutors to air their beliefs, spread them out under the revealing floodlight of reason, unravel their knots, disentangle their entanglements, bring out their implications, then leaving the interlocutors in that pregnant *aporia* (perplexity) which turns one's mind inwards and, if sincerely and diligently attended to, leads to the self-knowledge that is one with virtue. (Not once do we find in the 'elenctic' discourses a definition arrived at and approved, yet our erudite scholars, blindly and slavishly submitting to Aristotle's authority, repeat *ad nauseam* that Socrates in those discourses sought to establish valid definitions. Yet this is one of the less damaging fictions of Aristotle. Let us go back to where we left Plato in the pangs of soul-searching.)**

## **2**

**Plato was born a poet, notwithstanding his queer quarrel later on with poets and poetry and with the whole of fine art. Whether deliberately and with clear foresight**

or by a lucky stroke of chance, Plato began composing short (gradually not so short) dramatic pieces. What we have to be clear about and constantly to keep in mind is that those compositions were dramatic works. In time each new piece would incorporate and have worked into it various subsidiary themes and purposes. But to think that Plato composed any of those works to convey theoretical knowledge or to establish doctrine or belief is to mistake its prime intent and purpose. The *Euthyphro* is no more a factual record nor a piece of learned research than *Taming of the Shrew*. What each dramatic character speaks is an integral element of the drama. I am not a literary critic and it is not my purpose to make a proper literary study of Plato's drama. My aim here is simply to point out that we err grossly when we treat a Platonic dialogue as if it were a scholarly dissertation. Here I intend simply to point out a few of the dialogues in which the dramatic aspect is dominant.

### 3

In form and in content the *Crito* is of the simplest. It is written with so much — I will not say with so much mastery but with so much feeling and compassion that you can feel the vocal cords of the good old Crito quivering.

**You can sense the storm in the breast of the old man torn between his grief at the impending departure of his lifelong friend and his dismay at his certainty that he cannot counter the cold rationality and adamant will of Socrates. He comes to Socrates' prison before dawn, no doubt knowing that this last attempt to make Socrates change his mind and accept to escape prison, will meet with no more success than the many earlier attempts. He knows it is in vain but he cannot but try again for else he will be tormented to his last day by feeling he has let down his friend by not making this last attempt. Plato makes us feel all this using no tool other than the anaesthetized give and take of rational discourse.**

**By contrast to the tense atmosphere of the *Crito* we have the *Protagoras* with its multiple preludes and its rich character portrayals and its complexity of themes and episodes threaded together around the problem of the teachability of virtue. But I do not intend here to make a full study of the *Protagoras* or of any other dialogue but only to point out a few examples to show that in most of Plato's dialogues the dramatic effect is an integral element.**

If the *Protagoras* is perhaps the most extraneously complex of Plato's dialogues, the *Phaedo* decidedly has the highest internal complexity. It is impossible to do it justice as drama in a short essay. A master-critic may fill a bulky tome discussing its riches and not feel that she or he has done enough. I find the topical intricacy of the *Phaedo* dizzying: I cannot stop continually having different views of what to make of this perhaps most enigmatic of Plato's works..

Agann take the *Phaedrus*, with the *dramatis personae* at the utter minimum we have luxurious scenery, lively conversation varying from friendly banter to serious inquiry; we have striking flights of imagination side by side with practical literary criticism. The *Phaedrus* is so rich that however often you go back to it you are certain to find fresh inspiration and renewed delight. Having mentioned the *Phaedrus* I cannot pass it by without referring to that jocular passage at 260a-c where Plato makes Socrates resort to the most laughable examples to support the most serious of arguments.

In the *Charmides* and the *Lysis* we have fine humorous openings and the humorous touch is kept running

throughout each piece. For broad jocularity nothing can be more hilarious than the scene of the arrival of the drunken Alcibiades at Agathon's dinner party in the *Symposium*. Having mentioned the *Symposium*, where else can you find such a feast of wit and wisdom ranging from Aristophanes's funny myth to Alcibiades's serious account of Socrates' character and characteristics to the sublimity of the description of the ascent to the vision of absolute Beauty in the speech of 'Diotima'?

## 5

However, in what I have been saying above the emphasis may have been misplaced. My intention is not to find fault with scholars and students of philosophy for overlooking or ignoring Plato's dramatic genius; nobody capable of reading the text of the dialogues whether in Plato's original Greek or in translation could be so obtuse as not to note the dramatic excellence; indeed the fault may be quite the contrary, namely to see the dramatic genius and no more. What I want to stress is that the dramatic intent shapes the dialectical content so that we err when we take what is spoken separately from the dramatic setting. To flesh out this abstract statement I reproduce below lines from the introductory part and a few words from the

**conclusion of Chapter Four, “The *Protagoras*”, of my *Plato: An Interpretation* (2005):**

**“The *Protagoras* is, by common consent, a dramatic masterpiece. ... And it is not only incidentally a drama; it is primarily a drama, and we fail to understand it properly if we fail to see it as such. ...**

**“The intricate dramatic preliminaries ... indicate that Plato's intention was to contrast the wisdom of Socrates with that of ... the professional Sophists. ...**

**“But while the dramatic excellence of the *Protagoras* is universally acknowledged, its philosophical importance is underestimated. W. K. C. Guthrie, in the Introduction to his translation ... writes, “But in proportion as it excites our admiration as a literary work, so the *Protagoras* perplexes those who would extract its philosophical lesson” (p.8). The perplexity comes from the unwarrantable expectation to find a ready-made “philosophical lesson”. In answer to the central question of the *Protagoras* about the teachability of virtue, the dialogue pits the soul-searching Socratic examination against the dogmatic inculcation of the Sophists. It does not hand out a**

**“philosophical lesson” but affords an exercise in philosophical thinking, which is the true way to genuine virtue according to Socrates and Plato. When Socrates said at his trial that he never taught or meant to teach anybody (*Apology*, 19d), that was no false pretence. His mission was not to teach but to awaken his interlocutors' slumbering minds and make them think for themselves — a mission to which Plato was equally dedicated.”**

**“The *Protagoras* raises the question of the teachability of virtue and leaves it unresolved. That is as it should be. The problem has to remain an unresolved and unresolvable riddle if we are not to lose sight of the vital insight: virtue is *sophia* but it is not any particular *epistêmê*. Virtue is the *sophia* that knows its own ignorance ...”**

## **6**

**In all I have been saying thus far I have not touched on my main purpose and my original design for this chapter. It was not my purpose to speak of Plato's dramatic genius. Others can do this much better than I. What I wanted to do is to point out that we err when we overlook the dramatic nature of the dialogues. I will not go to great**

length to show how often and how gravely scholars err when they discuss something said in a dialogue without keeping in mind its dramatic character.

Out of a plethora of examples I will give only one to show how the learned go wrong when they forget or disregard the dramatic character of Plato's dialogues. Scholars have been puzzled by the 'paradox' of the *Hippias Minor*. They fail to see that both Hippias pieces are comedies of character, making fun of the bombastic sophist. In the *Hippias Major* the fun is more rough-hewn. In the *Hippias Minor* the fun is more subtle. Hippias fails to see that the 'paradoxical' conclusion follows from his own assessment of Odysseus. Moreover the 'paradox' which has puzzled scholars has a hidden *caveat* which our scholars, equally with Hippias, fail to see. Doing what is morally wrong intentionally – *if that were possible* – would be better than doing what is wrong unintentionally. In the context of Socrates' moral philosophy to do wrong willingly is simply as much of a contradiction in terms as it would be for Spinoza to speak of doing wrong when one has adequate ideas.

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**PS: I have been chided for not mentioning Xenophon in my book. Xenophon loved and honoured Socrates. He was a gifted writer but, in my opinion, did not have a philosophical mind. Socrates at his trial speaks of always being about the market-place and around the stalls admonishing people to virtue. Plato's dialogues show Socrates lounging in gymmasia (*Charmides, Lysis*) or in rich homes (*Republic, Symposium*) conversing with well-to-do and well-educated persons. I suppose Xenophon's *Memorabilia* give us the kind of simple admonition to simple people in the market-place.**

**PART TWO**  
**PLATO IN FIVE ASPECTS**

**Chapter Five**

**Disciple**

**1**

**It is nigh impossible to find such strong attachment and devotion of one person to another when the two persons are so widely opposed in outer circumstances. in material fortunes, in personal traits, and seemingly in temperament. Socrates must have had an almost supernatural attraction for young, innocent natures. How else can we explain the adoring dedication and devotion of Chaerephon, of Aristodemus, or of Apollodorus who never stopped crying all through the fateful last day of Socrates' life, not to mention the unique case of Alcibiades.**

**Socrates was clearly not a common teacher or a common leader but a spiritual lodestar like the Buddha,**

**Jesus of Nazareth, or Gandhiji. Look at the tender episode in the *Phaedo* as told in the words Plato puts in the mouth of Phaedo himself: “I was sitting at his right hand on a low stool beside his couch, and his seat was a good deal higher than mine. He stroked my head and gathered the hair on the back of my neck into his hand -- he had a habit of playing with my hair on occasion and said, To-morrow, perhaps, Phaedo, you will cut off this beautiful hair.” (89a-b, tr. Fowler) And Socrates could arouse these tender sentiments not only in the hearts of the young but equally in the heart of his lifelong friend Crito.**

**But why am I bringing in Aristodemus and Apollodorus and others in a chapter about Plato in the aspect of disciple? I do so because Plato never speaks to us in the first person. In the dialogues he only brings in his name in the *Apology* in the formal contexts of the trial proceedings and in the *Phaedo* to explain his absence. But we may be sure that when Plato tells us about Aristodemus or Apollodorus or Phaedo he is consulting his own feelings and experience.**

## **2**

**Probably even as a boy Plato was captivated by the character and personality of Socrates. I believe we can confidently assert that Plato was able to drink in the essence of Socrates’ philosophy better than any of the other intimate associates of Socrates. I believe that**

**Auschines, Abtisthenes, Aristippus and others, each grasped one element of Socrates' thought; only Plato absorbed the whole as an integral whole, and just that is his secret: wasn't he who pronounced the inspired dictum: *ho men gar sunoptikos dialektikos, ho de mê ou* (Republic 537c)?**

**Let me be clear about what I mean by this. In essence Socrates' philosophy was not reducible to a doctrine to be established or defended by argument, nor did it consist in a set of moral maxims and injunctions to be adhered to. Socrates' philosophy was a way of life – I was tempted to say: a way of spiritual being; but I want to remain as lucid as possible – embodying an ideal of perfected humanity, a humanity raised to the acme of the specific virtue (*aretê*, excellence) of a human being. Like the sages of the East, Socrates lived his philosophy and philosophized his life. It was that 'lived philosophy' that seeped into the inner being of Plato. When in time he came to immortalize the Master in his writings, and whatever was the vague idea that gave birth to the first couple of dialogues, Plato knew in his blood that his works must be not a register or record of Socrates' deeds and sayings but a living continuation of the Master's vision and mission.**

**When later on Plato describes in the dialogues the fanatic attachment to Socrates of an Aristodemus or Apollodorus, or when he makes Alcibiades describe what he experiences when he hears Socrates speaking (*Symposium*, 172a f, 215a ff.), we can easily believe that Plato would be drawing on his personal experience.**

### **3**

**With the exception of the *Apology* and the *Crito* where we hear Socrates' clear voice, and apart from a stray gem here or there, we should not expect to find in the dialogues any positive teaching of either Socrates or Plato. We go to Plato's dialogues not to receive and take away but to participate in the live give and take of discourse and to make our contribution. The learned analyses and astute criticisms of arguments in the dialogues, the more clever they are, the farther away they are from a true understanding of Plato.**

**I have singled out the *Apology* and the *Crito* as of a special character. If anywhere in Plato's works we are to find the gist of the Socratic-Platonic philosophy it will be in these two. In the *Apology* Socrates declares it to be his mission to go to everyone and admonish him saying, "Good Sir, ... are you not ashamed of your eagerness to**

**possess as much wealth, reputation and honours as possible, while you do not care for nor give thought to wisdom or truth or the best possible state of your soul?” (29d, tr. Jowett) He says he will not cease to philosophize as it is the best thing for a human being to discourse of virtue every day, an unexamined life not being a life for a human being (38a).**

**In the *Crito* when his lifelong friend tries for the last time to persuade him to accept his friends’ help to escape prison, Socrates takes the good old man on a journey of self-examination, making him agree to the following principles which I cull from the short passage 47a-49d, not keeping to the order or the phrasing in the dialogue:**

**What matters to a wise person is not to live but to live well. To live well is to live a life of virtue and righteousness. — We find life not worth living when the body, which is improved by health and damaged by disease, has been corrupted: will life be worth living when that in us which is improved by virtue and harmed by vice has been ruined? Certainly not. — One must never willingly do wrong. It is never right to harm anyone. Even when we are harmed by others, it is never right to return harm for harm.**

**Such was the legacy that Plato inherited from Socrates and made it his life-mission to preserve and to serve throughout his life.**

**PART TWO**  
**PLATO IN FIVE ASPECTS**

**Chapter Six**

**Prophet**

**INTRODUCTION**

**Plato was a prophet, in the best sense of the word, proclaiming a Way of Life, the Philosophical Life, a religion the chief holy scripture of which is that much misunderstood, much traduced masterpiece, the *Phaedo*.**

**The *Pnaedo* is commonly seen as, first, arguing for the immortality of the soul and, secondly, as portraying the last moments of Socrates' life. As I see it, the argument for immortality may be the thread holding together the pearls, but is not itself what is important or precious; and one can say that regardless of whether one thinks that Plato**

himself believed in personal survival or not. Anyhow the arguments are in the course of the dialogue openly and repeatedly declared to be non-conclusive. (Chapter Five, *Plato: An Interpretation*, 2005.) Whatever may have been Plato's reason or reasons for devoting so much space to the immortality argument(s), for myself I would range the valuable elements of the *Phaedo* as follows:

(1) the call to the Philosophical Life;

(2) the revelation of the divinity and eternity (as distinct from the 'immortality') of the soul;

(3a) the expounding of the notion of the intelligible as the bearer of all meaning and all understanding;

(3b) the setting of the boundary separating philosophical thinking and scientific thinking, constituting these as two radically separate spheres of thought; both (3a) and (3b) as expounded in the 'autobiography' (95e-102a);

(4) the inspiring description of the last moments of Socrates' life.

In this chapter I am primarily concerned with the Philosophical Life, but the divinity/eternity of the soul (something quite other than 'immortality') is closely

**related to this. (3a) and (3b) are the backbone of this book. They have already been expounded in Chapters Two and Three (as I have been doing in all my writings) but they fly so outrageously in the face of the common learned wisdom that one of two alternatives must be true: (a) either I am truly insane and am reading what is not there to read; (b) or the learned have been so besotted by their book learning (as Heraclitus perceived) that they are blinded to what is plainly there to read. I thought of adding an appendix to the book discussing this but found it would serve no purpose for the others do not give an alternative interpretation to be discussed but simply bundle the whole of 95e-102a as ‘preliminaries to the final argument’ or simply as a ‘second interlude’ and do not find there what I do.**

## **1**

**Let me before proceeding further ward off what would be a most damaging misunderstanding. I speak of divinity and of spiritual reality and use the language and the metaphors of religion and of mysticism. Let me assure the reader that I have nothing to do with the supernatural or the transcendent. In the philosophy I am expounding reality is the human reality and spirituality is the reality of**

**our being on the plane of creative intelligence. Indeed it is high time to have a new conception of spirituality rid of irrationality and superstition. (See Part Three of this book.)**

**The Philosophical Life is a life of intelligence, of the exercise of reason, when the human being asserts his superiority to the body and the bodily not by rejecting or negating the body but by putting first things first, knowing that the whole world and all the world can offer come second to the integrity and the wholesomeness of a human being's inner reality, that inner reality that, as Socrates says, flourishes and blooms by what is right and withers and dwindles by what is wrong. Let me reiterate, the Philosophical Life is the life of creative intelligence *per se*.**

**The Philosophical Life is the life of intelligence, entailing that we be, in all we think and in all we do, under the light of reason; that we constantly examine our mind, clearly viewing all our purposes, aims, values. As Spinoza would say, to live and act under the guidance of adequate ideas.**

## **2**

**Among the arguments for immortality in the *Phaedo* the 'argument from affinity' (78b-84b) is all in a class by itself.**

**It is much more than an argument for immortality understood as an endless extension of time. The soul is seen as belonging to the eternal and divine. This is an integral element of Plato's thought quite apart from the question of immortality as personal survival. Thus in a winged passage in *Phaedo* 79d we read:**

**“When the soul (mind) all by itself reflects, it moves into that which is pure, always is, deathless, and constant, and being of a like nature to that, remains with that always, whenever it is possible for it to be by itself, and then it rests from wandering, and in the company of that, is constant, being in communion with such; and it is this state that is called *phronêsis*.”**

**This is closely paralleled in the *Republic* where in a fiery passage Plato sums up the ascent of the philosopher's mind to communion with the Ultimate. We are told that the “philosophical nature aspires to real Being ... goes forth with no blunting and no slackening of her desire, until she grasps the essence of every reality by that in her soul to which it is becoming, that is, what is akin, to grasp that, approaching and mingling with what has true Being ...” (490a-b).**

**Plato asserts the affinity of the soul to the divine: in living the Philosophical Life the philosopher is virtually a god.**

**The injunction Know Yourself is thus, in the religion of the Philosophical Life, translated into Be Yourself, your True Self, your Divine Self.**

### **3**

**The call to the Philosophical Life in the *Phaedo* begins early in the dialogue when, at 64a, Socrates says that a true philosopher throughout life does no other thing than practise death and dying. It is essential to understand that this is neither a call to asceticism nor to a hermit's withdrawal from active life. Among genuine philosophers we can have the whole gamut of personal temperaments and moods. The call to the Philosophical Life is an earnest call to founding on the plane of one's biological being a parallel life on the spiritual plane of being.**

**The dictum about exercising death and dying does not issue from an attitude of enmity to life. It is not even as distanced from active living as Stoicism is. Indeed all the fine things we can enjoy – beauty, friendship, philosophizing, delight in the charms of nature – can only be enjoyed in and through a living body. I am aware that I**

have passed here beyond the letter of the *Phaedo* text but not, I am confident, beyond the spirit of the Socratic-Platonic philosophy. I find adequate support for this in the liveliness of Plato's portrayal of all these delights and charms in the *Phaedrus* and other dialogues.

#### 4

The religion of the Philosophical Life calls for the renewal of the human being; it demands a complete revision of the traditional understanding of the virtues. The common virtues are a travesty. The common people put on courage through the motive of fear, they resort to self-restraint by reason of self-indulgence (68a f.). Then follows a thundering passage of which I will quote as much as may give a tang of its flavour:

**“My dear Simmias, I suspect that this is not the right way to purchase virtue, by exchanging pleasures for pleasures, and pains for pains, and fear for fear, and greater for less, as if they were coins, but the only right coinage, for which all those things must be exchanged and by means of and with which all these things are to be bought and sold, is in fact wisdom; and courage and selfrestraint and justice and, in short, true virtue exists only with wisdom, whether pleasures and fears and other things of that sort are added or**

**taken away. And virtue which consists in the exchange of such things for each other without wisdom, is but a painted imitation of virtue and is really slavish and has nothing healthy or true in it; but truth is in fact a purification from all these things, and selfrestraint and justice and courage and wisdom itself are a kind of purification. ...” (69a f., tr. Fowler)**

**A philosopher identifies being with meaningfulness and the meaningful is the thinkable, thus the thinkable is what has true being, as Parmenides has affirmed *tauto gar esti noein te kai einai*, or, *to gar auto noein estin te kai einai*, in other words, one and the same thing it is to be intelligible and to be. Hence for Plato the intelligible ideas (forms) are what is ‘really real’ as opposed to the objective existents which are constantly, ceaselessly, vanishing. To come into being is at the same time to be passing away. (Chapter Ten below.) Thus it is the philosopher who lives and transacts and communes with a world of realities and not with the deceptive shadows of the outer world. In this dry paragraph of lifeless abstractions I have tried to condense Plato’s lively, vibrant, explication of what is meant by saying that a philosopher practises death and dying throughout his life.**

As prophet Plato may deliver an enigmatic message rich in profound core insight but the message may remain obscure even to the prophet who, in seeking to shed light on the enigma, speaks in myth and parable, the value of which consists in preserving the core insight safe from the ruinous cleverness of learned ignorance. Here I am, though no prophet, speaking enigmatically. Let us try to speak more plainly. Plato's invaluable contribution to the Problem of Knowledge was that he knew, he confessed, he proclaimed that we have no explanation, that there is no explanation to the mystery of knowledge. (Chapter Nine below.) In the *Meno* he presents the 'doctrine' of *anamnēsis* (reminiscence) as the teaching of priests and priestesses. In the *Phaedo* he argues at great length for the view that we are born having all knowledge. This at least locates the fount of knowledge in the right place. It keeps the mystery poignant. All of this is valuable as parable and myth intimating that we don't know how it is that we have knowledge. We can never know how it is that we know or understand any more than we can ever know how it is that we have being. **Re-wording Socrates: Only when we acknowledge that we have no knowledge do we have the only wisdom proper to and possible for a human being.**

**This is the gist of the Socratic Principle of Philosophical Ignorance. The positive value of the myth is in the realization and admission that for all understanding we have to explore, to excavate, our mind.**

**Our learned neuroscientists and philosophers of mind however, instead of turning to the mind within us are busily examining the neural accompaniments and the phenomenal exhalations of the workings of the mind. Their labour may be rewarded: they may procure information for an information-crazy age, piling up facts upon facts and not a whiff of understanding. But they will never come any nearer to the mind that way.**

**Socrates wanted us to know that we know not, for unless we know that we know not, we shall not enjoy any understanding and unless we seek to know ourselves, our inner reality, our hidden reality, all our learning is illusion and ignorance.**

**In the same class as the myth of reminiscence is the Socratic *maieusis* metaphor: it affirms that all knowledge and all understanding come from the creative womb of the mind.**

## 6

The serious discussion in the *Phaedo* begins, as we saw above, when Socrates says that the true philosopher practises death and dying throughout his life. The explanation and justification of that statement give us the ideal of the Philosophical Life. Let us note in passing that philosophy according to this view is decidedly not a science with a body of established facts or doctrines to be studied and developed and expounded in learned dissertations. The philosophy whose first criterion is the practice of death and dying is a mode of life to be lived; no paradox is intended in speaking of living a life of death and dying. To live philosophically is to be indifferent to the world and the lures of the world and the temptations of the body. But what I am saying here can be open to misunderstanding as it cannot be made plain yet, so let us go back to the *Phaedo*.

What are we to do when we are faced in the *Phaedo* by the long ‘Sermon in the Prison’ extending from 66b to 67b where we are told that we will never have true knowledge until our soul is emancipated by death from the bondage of the body; and that while we live we only have a barely acceptable approach to knowledge when we distance

ourselves as much as possible from the pernicious influences of the body? With minds fashioned and conditioned by the Empirical dogma our most generous reaction would be to pity the speaker as a miserable moron and condescendingly laying a hand on his shoulder. But it would be wiser to understand that the Prophet is pronouncing oracles and, as is proper for oracles, enigmatically. In the *Republic* Plato first tells us that what is wholly real is wholly knowable; what is in no way real is in no way knowable; and it follows that what is in-between the real and the 'not-real' would be the subject of opinion (as much is indicated in the *Meno*), which is imperfect knowledge. Empiricists will be revolted by this, but as Platonists we have to insist that our most sophisticated and advanced sciences cannot but be imperfect. Consistently, in the 'divided line' empirical knowledge – to borrow Kantian terms, the ordering of phenomena under 'concepts of the understanding' – is placed in the lower section of the higher division. Accordingly, all of our vaunted scientific knowledge, Black Holes and genes and NASA's discovery of organic matter on Mars, all 'knowledge' relating to the outer, objective world is tainted with the imperfection inherent in all determinate existents. Philosophical understanding relates to the only

**‘wholly real reality’ we know, namely, our own inner subjective reality.**

**The religion which Plato as prophet preaches is, notwithstanding the dictum that a philosopher practises death and dying, is a religion of the fullness of life, of the bliss of living the one true and proper excellence (*aretê*) of a human being. The Philosophical Life consists in living philosophically; it is not to ‘do philosophy’ as the newfangled idiom has it, but to live one’s life on the plane of creative intelligence. In the *Phaedrus* Socrates’ young companion exclaims, “For what should one live if not for enjoying such delights?” (258e) — meaning the delights of intelligent conversation.**

## **7**

**What is involved in living a philosophical life thus understood? A true philosopher cares little for the body or the enjoyments connected with the body. This does not mean that a true philosopher denies or rejects or suppresses the body but that he never forgets that whatever relates to the body must never usurp the precedence that is solely and exclusively due to our inner, subjective life, or in Socrates’ words, to that in us that flourishes by doing what is morally right and withers by**

doing what is morally wrong. (I am departing from the letter of the *Phaedo* on purpose. For a commentary keeping close to the text see Chapter Five, “The Meaning of the *Phaedo*”, of *Plato: An Interpretation*, 2005.)

Let me recapitulate what I have been saying above. The philosophical *Sophia* is perfected in the attainment of a mystic experience. Since the mystic experience or vision is strictly ineffable it can only be intimated in myth and parable. Since the philosophic myth once it assumes finality turns into superstitious dogma, it must be subjected to dialectic criticism demolishing its foundations. Thus the principle of philosophical ignorance is vindicated. (This will be further developed in the following chapter.)

Let me add a necessary clarification. The Philosophical Life is not a prerogative of professional philosophers: it is a life in which every sane human being must participate.

## 8

The intellectual atmosphere that has enveloped humans from the seventeenth century onwards with progressively increasing intensity, at any rate in the ‘advanced’ countries, is so deeply inimical to that which prevailed in

**Plato's world as to create a formidable barrier to understanding. When Plato speaks of the unreliability of the senses and when he describes the mind seeking knowledge with the aid of the senses as reeling and being dizzy as if drunk, we are likely to deride, or if generous to pity, the poor backward Plato who could not dream of precision instruments and computers that perform in seconds calculations that a team of scientists cannot accomplish in weeks. Thus we find it difficult, and for many of us impossible, to appreciate that Plato's position rests on principles that are in no way affected by the progress and achievements of empirical science. Plato was expressing roughly in a parable what only dawned on Kant quite late in his career and that has to this day not been widely grasped even in Kant's version that speaks the language of our age and time.**

**In Chapter Five, "The Meaning of the *Phaedo*", of *Plato: An Interpretation* (2005), I characterized the 'argument from affinity' as "a prophecy proclaiming the oncoming of rational humanity". Alas! the humanity prophesied must have been other than the species inhabiting the planet Earth.**

**PART TWO**  
**PLATO IN FIVE ASPECTS**

**Chapter Seven**

**Philosopher**

**1**

**Plato absorbed and embraced Socrates' philosophy totally and completely but then went on to do something that does not fall short of a miracle. He developed a metaphysics without infringing the principle of Philosophical Ignorance. That sounds impossible but Plato did it.**

**Parmenides had sown the seed of the notion of metaphysical Reality. In Plato the seed came to flower and fruit. Socrates was wholly absorbed in the reality within us that breeds the excellences of the moral life. But Plato aspired to know what is ultimately, wholly, fully, totally**

real, impelled, I feel, by what Shelley calls “the devotion to something afar from the sphere of our sorrow”. He began from Parmenides’ identification of *noein* ‘to be thought’ and *einai* ‘to be’, and that went very well with the Socratic identification of the intelligible with what is real for us and in us. And the marriage of Parmenides’ insight and the Socratic insight brought forth wondrous blissful progeny. What is especially noteworthy is that in the highest flights of metaphysical imagination Plato remains true to the Socratic principle of philosophical ignorance. This gives us the unique situation of daring to form and to proclaim visions of the Whole, visions that make us whole, without transgressing beyond the limits proper to human understanding. I hope all of this will become clearer as we proceed further.

In the *Sophist* (the bulk of which is taken up by the experimental application of the method of Collection and Division) Plato corrects his earlier exaggerated emphasis on the stability and immobility of the Forms, an exaggeration that threatened to infuse a serious defect into Plato’s philosophy. Plato’s philosophy had never been captive to an outlook of deadly immobility: the influence of Heraclitus alone could suffice to give him immunity against that. (So here we have another fecund marriage

between the flux of Heraclitus and the permanence of Parmenides' One.) Besides, his thought was at all times hospitable to the notions of birth and procreation: the inspired notion of *tokos en kalôî* (in the *Symposium*) provides sufficient evidence. In the *Republic* at the apex of the philosophical journey the philosopher "begets intelligence and reality" (490b) and this is paralleled in the *Phaedo* (79d). Thus it should come as no surprise to us when Plato in the *Sophist* rebukes the 'Friends of the Forms' saying, "But tell me, in heaven's name: are we really to be so easily convinced that change, life, soul, understanding have no place in that which is perfectly real — that it has neither life nor thought, but stands immutable in solemn aloofness, devoid of intelligence?" (248e-249a, tr. Cornford). Further on in the *Sophist* we have the no less than revolutionary view that what is real in any sense or on any level is no other than activity *ta onta hês estin ouk allo ti plên dunamis* (247e). (The only philosopher, to my knowledge, who saw the far-reaching significance of this was A. N. Whitehead.)

## 2

What is real? What is ultimately real? In these two questions we have the spring and fount of all metaphysical

**thinking. Heraclitus had seen that the whole outside world is in ceaseless change; nowhere in the natural world is there any permanence or stability. Socrates had found in the intelligible ideals and values the specific character and the whole worth of a human being. Plato saw that the intelligible ideas confer on the things in the natural world what meaning and what being they have; the very being of the hard rock as a perceptible or perceived object is a gift of the mind that dubs it hard. In an uninhabited planet the mountains have no more fixity than running water for it is the human mind that gives the mountains and all things else their fictitious stability and character.**

**In the central part of the *Republic* (from 472a in Book Five to the end of Book Seven), which the learned see as a mere digression, Plato takes us on a journey in search for the philosopher which turns out to be a search for ultimate Reality.**

**A philosopher, we learn, loves wisdom and desires all ‘knowledge’, but immediately we find that this statement requires qualification. Not all information is grist for the philosopher’s mill. A philosopher desires not factual knowledge of the multiple objects of perception but knowledge of the one intelligible Form that gives the**

**perceptible many their character. At this point Plato formulates a metaphysical principle that straddles epistemology and ontology: “what wholly is, is wholly knowable, what is not, is in no way knowable” (477a).**

**In the *Symposium* (in the speech of ‘Diotima’) Plato depicts the ascent of the lover to the vision of absolute Beauty. This vision is essentially a mystic experience. In the *Republic* we meet with this same spiritual journey and same mystic experience in the progress of the lover of wisdom to the vision of true Being:**

**“... a true lover of wisdom, being by nature drawn towards communion with Reality, will not rest in the multiple ..., but goes on ... until he grasps the very essence of every reality by that in his soul ... (that) is akin to that, approaching and uniting with what has real being, begetting intelligence and reality, has understanding and true life and is nourished ...” (490a).**

**We can clearly see that the whole journey is accomplished in the philosopher’s mind: the philosopher’s progress, like the mystic’s passion, is a subjective experience. Yet Plato, after thus prophetically proclaiming that the philosophic nature grasps and communes with**

**Reality by that in her soul that is akin to Reality, still has for us another account, a mythical account, of ultimate Reality dressed as the Form of the Good. And the manner in which we come to the naming of the Form of the Good in the *Replbluc* is highly revealing.**

**Socrates in outlining the programme of studies for the guardians of the ideal city had mentioned ‘the highest study’. Adeimantus persists in asking what that highest study is. Socrates says, *hê tou agathou idea megiston mathêma* “The Form of the Good is the highest study.” Consider it weird of me or what you will, but here I lay great weight on the exact wording. Plato did not write “The highest study is the study of the Form of the Good” as translators of the *Republic*, ‘correcting’ Plato, make him do. Identifying Reality with Intelligence is too much for them to grasp and Plato’s supreme oracular pronouncement is transmuted into a slip of the pen. The Form of the Good is the highest study. In other words, attaining the mystic-philosophical vision of ‘the Good’ is the *Sophia* the philosopher aspires to. Even if that were an inadvertent slip of Plato’s pen, still I find it pregnant with insight. The Form of the Good is not a particular curriculum of studies but intimates the philosophical travail that begets “intelligence and reality”, for**

understanding, profound understanding, cannot be barren but gives birth in beauty (*tokos en kalôî*).

Before we go on to the following stage in our philosophical journey let us revert briefly to the formula “what wholly is, is wholly knowable, what is not, is in no way knowable” (477a). This implies that being as well as knowing is subject to gradation however absurd this may seem to commonsense and to Aristotelian logic. For there can be no genuine metaphysics without the notion of degrees of reality (being). Based on this principle, Plato (in the ‘divided line’, 509a-511e) ranges levels of knowledge corresponding to levels of reality. Briefly we have: *eikasia* : representing images; *pistis*: corresponding to actual things, animate and inanimate; *dianoia*: concerned with the concepts of things; *nous* or *noêsis*: concerned with pure ideas and principles (elsewhere named by Plato *phronêsis*, intelligence).

We have still a most important station in our philosophical journey. In the *Republic*, particularly at 533c, Plato tells us in the clearest terms that the grounds of a philosophical position (viewpoint) have to be done away with, demolished (*anaireun*) by dialectic. I have discussed this at length in *Plato: An Interpretation* (2005) and

**elsewhere. Let me here say: If we put together (1) what we remarked above about the philosophical journey being accomplished entirely in the philosopher's mind; (2) Plato's emphatic assertion in the *Phaedrus* (275c-d) that no serious thought can be put in writing, which I take to mean in any determinate formulation of thought or words; (3) the assertion in the *Republic* that the hypotheses or the grounds of a philosophical position must be destroyed by dialectic — putting these together we can conclude as follows: All reality is in the mind; the mind itself is the one and only reality we know immediately and indubitably; the metaphysical or mystic insights are purely subjective experiences that cannot be represented objectively; the 'realities' born by the mind expressing the mind's vision — even when formulated in sheer abstractions — are, if they are of any value, pure myths. All true metaphysics intimates the reality of our inner subjective being in myth, parable, and metaphor. Receiving the philosopher's myths as myths we share in the philosopher's vision; but if we take the myths for factual reports they turn into damaging superstitions.**

**It is important to understand clearly the connection between the necessity of destroying the foundations of philosophical statements and Plato's banning of writing**

**texts: the underlying rationale connecting the two positions is the assurance that no determinate formulation of words or thought (1) can be definitively right (correct); (2) nor can it have the same meaning for different addressees or even for the same person at different times or in different contexts. All of this agrees and harmonizes with the likening (in the *Protagoras*) of a book to a drum that once struck keeps giving the same sound. Shall we burn all philosophy books then? No, but we must insist that the reader taking up a philosophy book must do so not with the intention of imbibing ready-made wisdom but with the intention of interacting with the text, conversing intelligently with it.**

**In stating the above conclusions I know that I have mixed my thought with Plato's thought and I will not bet that Plato would endorse any of my statements. But since Plato has from the very beginning been my main source of inspiration it would not be fair to charge me with falsification. My philosophy is an outgrowth of Plato's and it is practically impossible for me to say where Plato's thought ends and where mine begins.**

### 3

In the *Phaedo* where the argument ostensibly aims at ‘proving’ the immortality of the soul, all the arguments are, behind the flimsiest of veils, explicitly declared to be insufficient (see Socrates’ final assessment at 107b). It is possible to see the *Phaedo*, despite its most solemn overall theme, as the most roguish of Plato’s dialogues, showing that the most plausible of arguments cannot be secure against dialectical refutation (*eis apistian katabalein*, 88c). (See “Plato’s Greatest Hoax”.) This view is not incompatible with the possibility that Plato personally may have been inclined to believe in, or even firmly believed in, personal survival. And, lest anyone should think otherwise, this reading does not clash with my holding that the *Phaedo* is one of Plato’s most artistically perfect works.

Indeed many a dialogue of Plato’s can be seen as a practical demonstration of the dialectical breaking down of presuppositions. The prime example of course is the *Parmenides* where we are plainly and explicitly alerted to its being an exercise in dialectics and yet scholars keep going round and round the dialogue trying to discover a non-existent secret.

**Even outside strictly philosophical contexts, even the simplest down-to-earth matter-of-fact ‘true’ statement is only true in virtue of a whole web of contextual presuppositions. Only a person endowed with a very lively imagination can question the solid foundations of such seemingly invincible structures. Descartes thought that his “Je pense donc je suis” is simplicity incarnate. It has since been shredded to tatters.**

**In the *Republic* Plato speaks of the age at which the philosopher reaches his zenith and becomes fully rounded. I might say that in the *Republic* philosophy reached its zenith and became fully rounded. But this immediately calls for a note of caution: to say that Plato’s philosophy became fully rounded does not, I repeat does not, mean that Plato had then a definitively articulated system. At no time did Plato have an articulated system. And this want of system that scholars complain of and blame Plato for is the mark of Plato’s genius. In saying that Plato’s philosophy became fully rounded I mean that all its dimensions, all its basic principles, had found explicit expression.**

**Here permit me a summing up and clarification. Socrates busied himself with the notions of justice, propriety (*sôphrosunê*), courage, etc. The character**

**common to these notions is that they are intelligible but, though we can find instances of them in the outside world, the notions themselves have no place, we might say, have no being other than in the mind. So we set the intelligible opposite to the perceptible instances in the, let us say, objective world. At this point we have a magical jump into the metaphysical sphere. In chapter two above, in interpreting the ‘autobiographical’ passage of the *Phaedo*, we have seen that these intelligibles are in truth what makes things what they are for us. There are no twos or threes in nature: it is the intelligible Two that makes all twos be twos for us.**

#### **4**

**Allow me to end with a jest: Thus Plato in raising a metaphysics without infringing the principle of philosophical ignorance has shown that the metaphysical cake is the only cake you can eat and still have.**

**PART TWO  
PLATO IN FIVE ASPECTS**

**Chapter Eight**

**Theorist**

**A**

**A THEORY PLATO IS INNOCENT OF**

**Ask anyone with a nodding acquaintance with philosophy, “What is Plato best known for?” and she or he will blurt out, “His theory of ideas”. Plato had no such theory. The so-called ‘theory of ideas’ was a child of Aristotle’s imagination. Yes Plato had ‘ideas’ at the very heart of his philosophy, not the sickly Aristotelian ‘theory of ideas’ that every student of philosophy is trained, parrot-like, to ascribe to Plato, but the rich Socratic notion of the intelligible ideas that confer on the instances in the natural**

world their meaning and their very being as what they come to be to us. For no thing in nature is anything in itself; how can it be a thing when it has absolutely no permanence and hence no character? The human mind, thrown into the nebulous turmoil of the natural world, cuts and hews and shapes a world of things of borrowed stability and assumed permanence. But so entrenched in learned circles are the many Aristotelian fictions about Plato that even the youthful Bertrand Russell could propagate in *Problems of Philosophy* (1912) the Aristotelian fabrications for genuine Platonic ware.

Plato was enamoured of the intelligible ideas. He called an intelligible *eidos* or *idea* (form). Since the forms are what makes things meaningful to us and since a philosopher is concerned with the intelligible forms rather than the particular instances, Plato sang the praises of the Forms, spoke of them poetically, in the *Phaedrus*, in a flight of poetic imagination, he envisioned a celestial abode of the Forms around which the souls even the souls of the gods tour for spiritual nourishment, a sheer imaginative myth. I suppose this was what Aristotle spoke of as *chôrismos*. Plato speculated about the best way to express the fictional link relating the forms to the objective instances. In the first part of the *Parmenides* he showed

that there is no satisfactory way of expressing this fictional connection. In the *Sophist* he explodes the idea of fixed unchangeable Forms (248e-249a). In spite of all this Aristotle spoke of a *chôrismos* in Plato's 'theory of Forms' and our learned scholars fill tomes criticizing the non-existent theory.

### SOME PLATO'S THEORIES

Plato had a sportive mind; he must always be playing with new ideas; call it a penchant for theory. He would form a theory, enthusiastically experiment with it for a while then forget it.

Socrates was a single-minded man. He was completely occupied with calling all people to realize in themselves the special excellence (*aretê*) proper to and possible for a human being. Plato on the contrary had diverse interests and an imagination of Shakespearean scope. Composing his dialogues alone (some thirty of them) could have been a sufficient lifelong occupation for another person. Setting up and running his school (the Academy) was another such occupation. Leave alone his Syracusan escapade. Beside all this he found time, or else the activities of the Academy obliged him to find time, to propose and experiment with

various heuristic and logical theories that may be good as far as they go but are not part of or necessary for philosophy proper. Shall we say that his mind, like Kant's, craved neat, nicely ordered systems, and when philosophy proper could not provide that, it had to find other means?

Plato well knew that in the philosophical quest that is needed to make of the life of a human being a coherent whole there can be no place for any fixed doctrine or any fixed formulations of thought -- this being the quintessence of the philosophical quest, namely, to be a constant search for coherence and integrity. He well knew that, and we waste the whole worth of Plato's philosophy if we ignore that as those who deplore the absence of a fixed system in Plato's thought do. It is well to remember this especially when we come to discuss theoretical ventures the avowed goal of which is to attain fixity and correctness.

I hesitated long when I came to this chapter. If I chose to discuss Plato's theoretical ventures, that discussion would have been on the whole quite negative, and that would have upset the overall scheme of this book as I originally conceived it. On the other hand I somehow could not stomach the idea of leaving out this chapter altogether. At last, after much wavering, aggravated by the accidental

deletion of a version I was working on experimentally, I at last decided to list some of Plato's numerous theories with minimal comment.

1. **Method of inquiry by hypothesis**: This was introduced in the *Meno* and developed in the *Phaedo*. It might be of use in empirical investigation but I cannot see it working in a philosophical context. Its application in the 'final argument' for immortality, to my mind, conforms neither to the *Meno* model nor even to its presentation in the *Phaedo*. It is decidedly not a development of Socratic dialectic as some have suggested.
2. **Collection and division**: This was introduced in the *Phaedrus* and then applied in the *Sophist* and the *Statesman*. Plato obviously at one time expected much of it and it may have been set as an exercise for members of the Academy. Again I have to say that I cannot see how it can be of any use in philosophy as understood by Socrates or by Plato himself in his flights of inspiration.
3. **The tripartite soul**: In the *Phaedrus* the soul is represented in an allegory as a chariot with a charioteer and two horses, one good and the other vile. As an allegory that was fine but when Plato turned it

into a psychological theory he was inviting serious criticism.

4. Poetry and art as *mimēsis*: Two years ago I wrote a paper titled “Shelley Answers Plato” from which I pick up the following lines: “Plato ... was a born poet but had a love-hate attitude to poetry...Plato was enraged by the immoral and irrational stories about the gods propagated by the poets ...Then I suppose Plato, to mollify his bad conscience about his adverse stance towards poets and poetry, concocted the theory of imitation ...” (“Shelley Answers Plato” is included in *Last Words* which can be downloaded from [Archive.org](http://Archive.org) as well as from [Philosophia937.wordpress.com](http://Philosophia937.wordpress.com).)

I have written much more than I had intended. I hope what I have written in this chapter will not cloud whatever impression may have been produced by the earlier chapters.

**PART THREE**  
**FOUR METAPHYSICAL**  
**PRINCIPLES**

**PART THREE**  
**FOUR METAPHYSICAL**  
**PRINCIPLES**  
**Chapter Nine**  
**Intelligibility**

**With the Ionian thinkers the human mind made a qualitative leap to a new plane of being; I was tempted to say ‘a new plane of intelligent being’, but this would be puerile, because in my philosophy not only is all being intelligent, but being is nothing but intelligence; but I am anticipating what this chapter is all about, so let me retrace my steps.**

**The Egyptian priests had much high knowledge in various fields: astronomy, mathematics, chemistry,**

medicine, what you will. The Babylonian astronomers kept records of their astronomical observations and they may have instituted the seven-day week, naming the days after the Sun, Moon, and the five planets known to them (not including the Earth). The Indian and Chinese sages had profound insight into moral and metaphysical realities. In the case of the Ionian thinkers there was a difference. They did not institutionalize their knowledge, not at first anyway, nor did they tie it to any theological creed or practical purpose. Each individual thought by himself and for himself, claiming no authority, seeking no approval, expecting no personal benefit; they only sought to satisfy their own mind. This amounted to making of Reason a supreme, self-contained end in itself. The Life of Reason, like Life itself, had its worth in itself, of itself, for itself.

In seeking to live the life of pure reason, the philosophical life, the philosopher implies that life and the world are intelligible or – and here comes the indomitable audacity of the philosopher – can be made intelligible. The philosopher declares: If the world is not intelligible or cannot be made intelligible, then it is as nothing to me. This is the hidden meaning in Parmenides's *tauto gar esti noein te kai einai* (“one and the same thing it is to be thought and to be”). Einstein famously said: “The eternal

**mystery of the world is its comprehensibility.” But what does it mean for Einstein to speak of the comprehensibility of the world? It means that the world obligingly permits certain mathematical formulations to fit the organization of the world. Pythagoras had already seen that. But it is the same world that obligingly accepted to be attired in the formulations of Ptolemy, of Kepler, of Newton, of Einstein. This is not the philosophical intelligibility, but even if we confine ourselves to the mathematical model we can see that we always live in worlds of our own making. For from beginning to end all knowledge and all understanding is a show authored and presented by the Wizard Mind. But the intelligible world created by the philosopher is not merely an orderly world that enables us to make predictions of natural happenings but is a meaningful world in which moral and aesthetic values have their rightful place.**

**Yet still, you will say that the philosophical world thus delineated is a world of our own making and may not be true of the actual world. Yes, indeed, that is so. We buy the world that satisfies our craving for meaningfulness and our moral and aesthetic needs at the price of confessing our ignorance of all that is outside our inner reality. Thus here too the principle of philosophical ignorance is vindicated.**

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**Having written the above I felt unsatisfied; certainly this was not the conclusion that already lay within the first sentence I began with as the flower lies within the seed; but for the moment I felt as if I had nothing more to say. Two months earlier I had written a paper for my blog on the Principle of Intelligibility. Normally when I have finished with writing something then often soon after I can't remember what I had said there. This is the prerogative of the philosophical essayist as against the philosophical scholar. The essayist composing successive accounts of the Metaphysical Elephant doesn't worry if at one time he was speaking of the elephant's trunk, at another time of the tail, and at yet another time of the tusk. At all times he was speaking truly. The poor scholar is expected to perform the impossible task of reporting on the whole Elephant at once. Anyway I went to my blog paper and decided to reproduce it here only omitting the first paragraph and a sentence or phrase here or there and I beg the Reader's indulgence for the remaining repetitions. (In revision I made other alterations and additions.)**

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**With the birth of philosophy (as distinct from the wisdom of the oriental sages) the human mind threw down the gauntlet to the universe demanding that it be intelligible. That was the challenge issued to the World by Thales and his Milesian successors. The human mind no longer accepted to yield slavishly to the unknown powers behind the happenings of the natural world. The primitive mind sought to appease and/or if possible sway the gods behind thunder and rain and fire, behind birth and death. The Hellenic thinker knew full well that the powers of nature could crush him; that was as nothing to him; he demanded to know what those powers are and how they function. When Thales said that all things were full of gods that was not a polytheistic dogma; it was a rational conviction that there was a *logos* (reason) for the doing and for the being or becoming of everything; that there was motive power in all that happens. That was the insight that Plato, some two centuries later, encapsulated in the assertion that everything that is in any sense real is at bottom nothing but *dunamis*, power, energy (*Sophist* 247e). That – the insight of Thales and the statement of Plato – is far in advance of the position of our present-day ‘materialists’ (under whatever newfangled designation) who think that their ‘laws of nature’ control and move the world. (More**

on the ‘laws of nature’ below.) (In referring to ‘materialists’ I have in mind philosophizing-scientists and science-mimicking philosophers. For science working within its proper sphere materialism is a legitimate first principle, being just another name for the objective.)

Not long after Thales and his immediate successors we find Heraclitus speaking of the *Logos* that holds always and Parmenides who affirmed that to be intelligible and to be is the same thing (*tauto gar esti noein te kai einai*). Jumping over millennia we find Einstein, relatively quite recently, saying: “The eternal mystery of the world is its comprehensibility.” But what are we to understand by the ‘comprehensibility’ of the world? Perhaps earlier than (or contemporaneously with) the Milesian school Pythagoras noted that things (beginning with musical notes) had a mysterious affinity to number. Modern science is fundamentally and basically built on this affinity. Thus in all things scientists look for their quantitative aspect. This enables them to formulate relatively constant equations that make it possible for scientists to make predictions of happenings in nature — predictions that are always approximate and always provisional (despite Laplace’s confident prophecy). In support of this statement, especially as I claim no scientific competence, I will quote

**words of two scientists of the highest rank of scientific genius.**

**Einstein said: “As far as the laws of mathematics refer to reality, they are not certain, as far as they are certain, they do not refer to reality.”**

**Stephen Hawking who departed only the day before I began this essay said: “... you have to be clear about what a scientific theory is. ... a theory is just a model of the universe, or a restricted part of it, and a set of rules that relate quantities in the model to observations that we make. It exists only in our minds and does not have any other reality (whatever that might mean). ... Any physical theory is always provisional, in the sense that it is only a hypothesis: you can never prove it.” (*A Brief History of Time*, first chapter)**

**Let this suffice for the ‘comprehensibility’ of the universe, only let us keep in mind that number is a creation of the human mind and the equations of scientists are creations of the human mind. Now, as we jumped millennia forward from Heraclitus and Parmenides to our present day, let us jump millennia back to Plato.**

**The much maligned Platonic ‘theory of forms’ boils down to this: We understand nothing but what our mind**

clothes in forms of its own creation. This is the same insight we find in Kant who said that reason finds in nature nothing but what reason itself has put in nature (*Critique of Pure Reason*, first ed., xviii). The bare sense impressions that Locke called 'ideas' mean nothing, say nothing, until the mind confers on them a character born in the mind. But the ideas of the things in nature, of things outside the mind, including the human body, though they enable us to speak of things and to manipulate things yet they do not give us understanding of the inner nature of things, of the reality of things. This too was affirmed by Kant: things in nature are only known to us as phenomena. The 'comprehensibility' of the universe that Einstein spoke of does not take us far. The model of the universe that Hawking speaks of does not take us into the inner reality of things. All knowledge of things outside our own inner reality is nothing but a pattern, a shape, into which the mind moulds the otherwise meaningless phenomena of the outer world, just as a lad reclining leisurely on a grassy hill shapes the sailing clouds into giraffes and elephants and swans. Wittgenstein insightfully describes as illusion the modern belief that the scientific 'laws of nature' explain the phenomena of nature (*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 6.371).

**In the ‘divided line (*Republic* 509c-511e) Plato ranges the levels of knowledge from *eikasia* (image) concerned with images to *pistis* (belief) relating to commonplace acquaintance with actual things in the natural world, through *dianoia* (thought) relating to the area of empirical knowledge, to the topmost level concerned with pure ideas and principles (the field of philosophical reflection), in the ‘divided line’ designated as *nous* or *noêsis*, but elsewhere Plato names it *phronêsis* (reason, intelligence).**

**Thus with the Milesian thinkers the human mind begins its long journey in quest of understanding by proclaiming its self-awarded right to know the world as a whole. At a crucially important station in that heroic journey Plato declared, as stated above, that all things that are in any sense real are nothing but *dunamis*. I know of no one other than A. N. Whitehead who sensed the importance of that seminal declaration by Plato. Regardless of that, philosophers have been drawing their mind-bred models of the world and of ultimate reality, visions of reality I call them. Strictly, they are that and nothing but that, mind-bred visions of reality.**

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**[Warning to the Reader: What follows you will find truly crazed, for who dare aspire to look Reality in the face and preserve his sanity?]**

**Well then, seeing that there is no knowledge and no understanding of reality but the knowledge and the understanding that the mind creates for itself, I say that the mind, fount and home of all reality, is itself the ultimate Reality. To put it somehow paradoxically, the mind in its quest of ultimate Reality, by finding its own inner reality to be the only reality and the whole of reality, brings forth Reality into being by what Plato calls *tokos en kalôi*: its visions of ultimate Reality are portrayals of its own inner reality. The Delphic *gnôthi sauton* is the beginning and end of the mind's quest of Reality. And since I say with Plato that all reality is essentially *dunamis*, I say that the reality of the mind or the ultimate reality that is the mind is sheer creativity. Begging Plato's forgiveness, I will re-state his dictum thus: *ta onta hôs estin ouk allo ti plên phronêsis*. Further, the mind that is itself ultimate Reality, I say, is not an entity that is creative and intelligent, nor even a God that is creative and intelligent, but is wholly and purely creativity. I also say that it comes to the same thing to say that ultimate reality is creative intelligence or, better said, intelligent creativity. I name it**

**Creative Eternity.** The justification of this name is given in my books, particularly *Creative Eternity: A Metaphysical Myth*, and will be taken up again in the last chapter of this book, “Principle of Creativity”.

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**In conclusion let me emphasize two things. (1) My vision of Reality is just that, a vision that gives my mind satisfaction and is one of many possible visions. If I say that ultimate Reality is mind, it is consistent with this to say that my vision of Reality is a reflection of my own inner reality which is strictly ineffable and consequently all representations of it can be nothing but myths aspiring to speak the unspeakable. (2) My vision of Reality does not seek or claim to be applicable to, or to be true of, the actual world. Scientific ‘models’ of the universe are, as Kant saw, confined to phenomena. Whitehead contrasts Plato’s *Timaeus* myth with Newton’s *Principia* in a passage that philosophers and scientists would do well to study carefully. (Whitehead’s *Process and Reality*, p.93.)**

**As a bonus to the Reader let me add this: He who does not find all I say in this book plainly intimated in Spinoza’s *Ethics* has understood neither this book nor Spinoza’s *Ethics*.**

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**To sum up and conclude: I cannot see how Reality or any reality could be intelligible had not Reality ultimately been nothing but Intelligence. Hence we may say that Einstein's mystery of comprehensibility seems to be whispering to us that ultimately the essence and substance and the all in all of Reality is nothing other than a perpetual act of comprehension. But in obedience to the principle of philosophical ignorance we must confess that we have no right and can assume no right to dictate to the actual world, the world outside our mind. All our philosophical visions are fairy tales we weave to while away our time during our life-journey from the unknown Before to the unknown After. I really can see no way how to escape our confinement within the fabrications of our mind and can see no way how our mind may arrogate to itself the right to dictate to the actual world. I believe that this would have been Kant's position too had not his Christian faith deluded him into thinking that Practical Reason can usurp the right to make factual judgments about God and the soul and the hereafter.**

**PART THREE**  
**FOUR METAPHYSICAL**  
**PRINCIPLES**  
**Chapter Ten**  
**Transience**

**Ultimate Reality cannot be simple. Parmenides's One, the 'simplicity' of which consists of an infinity of negations, could not bring about our tumultuous, variegated, ever-changing world. Though Parmenides found it necessary to follow his Way of Truth with the Way of Seeming, the Way of Seeming, however deceptive or illusory it may be, could not have come from nowhere. God cannot disown the World She has given birth to. If She persists in denying the World Her blessing we can only conclude that the World is a bastard child whose father remains**

**unnaed. Dropping this not quite delicate allegory let us affirm that to account for the world as we know it, we have to conceive of its ultimate source as multi-dimensional. This is the profound insight in the Hindu conception of the Trimurti uniting Brahma the creator with Vishnu the preserver and Shiva the destroyer, this last being what I call the Principle of Transience.**

**The insight of Heraclitus is nothing short of divine. At a time when it was difficult to think of, say, mountains as anything but solid and permanent, Heraclitus penetratingly affirmed that all things flow. In the extant fragments he speaks of a river where perpetually other and yet other waters flow. Plato absorbed the Heraclitian insight perfectly: he says you cannot even say of any given thing ‘this’ or ‘that’; all you can say is ‘here is a such’, and as you say it, it is already a different such (*Timaeus* 50a). Taking leave of Heraclitus and Plato let us consider the mountains we mentioned. You think you see a mountain over there. You are mistaken; the mountain you see is a fiction produced by your mind. Behind the fiction or beneath the fiction there is nothing steady and staying, strictly speaking nothing that is ever the same. The sun that was worshipped as an eternal god is now known to be seething and boiling (pardon the naivety of my terms) and constantly throwing off its own substance. Heraclitus said you don’t step into the same river twice. I tell you, you**

**don't see the same mountain in two consecutive seconds. The mountain this second is not what it was one second earlier. It, if we are permitted to speak of an 'it', is perpetually seething and boiling. The mountain you see is the fiction created by your mind to give the fleeting nonentity virtual permanence. So here is another example of what we said in the preceding chapter: we only see in nature what the mind has put there. Thus fiction is the tool through which Vishnu the preserver lends evanescent things virtual being and virtual permanence as Shakespeare gives the non-existent Hamlet virtual being and virtual permanence.**

**In the ontological part of *Let Us Philosophize* (1998, 2008) I had a chapter titled "Dimensions of Reality". I believe that the concept of dimensions of reality is original (in metaphysical thinking, though it is, as we saw, familiar in Hindu philosophy) and it is important to understand this concept. Just as I have been saying that ultimate Reality cannot be simple but must have multiple dimensions, likewise anything that is in any sense real cannot be simple but must be an organic, integrative whole having more than one dimension. (For a fuller discussion of Integrity see the following chapter.) Poets have the most penetrating insight into reality, thus I find the notion of the metaphysical whole beautifully illustrated in a stanza of Yeats:**

**Oh, Chestnut tree, great-rooted blossomer,  
Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?  
O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,  
How can we know the dancer from the dance?**

**William Butler Yeats,**

*Among School Children.*

**In the Whole that has its reality in its integrity we have a first dimension of transcendent reality as opposed to existent actuality. All actuality must be particularized. The particular is determined by what it is not; is constituted by negations, and as such can have no stability and no permanence. Thus all that exists as opposed to what is real is constantly in flux as Heraclitus declared. We may say, the law of Existence is Transience. To exist as an actuality is to be passing away, vanishing. Thus everything in nature, the solid mountains no less than the flower of a day, are shadows passing away. The sun that will come up tomorrow is not the same sun that came up this morning since it is constantly wasting its substance. How foolish it is to think that we can have laws that apply to a constantly changing nature with absolute correctness and absolute certainty.**

**Thus all existents have their undoing written in their formation. In inspiration a symphony is a daughter of Eternity but to be actualized it must suffer the evanescence of Time, its tones as they are born must die away..**

**All that begins must end. We say that a fertilized ovum begins the journey of life; it is more like truth to say that it begins the journey of dying and death.**

**In *Quest of Reality* (2009) I have a chapter titled “Three Metaphysical Principles”. I had half a mind to reproduce the section on Transience here: but no! it is there for whomever cares to look it up. However I could not resist plucking the lines from Shelley with which that section ends,**

**Worlds on worlds are rolling ever  
From creation to decay,  
Like the bubbles on a river,  
Sparkling, bursting, borne away.  
Shelley, “Hellas”.**

**PART THREE**  
**FOUR METAPHYSICAL**  
**PRINCIPLES**  
**Chapter Eleven**  
**Integrity**

**Nothing can have a share in reality unless it can be seen as constituting a Whole. Only a (relatively) self-contained whole is real and intelligible. To understand anything we have to see it as an integrative Whole or to see it in the context of a Whole.**

**No actual thing can be absolutely simple. The absolutely simple is an impossible, a meaningless, fiction. For anything to have reality in any sense it must be somehow qualified. This plain white sheet of paper has dimensions, has colour, has weight. Likewise, a thing**

**cannot be a jumble of unconnected things; the contents must be somehow related. In a pile of sand each grain of sand has a definite position in relation to all the others.**

**To say that the world grew out of an absolutely simple beginning is nonsense since the absolutely simple cannot exist so that our statement in effect amounts to saying that the world grew out of nothing, which is absurd. Physicists were driven to assert that the cosmos grew out of the Big Bang, but they found their conception of the Big Bang so riddled with puzzles they invented for it the designation ‘singularity’ which is a euphemism for absurdity.**

**I must apologize for bringing in science contrary to my insistence that philosophy and science should not mix and cannot mix, but I am vexed by the failure of scientists to see that there can be no knowledge of ultimate origins. Any supposedly scientific theory of the ultimate origin of the world is bound to be no less a myth than saying that the world was hatched from an egg. Scientists and scientist-philosophers should have learnt that from Kant. If physicists find that the Big Bang works for them, Congratulations! But it is absurd to see that as the Beginning.**

**You might say to me, “What about you Creative Eternity?” My answer is simple: My metaphysics, Aristotle’s metaphysics, Schopenhauer’s metaphysics are all myths that represent the world for us as an intelligible whole, a fairy tale, no more. Philosophers only err when they fail to see that their fairy tales are fairy tales. I blame philosophers for their refusal to see that philosophy does not give us knowledge but only intelligible visions. If philosophers are not happy with this let them go quarrel with God or whomever they consider responsible for the limitations of our nature. Only Socrates-Plato and in modern times Kant were wise enough to confess the extent of our inescapable ignorance.**

**Let us go back to the notion of Wholes as a *sine qua non* of reality and understanding. In poetry, in drama, in all literature and all art there is no place for the simply simple as there is no place for the simply multiple. A historian trying to give a convincing account of a particular event may collect hundreds, thousands of bits of information, but he will not be able to give a meaningful account until he has found a thread uniting the disparate bits of information in a coherent whole.**

**I have expounded the Principle of Integrity repeatedly in my writings, particularly in *Let Us Phikosophize* (1998, 2008) and more amply in Chapter Sixteen of *Quest of Reality* (2013) and I hope that what I have written here suffices to make the notion clear.**

**PART THREE**  
**FOUR METAPHYSICAL**  
**PRINCIPLES**  
**Chapter Twelve**  
**Creativity**

**1**

**The problem of Becoming is the hub of metaphysics. How can anything come to be? How can anything become what it was not? The ultimate problem of Being (Reality) is acknowledged, at least by those who are endowed with a metaphysical sense, to be a final and ultimate mystery, and that's that! There is nothing we can do about it. But the problem of Becoming seemed to be of a different nature and continued to irk thoughtful minds. Over millennia, from creation myths to the Ionian cosmogonists through**

**Aristotle's Four Causes to theories of evolution philosophers and scientists offered purported solutions to the problem. All of these left the central mystery untouched.**

**The notion of 'cause' is the most shallow and most poverty-stricken word in the philosophical vocabulary. It's a hazy notion without substance. Actually, you will never find a single isolated cause for any happening. For anything to come about there has to be a complex state of affairs interacting with another complex state of affairs. To give an exhaustive account of all the factors involved in the slightest happening is, strictly speaking, an impossibility since strictly speaking, ultimately, in the tiniest happening, the whole universe is involved. That is the insight behind Plato's portrayal of the world in the *Timaeus* as a living animal.**

**The pluralism of the Empiricists is no more than a practical working hypothesis. For if we have to think rationally at all we have to think of the whole world as a single integrated organism where the slightest motion anywhere depends on and reverberates in the Whole. For practical purposes we give accounts of various degrees of abstraction.**

**From the dawn of reflective thinking in humans, in respect of happenings ranging from the hunting of a deer by a primitive man to the landing of a research vehicle on Mars we have been speaking loosely of causes and causation. But that is not all: The accounts thus given of happenings, even when they are good enough for our limited objectives, do not explain the happening, do not make us understand the happening. All of our objective explanations of causation are of the kind rejected by Socrates in the *Phaedo* (the ‘autobiography’, 95e-102a), discussed in Chapter Three above.**

## **2**

**Thus philosophers and scientists could neither explain Becoming in general nor in particular instances of becoming. For a long time I too remained puzzled. The problem of Becoming continued to pester me although I had the answer all the time ever since my boyhood when my wrestling with the ‘obstinate questionings’ of first things led me to the conviction that ultimately Reality must be a Will, an affirmative Will, eternally outpouring its essence in particular finite ever-vanishing existents. Somehow for a long time I did not relate the problem of Becoming to that early vision of my boyhood**

**philosophizing. Thus I continued to search in vain for a formula that would apply to all instances of becoming. And maybe it was the bad example of philosophers who had proposed such ‘explanations’ that misled me to that false track.**

**I continued my van search until one day walking home it struck me like a thunderbolt from the sky, like the sudden illumination described by Plato in Epistle VII — Of course! Becoming is a dimension of ultimate Reality. It is the Creativity of Reality. If Reality is eternally creative, what need have we for any cause of becoming? Creativity is a dimension of ultimate Reality. It is an ultimate mystery that can never be explained. I gave ultimate Reality the name of Creative Eternity.**

**Among modern philosophers A. N. Whitehead had the right answer by viewing Process as of the very essence of Reality. Of course also Schopenhauer’s vision of the World as Will answers the problem correctly.**

### **3**

**Once we acknowledge the Principle of Creativity, entailing that creativity is of the essence of Reality, we can see that all becoming is creative and consequently can never be explained by empirical science. (See Chapters Two and**

**Three above.) We can describe processes of becoming but cannot explain them. We can describe the growth of a tree from a seed but still it remains a mystery. Only a fool thinks he understands how a sprout comes from the seed. So here again we see the Socratic principle of philosophical ignorance working. Only when we recognize and acknowledge our ignorance can we have the only kind of understanding possible to us human beings.**

**Further, all understanding is creative. A raw sensation in itself means nothing; only when the mind dresses the raw sensation in a Form created by the mind does the sensation become a perception that means something to our human mind. The simplest statement addressed by one person to another is not passively received by that other but goes through a process of creative interpretation in the recipient's mind.**

**When we are born we are thrown into a world completely foreign to us. Gradually we build a world of our own making. We live our whole life within that world that is ours in a special sense. This is true not only of the human race collectively but every one of us lives his whole life in a world his own in a special sense. And in that special world for every human being, the mind, as Milton**

**has it, is its own place, and in itself can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven.**

**4**

### **SUMMING UP:**

**The least event, the least instance of becoming, is ultimately inexplicable. All attempts to find an explanation or a general law of becoming, say no more than that an X extracted arbitrarily from the total event is followed by a Y extracted equally arbitrarily from the event. When we say that we see the connection, that we understand the ‘why’ of the event, we are deceiving ourselves, we are covering our ignorance. It took me long to grasp this and this was the coping stone of my philosophy: all becoming is creativity: the budding of a leaf is a creation or rather creativity. An event is a whole. To analyze it, to break it up into elements or parts or constituents is to let its secret slip between your fingers. The only intelligible model of creative becoming is an act of free will, from taking a sip of coffee to a heroic act of rushing through flames to rescue an entrapped child to poetic inspiration. And to admit the Principle of Creativity as the ultimate secret of Reality is simultaneously to affirm our submission to the principle of philosophical ignorance, for it amounts to confessing that**

**in fact we do not know: as when Socrates in the *Republic* is pressed to say what the Form of the Good is, he says: I cannot tell you that but will tell you of a Child of the Good, so when you ask me what Creative Eternity is, I say: I cannot tell you that but will give you a model of ultimate Reality as Creativity, and that model is the spontaneity of our Free Will, of which we have immediate self-evident cognizance but which we can never understand.**

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