

Plato and the Institution of Philosophy

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Introduction

In this essay I want to make some remarks about how the Ancient Greek philosopher Plato understands the nature of philosophy, and how this understanding informs the way in which he philosophises. I shall begin, however, with what appears a rather simple observation: the word *philosophy* has not always been around. I do not mean that it can only have possibly existed for as long as human beings have themselves been around to utter it, but that it is the creation of a particular culture, created at a particular time within human history. The word *philosophia* that gives us the English word *philosophy* is Greek, and one of the peculiar things about this word is that no other language has its own equivalent for it: all other languages modify the Greek word.

It is possible to say, then, that the Greek term does not translate a term that originates from a different culture, but is originally Greek, and is subsequently translated into other languages and cultures. If we look to the Greek language itself, we find that the word *philosophy* is historically preceded by the adjective *philosopher* (the Greek word is *philosophos*), and by the verb *philosophise* (the Greek is *philosophein*), both of which were in use in the fifth century BC. The term *philosophy* only enters into the Greek language with Plato. Plato is estimated to have lived sometime between 428BC and 348BC, and so we can surmise that it is at least a century after speaking of someone as a *philosopher* that the Greeks came to identify and enquire about a specific discipline that was thus said to be *philosophy*.

Plato speaks for the first time of philosophy in the *Phaedrus*, and he presents what he baptises with this name as something distinctive and original. The necessity of coining the word *philosophy* corresponds to the discovery of a particular manner of thinking that itself has not always existed. Now, as something which has not always existed, and which is thus a discovery, this new manner of thinking both deserves and needs to be preserved. This is why Plato commits his philosophising to writing, in contrast to his teacher Socrates who conducted all of his thinking verbally. However, the form in which Plato cast his philosophy, and in which it has come down to us, indicates a difficulty for Plato, an ambiguity in his attitude towards the manner in which he is compelled to preserve the discovery of philosophy.

Employing the dramatic form of a reputedly reported dialogue, Plato writes in a way that disguises that he is writing. It is as if Plato recognises that writing is a necessary evil, and if this evil cannot be avoided, it is necessary to try to ameliorate the dangers that it harbours by techniques that reproduce the form and manner of speech.

Why is it that Plato is reluctant to write while all the time recognising that he must write in order to preserve the discovery of philosophy? What does Plato's ambivalence tell us about philosophy itself? Another way of putting these questions is to ask ourselves how the Dialogue form that Plato uses allows him to negotiate the

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dangers he sees as inherent in writing, and so open up and sustain – in a word, institute – the institution of philosophy itself.

What It Means To Love Wisdom

As a first step towards answering this last question, it is necessary to ask what the word *philosophy* actually says. According to its etymology the Greek word *philosophia* means *the love of wisdom*. The word *wisdom* is our way of translating the Greek word *sophia*, which forms the second part of the word *philosophy*. *Sophia* for the Greeks meant *knowledge* in the broadest sense. This tells us how we now understand what we suppose forms the object of philosophy, what is said to be loved by its practitioners. However, substituting one term for another like this does not really say that much; and we could again ask what *wisdom* or *knowledge* are. Nevertheless, one thing is apparent: the word *philosophy* as a whole says something odd about the discipline that it names. We can see this if we compare it to the names used for other sciences. For example, the names *biology* and *physics*, which are both originally Greek words, tell us what is studied by these disciplines – living things and moving things respectively. But philosophy does not just tell us what is studied, it also names a disposition on the part of its practitioners – they *love* wisdom. In order to get a better idea of what *wisdom* actually means in this context we will have to follow this clue, and consider the disposition towards wisdom that is named love.

The verb *philein*, which comprises the first part of the word *philosophy*, means *to love*. When we speak of love we can mean many things, some more elevated than others. Yet in its most genuine sense we speak of loving something when we are bound to what we love in such a way that we give ourselves over to it, and allow it the possibility of being what it is. A parent's love for a child is such that it always seeks to allow the child to develop to their fullest extent, to flourish, and to realise their true potential. Understood in this way love is always something that is difficult to realise and sustain, for it means overcoming our own particular desires and ambitions in order to let the person that we love be what they are.

Thus, when Plato speaks of philosophy, he is speaking of a genuine inclination towards *sophia*, towards understanding or knowledge, which allows it to be what it is. However, if we follow further what Plato says about this love of *sophia*, we find something that is at first glance puzzling, and which seems to contradict what I have said about the genuine nature of love. In the *Phaedrus* Plato has Socrates declare that the *love of sophia* is *erotic*. But, what we should note is that Plato has in mind a fuller understanding of the erotic than something simply sexual. Where we only understand the erotic in a sexual sense we have lost something of the richness of Plato's thought. Socrates goes on to say that eros "is... desire".¹ The term 'desire' translates the Greek word *epithumia*. *Thumos* is Greek for the *heart* or the *soul*; and *epi* means *towards*; thus *epi-thumia* means a movement of the heart or soul towards something. Although love is a desire, and implies a longing for and movement towards something, it is not simply a longing that comes from the senses, it is a longing and movement of what is essential in the human being, its soul or heart.

Thus, for Plato, philosophy is a movement of the heart or the soul after wisdom. Because the heart or the soul must strive after wisdom it means that it does not possess such wisdom immediately. Certainly the heart or soul must lack wisdom in

order to feel the need to strive after it, but this does not necessarily mean that it is entirely ignorant; it can only undertake to strive after what it does not possess if it knows that it lacks it. For this reason Plato says that the philosopher – whose soul realises what it lacks – stands somewhere “between the wise and the ignorant”.² It is for the same reason that he has Socrates accept the declaration of the Delphic Oracle that he, Socrates, is the wisest man in all of Athens with the qualification that if he is wisest it is because, unlike most men, he knows that he knows nothing. In effect what Socrates says is that he is a human, and like all humans he is lacking understanding or genuine knowledge, and yet unlike most other humans he recognises his own ignorance, and so at least is in a position to strive after wisdom.

There is however another reason why Socrates can maintain a claim to wisdom whilst still acknowledging that he knows nothing, a reason that will allow us to draw together all that we have so far said about philosophy. Philosophy is the striving on the part of the human being for what it does not possess. For Plato, as we have seen, what strives towards wisdom is the heart or the soul. The heart or soul is the very essence of the human being. In this sense, the word *philosophy* does not name an object that is studied; it names what genuine study and understanding involves – a movement of the soul, a movement of the human being in its true being. Thus philosophy can never be simply the acquisition and storing up of facts. Rather it is most properly a transformation of the being of the human being, a movement – or in Plato’s famous phrase – ‘a turning about of the soul’. So when Socrates says he knows nothing, he means that he is certain of no (particular) thing; or to put this otherwise, he is not concerned with particular facts. Nevertheless, because he is concerned with the fundamental attitude towards things that is the basis of us knowing them, he is still to be counted as wise. This is why philosophy can be considered to be a genuine love of wisdom, for it understands wisdom in its essence, it lets wisdom be what it is.

Thus, what Plato grasps is that prior to any acquisition of positive facts about things, wisdom is constituted by our attitude towards the world and ourselves. Plato sees that at bottom genuine knowledge of the world can only be attained if we first of all understand what we are, and on that basis the way in which we relate to the world. How we think of ourselves, or just as significantly, what we unreflectively presume about ourselves, is so fundamental that it conditions how we understand our particular experiences, and so what we accept as facts about the world. It is only if we dispose ourselves towards a genuine self-knowledge can we genuinely grasp anything about the world. For Plato, then, it is the case that in order to know the world we must first of all take a step back from it, and underpin all our facts with a more fundamental understanding of what we are. In other words, rather than satisfying himself or herself with simply looking at the world and accumulating facts about it, the philosopher must look away from the world as it immediately presents itself, avoid being seduced by the immediacy and vivacity of his or her direct experience, and in order to genuinely know the world first of all look into themselves. It is this self-knowledge that, properly speaking, constitutes wisdom.

The Problem of Writing

For Plato to philosophise is to move or displace the soul, to tear it away from its immediate absorption in the world, and turn it around through philosophising itself.

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Another way of putting this is to say that philosophy changes the way in which the human being looks at the world, and it is therefore able to change effectively and properly the world that is looked at. When the love of wisdom is understood as Plato understands it, it is the highest instance of human activity, what properly allows human beings to change and to realise their own greatest and truest possibilities. Philosophy, for Plato, is the greatest of all activities because it is the most active of all activities, before which and without which all other activities amount to nothing. In other words, philosophy is the highest form that human life can take.

All of this, however, presents Plato with a problem. Because philosophy is the highest of all human activities, it is also the one that is susceptible to the greatest corruption and misunderstanding. In Plato's eyes such corruption and misunderstanding was already exemplified by the ready confusion of philosophy with what was known in the Greek world as *sophistry*. The practitioners of *sophistry* were known as *sophists*, and yet for Plato the name sophist is entirely ironic: The sophists were not wise, but only supposedly wise. They relied on rhetorical trickery in place of genuine understanding in order to persuade an audience or interlocutor of their claims, and thus profited by both their own and their audience's or interlocutor's lack of understanding. Plato, and before Plato, Socrates suffered grievously from confusion with the sophists, and more importantly for Plato, so did philosophy.

The paradox that Plato faces, then, and that the Dialogues negotiate, is that philosophy's susceptibility to corruption and misunderstanding is not lessened but augmented by the attempt to preserve it in and through writing. To make this clearer it is first of all necessary to distinguish the way in which philosophy can be corrupted by the very attempt to preserve it in written form from the way in which factual information can be corrupted in being written down. It would seem that in writing down a factual observation, and thus preserving it, whatever corruption occurs is entirely accidental to the fact itself – that is to say, there is always the possibility that the observed fact is wrongly transcribed. In contrast to this, the corruption that philosophy can always suffer in its written preservation is one that can affect it even when it is accurately transcribed. This is because philosophy is not a factual discipline and is not concerned with the accuracy of facts, but a disciplining of the essential nature of the human being. When philosophy is corrupted, what is subject to corruption is this disciplining of the essential being of the human being that philosophy seeks to effect.

Of course Plato recognised this. In the *Phaedrus* Plato famously has Socrates contrast the virtues of spoken dialogue with the weaknesses of the written word. For all that it promises to extend wisdom and memory the written word really threatens them, for it offers only the appearance of both. Writing, Plato suggests, suffers from a lack of intelligence; it cannot answer to interrogation, nor can it discriminate amongst those who read it. Because of these inherent failings, and in contrast to the spoken word which always presupposes the presence of speakers, it can neither provide intelligence nor provide for it, and thus it always is susceptible to offering the appearance of understanding without its reality. Thus, as Plato says, it is always possible to read many things without instruction, and so appear to know many things whilst remaining inwardly ignorant.³ The preservation that writing offers is external and mechanical, for it is not based in, and itself does not inform, a genuine understanding. We know this distinction between external memory and genuine knowledge from contemporary

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educational principles, which are informed by Plato's insights. For example, we recognise that whilst children can be made to memorise their times-tables, it is preferable that they be brought to understand the principles of multiplication and thereby liberated from a reliance on facts that they cannot understand and cannot go beyond. Similarly, and in short, writing can always provide information without that it necessarily disposes anyone who reads it towards genuine knowledge. It threatens to replace an active understanding with a passive memory, and in itself lacks the resources to effect the movement of the soul that is essential to all active, genuine philosophical comprehension.

The Dialogue Form

Having outlined why Plato finds writing a danger to philosophy, we can return to the consideration I brought up at the beginning of this essay. There I said that by adopting what we might call a dramatic form, by simulating dialogue, Plato writes in way that attempts to disguise that he is writing, and thus it is as if he writes without wanting to write. We can now appreciate this reluctance to write as a positive feature of Plato's work that has its own philosophical justification. Wanting to preserve the possibility of philosophy Plato has to write, yet he must write in such a way that he does not betray that possibility by seeking to preserve it: he must write without writing. To push this appreciation further, it is necessary to try to see how the Dialogue form allows Plato to avoid the dangers he sees in writing.

One of the distinctive traits of the Platonic Dialogues is that often they do not just report a conversation, but stage themselves as reported reports, or even as reports of reported reports. For example, whilst in the *Euthyphro* Plato simply reports Socrates' purported discussion with Euthyphro, in the *Phaedo* Plato reports Phaedo's report of Socrates' discussion with his friends on the day of his death. In the *Theaetetus* the successive embedding of report in report is yet more involved. Such sophisticated staging of the Dialogues is an indication that Plato aims at something more than merely recording Socrates' conversations.

Now one reason why Plato stages the Dialogues in this way is to avoid the dangers he sees as implicit in writing. As we have already noted, for Plato the problem with writing is that it lacks intelligence: it knows not whom to speak to or not to speak to, it has no power to protect or help itself.⁴ To discover how this staging helps Plato avoid the dangers of writing we do not have to look very far, for not only do the Dialogues answer to those dangers, the characters themselves sometimes bring up a similar problem and give a response to it themselves. In other words, Plato sometimes dramatises within the Dialogues the problem that the Dialogue form itself answers to. By having his characters reflect on writing, and on the most appropriate form for philosophical discussion and argument, by embedding a sort of implicitly reflexive commentary on his own practice within the Dialogues, Plato invites us, his readers, to think about what he is *doing* as much as about what he is saying. Thus we are able to develop our account of how the Dialogue form works, and enter into a reflection on philosophical practice, on the basis of what they themselves say, or more exactly on the basis of what the characters within them say.

In the *Sophist* Socrates asks the Stranger, who has been called upon to speak, what method of discourse he would prefer. He answers that his decision depends on the

disposition of his potential interlocutor. If the interlocutor is unable to appreciate the difficulty of the discussion, or if he is dogmatic or recalcitrant, it would be better, says the Stranger, that he speaks alone. On the other hand, if this is not the case he will engage in dialogue. But even when Socrates proposes a tractable interlocutor to the Stranger, the Stranger still says that because of the inherent difficulty of the subject matter he would prefer speak alone and simulate a discussion. The Stranger then makes a proviso: after he himself has made trial of the matter, his potential interlocutor can be admitted to the discussion. In this way, those characters without philosophical experience or lacking a properly philosophical disposition are excluded from dialogue. But this exclusion is temporary, and operates in such a way that it makes their admittance to the dialogue possible; for at the same time as they are excluded they witness themselves represented in the simulated dialogue. After having witnessed themselves in the simulated dialogue, they can be admitted, or admit themselves to the dialogue by linking on to it with a question.

These characters' expulsion from the dialogue and subsequent readmittance figures the reader's own relation to the Dialogue. Unlike an essay, for example, the Dialogue form puts off any direct, unmediated address between Plato and the reader. When certain of the Dialogues set their reports within reports, then this mediation is further mediated, and the reader pushed further back from the direct scene. As one commentator has remarked, like the characters themselves, but more so, the reader's direct philosophical engagement is deferred by these devices.⁵

So far we have seen how the Dialogue form works to protect philosophy from misunderstanding and corruption by mediating its address to the reader. But this is only the negative side of Plato's negotiation of the difficulty that writing presents him with, and we might wonder if it is really sufficient to protect the institution of philosophy from its corruption if there is not also a positive way of inviting the reader into philosophy, of getting them to philosophise themselves in response to what they have read. Our next, and final, question then must be this: how do the Dialogues actually invite and secure an active comprehension by the reader, how do they promote the turning around of the soul that distinguishes the discipline of philosophy?

The Allegory of the Cave

This final question is one that concentrates every point so far considered. To make this clear it can be put in the following terms: how is the reader, who is potentially outside of philosophy, outside of the dialogue, introduced into philosophy?

In Book VII of *The Republic* Plato has Socrates relate what is known as the *Allegory of the Cave*. This allegory represents the idea of a philosophical education. It pictures people as dwelling in a dark, underground cave, and as fettered by chains. Humans are thus shown to be in a state lacking in enlightenment and as imprisoned. Moreover, they do not recognise the state they are in: they are ignorant of their condition, and held captive by their own ignorance. Philosophy is shown to offer an escape from this condition, and to have the potential to free humans from their state of captivity, turning them away from the immediate concerns that captivate them, and leading them to an understanding of the truth of their own situation and their own being. Now, Socrates has first of all to recount the idea of a philosophical education as an allegory so that those he tells the story to in the Dialogue can have some understanding of what

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he is talking about. But over the characters shoulders, so to speak, and by way of Socrates, Plato is addressing the reader of the Dialogue. Thus the *Allegory* also aims to show us, Plato's readers, in the clearest and most concrete way possible what the essence of a philosophical education consists in.

At first glance it might appear that all we, Plato's readers, need to do is interpret the *Allegory* (which I have just done), substituting for its pictures and images the meaning that they represent. However, if we think this is all that is at issue in the *Allegory*, then we miss its true purpose. If the *Allegory* is to work, it needs to do something more than just picture to us the essence of philosophical education: it needs to educate us. In other words, as philosophical in itself Plato's account of the essence of philosophical education must not only illustrate, but exemplify what such an education consists in. It must effect an introduction to philosophy, it must produce as much as picture the turning about of the soul that is the essence of philosophical education.

Thus the truth of the *Allegory* lies not in its abstract meaning, but in its own ability to effect a movement of the soul.

Perhaps we all have some sense that a simple interpretation of the meaning of the *Allegory* does not suffice to account for its truth and purpose. It is my experience when teaching the *Allegory* that the majority of students are initially unconvinced by the picture it presents. But such resistance and scepticism is precisely what Plato sets out to provoke on the part of his reader, and this resistance and scepticism is first of all found in the characters that listen to Socrates' *Allegory*. Thus Plato actually draws upon the reader's inclination to resist the very picture that Socrates draws, in order to initiate the movement of the soul that philosophy demands. Socrates begins the *Allegory* saying, "Imagine – picture this! Men dwelling in a sort of underground cave..."⁶ The imperative, 'Imagine' is, of course, indeterminate in its addressee – it addresses both the characters that Socrates speaks to in the Dialogue, and also the readers of the Dialogue. Glaucon, one of those characters to whom Socrates speaks, responds to Socrates' picture by saying that it is an "uncanny, out of place, image" that he gives of "uncanny, out of place people".⁷

What is it that is so strange about this image? Why is it said to be "uncanny" or "out of place" by Glaucon? In the first instance Glaucon's reply could be said to anticipate the reader's. The image that Socrates presents is "out of place" because it does not accord with our experience, and so is unbelievable. Socrates' response to Glaucon appears to want to confront his scepticism. The people in the image, Socrates says, are "like us".⁸ In other words, the image is 'uncanny' because of its less than obvious proximity to our own situation, because it presents something to us that we initially are wont to overlook. According to Socrates, then, the image portrays us, human beings, as we truly are, and it initially appears uncanny, strange, out of place, unbelievable, because "we" find in it something unfamiliar, something "we" do not recognise in our experience and situation.

How convincing is Socrates' response? In fact it is not necessary that Socrates' response to Glaucon should command our assent; in fact the opposite is the case. Should this counter-claim excite even more resistance and disbelief on the part of the reader, then it has done its work.

The more that “we”, Plato’s readers, refuse or are unable to see ourselves in the image that Socrates presents of these uncanny people, the more closely we resemble them. Just like them, we refuse the picture that philosophy offers us of our situation. However, as soon as we reflect that our own attitude not only reflects Glaucon’s astonishment, but also the hostility of the prisoner’s depicted in the *Allegory* towards the philosopher and towards philosophy, then we cease to resemble them. The less that we think we are like the people pictured the more we are, and the moment we see ourselves in them, then we distance ourselves from them. It does not matter so much that we accept everything that Socrates says, in fact that is not the point at all. Rather the point is that we initially refuse it, and then reflecting on that refusal actively begin to question not what Socrates says, but ourselves. If we recognise in ourselves a likeness to the prisoners insofar as we resist what Socrates says, then we actually initiate the philosophical movement of questioning ourselves. We no longer trust the way that we appear to ourselves, and in doing so we cease to be what we were. In the *Allegory of the Cave* Plato intends that we first see ourselves reflected, externalised and reject what we see, but then reflecting and recognising ourselves we cease to be what is reflected and change. We are thereby brought to an active engagement in philosophy.

Conclusion

The institution of philosophy that Plato institutes is shaped by a mode of address that is in principle open to anyone. The book, the written word, can be taken up and read by anyone, and this throws philosophy open to corruption and distortion. However, the Dialogue form operates to overcome this potential corruption and educate its readers philosophically in the absence of the philosopher. The *Allegory of the Cave*, which for many students stands at the entrance to philosophy, exemplifies this. The *Allegory* works in such a way that “we”, its readers, are immediately implicated in it; but if, in the first instance, it speaks about us, then in our reflection upon it, we come to speak with it. It draws for us a picture of philosophical education, and operates in such a way that we are always already caught up in philosophy, and the philosophical disposition towards truth. The *Allegory* does not simply state the truth; it produces the movement towards truth in its readers. It takes hold of those who read it, and above all those who are resistant to what it says, folds them within itself, turns them around, and converts their speech. Henceforth, thanks to the *Allegory*, and the exemplary teacher that Plato is, we are all, each in our own way, philosophers.

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¹ Plato, *Phaedrus*, 237d, (trans. H.N. Fowler, Cambridge Mass: Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, 1995).

² Plato, *Symposium*, 204b, (trans. W.R.M. Lamb, Cambridge: Mass., Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, 1989).

³ *Phaedrus*, 275a ff.

⁴ See Plato, *Phaedrus*, 275e.

⁵ cf. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, pp 24–26, (trans. G. Van Den Abbeele, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988). In discussing the implications of the technique of Plato and the Institution of Philosophy Richmond Journal of Philosophy 2 (Autumn 2002) Keith Crome
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distancing the reader from the matter of the dialogues I am indebted to Lyotard's account, which despite its density and difficulty I recommend to anyone interested in this aspect of my essay. To any reader more generally interested in the implications of Plato's use of the Dialogue form, I would recommend the chapters on Plato in Martha Nussbaum's *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), in particular the chapter entitled 'Plato's Antitragic Theater', pp. 122 – 135.

⁶ Plato, *The Republic*, 514a, (trans. P. Shorey, Cambridge Mass., Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, 1994).

⁷ Plato, *The Republic*, 515a. I have modified the translation here, preferring to render the Greek word *atopon* more literally than does the P. Shorey. Shorey translates it as "strange", whilst I have preferred "out of place", and thus "uncanny". The literal meaning of "atopon", is something like "out of place" or "without place", which we might otherwise translate as "lacking all reality", or "unbelievable".

⁸ Plato, *The Republic*, 515a.