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Plato's Apophatic Legacy and the Unwritten Doctrines (II): Toward a Speculative Philology

ABSTRACT: This sequel to “Plato's Apophatic Legacy and the Tübingen School” (I) continues to argue for a generally apophatic interpretation of Plato's thought and especially of its influence and appropriations throughout the centuries down to modern times, for example, in Romantic thinkers such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Crucial is the self-negation of thought that undoes or deconstructs its purported objects in order to open thinking to the infinite that is always the context and horizon in which its sense registers and can be formulated. The second part of this combined reflection goes into more detail concerning the author's debate with the Tübingen school of interpretation, by highlighting tensions within that school itself between its objective philological methods and certain speculative exigencies of Platonic thought. Thought aspires to something that cannot be objectified but that remains unsurpassable at its own source and origin. This particular way of construing the essence of Platonic thinking highlights continuities with its precedents in presocratic philosophers such as Heraclitus and Parmenides, who begin to disclose the reflective resources of speculative thinking aiming at an unencompassable and undecomposable whole. On the other side of Plato, historically speaking, the negative theology of his Neoplatonic heirs is then traced in its ramifications into unlimited branches of culture and expressions in art, especially literary art, in all subsequent ages.

KEYWORDS: monism versus dualism • unknowing knowing • principles doctrine • intellectual intuition • creative imagination • anti-foundationalism • Tübingen philology • speculative philosophy

1. Premise

This sequel to Part I of “Plato's Apophatic Legacy” pursues further the question of an instance of *unknowing* at the heart of Plato's thinking, an unknowing lying deeper than all positive knowing. This continuing reflection distinguishes alternative methodologies of philosophy and philology respectively as decisive in determining whether Plato's thinking is to be considered monist or dualist, and this question is crucial, in turn, for determining whether this thinking's foundation is to be found in a supreme knowing of first principles or in ultimate unknowing. The Tübingen school

of Platonic interpretation emphasizes rigorously historical philology, which focuses on positive evidence of apodictic knowledge of principles. This approach favors articulation, which automatically entails duality. But even this school's own views are infiltrated by the equivocations that more speculative methods introduce. The theoretical grounding of any science such as philology is finally speculative. This methodological amphiboly works to begin to expose the foundations of knowledge itself in unknowing. Religious rites and cultic ceremonies are typical ways of relating to an ultimate ground that remains unknown. Acknowledging an unknowing at the bottom of all knowing situates philosophy in proximity to the mystery religions that it otherwise aims to distance itself from through rational critique. This paradoxical predicament produces and is made manifest by the creativity we observe as intellect operating imaginatively in myriad forms of culture and art as they unfold throughout subsequent centuries deeply influenced by Platonic thought. Creative intellect typically works from an imaginative projection of unity that cannot be grasped analytically but is realized in an irreducibly subjective act or aspiration.

2. Unity/Duality and Philological-Philosophical Amphiboly

Plato is, above all, a thinker of unity. Oneness is truth both in the written and in the unwritten traditions ascribed to his name. An unequivocal affirmation of *hen* (one) as the source of truth and knowledge, not to mention of beauty and being, is the salient point of agreement between oral and written traditions that are otherwise often discordant. This is why I resist taking articulate discourse, whether written or oral, as ultimate truth because it necessarily divides unity. For all their emphasis on the unwritten teaching as alone attaining to truth, the Tübingen interpreters actually realize this full well. Yet their stress on unwritten as opposed to written teachings, and the insistence on specific, orally taught and transmitted doctrines, obscures this point. The determination to state exactly the contents of the unwritten teachings seems to exclude the dimension of the unsayable, which, however, is fundamental to the Platonic ascent and vision of the philosopher who, metaphorically, sees the sun as the source of the visible universe and as an allegory for seeing ecstasically the intelligible source of being in the One¹.

There is a tension here between the science of philology, which seeks definitive answers in the precise determinations of texts, and the love of wisdom, or "philo-sophia," which is self-aware that it does not possess the

¹ Manuela Tecusan, "Speaking about the Unspeakable: Plato's Use of Imagery," *Apeiron* 25 (1992): 69-87.

wisdom that it seeks. Philosophy loves, which means that it desires and seeks, a wisdom that it does not possess and for which, arguably, it can give no adequate formulation or doctrine. Often manifest as conflict between schools of interpretation, this divide in approach can also be stimulating and nourishing and can ultimately lead to the kind of synthetic, composite visionary perspective that I wish to propound under the rubric of “speculative philology.” Philosophical speculation and historical philology are most provocative and poignant when they work together, transgressing their own disciplinary boundaries.

Such a hybrid approach is already defended in part by a number of scholars and thinkers. Concerning directly Plato, Jens Halfwassen, with historical and philological acumen matching that of the Tübingen researchers, nevertheless defends a highly theoretical negative theological approach. These divergent methodological tendencies—historical philology versus speculative philosophy—correspond to contrary impulses toward dualism and monism that both turn up in powerful forms within mainstream expressions of Platonism.

Starting from the results of the Tübingen school's research, Halfwassen interprets both the dialogues and the unwritten doctrines of Plato in a negative theological sense as pointing to a higher or deeper and more comprehensive principle that can only be approached by negative methods of abstraction, a principle that grounds the explicit, defined principles. The latter principle is described sometimes dualistically as an indefinite dyad (ἀόριστος δυάς), but Halfwassen demonstrates its grounding in the one principle of all, the good beyond being that is the cause of all (ἀρχὴ τοῦ παντός, *Republic* 511b 7). The dyad does not exist in itself, it has no being except in conjunction with the One. Its being beyond being is privative, a deficiency of being, whereas the One or Good beyond being is a transcendent fullness of being, not a privation. This “final monism in Plato that does not eliminate the bivalent structure of reality, but instead grounds it in a deeper, comprehensive principle” is a monism that Halfwassen finds to be “supported throughout the reports of the unwritten doctrine”².

Gaiser, too, recognizes that the principle of the One is the “ontologically grounding, solely positive Cause, first-ranking in worth, while the second principle is characterized as passive and negative” (“seinsbegründende, werthaft vorrangige, allein positive Ursache, während das zweite Prinzip als

² Jens Halfwassen, “Monism and Dualism in Plato's Doctrine of Principles,” in Dmitri Nikulin, ed., *The Other Plato: The Tübingen Interpretation of Plato's Inner-Academic Teachings* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012), 147.

passiv und negativ charakterisiert wird")³. It is just a shadowy counterpart of the first principle, lacking in any being of its own ("ein lediglich schattenhaftes Gegenstück des ersten Prinzips ohne eigenes Sein")⁴.

The dyad cannot be discursively derived from the One—nothing can be so derived given the absolute transcendence of the One—so the dyad must be presupposed independently (as hypotheses II and III of the *Parmenides* suggest). In this sense, the dyad is a principle which must be independently assumed in order to account for the many and the cosmos. Halfwassen writes, "The ἀόριστος δυάς [indefinite dyad] is therefore not absolutely final or first in the *reductive* ascent to the original ground, i.e., it is not a second ἀνυπόθετος ἀρχή [unconditioned principle], but rather a discursively non-derivable condition for the deduction of being; for no thinkable determination can be derived from the one itself in its absolute transcendence and unrelatedness" (149). Thus, Halfwassen concludes for a "deductive dualism," since the multiplicity of beings requires a plurality of principles to be articulated and explained. The absolute One discursively explains nothing.

This monistic reality, which cannot be described except dualistically, becomes fully explicit with Neoplatonism. Plotinus resorts to images of emanation since there is no rational account of the derivation of the many or of anything from the absolutely separate and autonomous One. Creation is not less than miraculous. Such are the dilemmas leading to a monism that paradoxically can only be described dualistically. This amphiboly is apophatic in that what is said in necessarily dualistic language is structurally incapable of adequately stating the non-dualistic nature of the ultimately real.

The ultimate principle is not discursively knowable, although the *Republic* does posit that the idea of the good is to be known (508e 4, 517b 8-c 1) and that its nature can be defined (534b 3-d 1). The philosopher kings are supposed to have knowledge of the idea of the good, even though Socrates does not count himself among those who know it. It is an esoteric knowledge that is not for all, not even for Socrates. Of course, the entire ideal construction of Plato's republic is only hypothetical. I believe that the philosopher king's knowing must actually be an unknowing knowing, a knowing of one's own limits rather than, or more profoundly than, apodeictic knowledge of an object. It requires dialectic and a double movement of thought ascending to a non-

³ Konrad Gaiser, "Platons esoterische Lehre," in P. Koslowski, ed., *Gnosis und Mystik in der Geschichte der Philosophie* (Zürich/München 1988), 13-40. Citation 25.

⁴ Christina Schefer, *Platons unsagbare Erfahrung: Ein anderer Zugang zu Platon* (Basel: Schwabe, 2001), 187, quotes Wolfgang Kullmann, "Platons Schriftkritik," *Hermes* 119 (1991): 1-21. Citation 20.

hypothetical starting point and a descent from this highest knowledge: this, in effect, constitutes apophatic and cataphatic methods working together. We might suspect that Socrates actually realizes and embodies this knowledge precisely by not claiming it for his own—just as he is the wisest of men for the Delphic oracle precisely because he knows that he knows nothing. By excepting himself from it, Socrates models this knowing, which is really an unknowing.

The Tübingen school, when propelled by their philological penchant, would like to claim that Plato believed that knowledge of the Good and of the One was definitively attainable for the philosopher. Szlezák's examination of the idea of the good as first principle in Plato's *Republic* underlines that it must be knowable in order to make all other ideas knowable⁵. It, the good, makes them "sufficiently" (ικανῶς) knowable (505a 6-7). However, this is already a crucial qualification of its being *absolutely* knowable. The idea of the good is thereby declared to be known "sufficiently" to support other ideas and lend them their value and usefulness (505e 3-4). Might this itself not enfold and allow for "knowledge" of an ultimate unknowing? Might such unknowing not be necessary and useful for unmasking myths and impostures and humbuggery, as Socrates demonstrates by his dialectical method throughout the dialogues?

Socrates does not include himself among the philosophers who are to have this knowledge of the Good (519d 1-2, 520a 8-b 4), which is extremely intriguing. How would he know that the philosophers have it if he does not know it himself? This knowledge is more of a hypothesis and a mythic projection. I take it as a figure for a knowing unknowing or a knowing of (one's own) unknowing, a *docta ignorantia*. It is structured for Plato dialectically, which means negatively. Like negative and positive theology working in tandem, it entails an ascent to the origin of all knowing and a subsequent descent (511b 6-8). The Tübingen school itself brings out a moment of negative, dialectical knowing at the core of Plato's doctrine. Szlezák's examination of Socrates's theory of the principles (especially the idea of Good) in the *Republic* emphasizes its incompleteness. Socrates does not expound the essence of the Good. He says that only god knows whether his opinion about it is true (533a 2-5).

The "two principles" or Dyad of the oral tradition of Plato's unwritten doctrine is similarly shrouded in mystery. If a definitive, apodictic knowledge of these principles is posited, it is more of the order of myth, of a story told

⁵ Thomas Alexander Szlezák, "The Idea of the good as ARKE in Plato's *Republic*," in Nikulin, ed., *The Other Plato*, 121-42.

about something not reducible to objective knowledge, which would then have its contrary and not be able to encompass the whole of truth, not wholly. It is in approaching and moving away from these principles that knowledge takes place. All things owe their being and essence to the principle of the One delimited in some way by the Dyad.

I take the ultimate truth on which all knowledge is founded to be in itself unknowable. Even if it were knowable, how would one know that one knew it? Is not such absolute truth incommensurate with the relativity of human consciousness and knowledge? This is not to deny very different manners of relating oneself to an absolute truth, the truth itself (αὐτὸ τὸ ἀληθές, 533a 2-5). Denied is only the possibility of mastering it and disposing of it in the sense that “knowing” it would seem to imply. Without knowing an absolute truth, we can nevertheless relate to it by encountering our own limits through self-reflection (the Socratic method) and opening ourselves to what lies beyond those limits. Like Gadamer, I would say that, “To grasp directly the good itself and to want to know it like a μάθημα appears to be impossible on account of its nature. One should take this inexpressibility, this ἄρρητον as soberly as possible”⁶.

That Plato’s published dialogues should be inhabited by an unwritten doctrine that was transmitted orally is an idea I willingly embrace. This move makes the sense of Plato’s philosophy hinge from something that does not as such appear spelled out in his texts. But the Tübingen scholars’ aim was to center Plato’s thought on the theory of principles that they deduced as the content of Plato’s oral teaching and presented as the veritable core and ultimate foundation of Plato’s thought, his definitive doctrine. I resist this delimitation and positive definition of Plato’s thinking and the Platonist paradigm. I would continue the trajectory of the displacement from the written to the unwritten further and recognize the oral teaching as itself inhabited by an unsayable experience of truth that all Plato’s teaching—written and oral—hinges on and points toward as its unconditional ground. This ultimate ground can only be negatively discerned, not positively formulated.

3. The Tübingen School’s Rejection of Unknowing Knowing—The Principles Doctrine

Hans Joachim Krämer, given his historicist insistence, would presumably not approve of my appropriations of the Tübingen school’s researches for an apophatic interpretation of Plato. Krämer explicitly rejects interpreting the

⁶ Gadamer, *Die Idee des Guten zwischen Platon und Aristoteles* (Heidelberg: C. Winter, 1978), 21.

first principles of the system, those reportedly presented in Plato's "Lecture on the Good," as non-propositional and in essence unknowable or "essentially unsayable." He dismisses the idea that "Plato had to refrain from writing down certain thoughts because they could not be presented in propositional form, and therefore could not be articulated"⁷. Krämer contends that Plato's refusal to resort to writing is "deliberate and purposeful" and should be understood on the basis of the fundamental critique of writing in the *Phaedrus*.

However, that Plato should make such a deliberate decision to withhold from writing certain formulations that could be written down does not mean that the ultimate principle itself (or principles themselves) might not still be intrinsically unknowable. All of our mediations, and derivations and our closest approaches to absolute knowing, can be written or not written at will and for purposeful reasons, even after this initial impasse vis-à-vis the principle(s) in and for itself is experienced and acknowledged. What Plato does not write yet *could* write need not be an adequate knowledge of absolute unity or the good, as if these terms could be fully intelligible to us discursively. Both the dialogues and the inner-academic tradition teach that the visionary experience, like looking at the sun, which founds the philosopher's knowledge, is not discursive. It even blinds the philosopher and makes him incapable of communication in worldly terms.

We may accept, at least provisionally, Krämer's argument that Plato is prior to the turn within Greek culture toward writing ("die inneren Verschriftlichung," 68). This turn is indeed found accomplished already in Aristotle's mode of philosophizing in his treatises, which is so different from the Platonic dialogue. I have no problem with Krämer's argument that, still for Plato, "The most significant, most valuable, and most difficult topics are excluded from documentation and storage for the purpose of recollection, and instead are reserved exclusively for orality" (69). But the foundation of knowing, whether expressed orally or scripturally, is not necessarily itself oral or scriptural. These alternatives give a concrete form to knowledge, but such finite forms do not as such ground absolute knowing, which is rather of the nature of the infinite—and necessarily so if knowing is absolute. Is this last point Hegelian rather than Greek? Could the Tübingen authors accuse me here of anachronism?

Krämer's evocation of a historical understanding versus a modern view, on reflection yields to the realization that any evocation of historical

⁷ Krämer, "Plato's Unwritten Doctrine," in *The Other Plato: The Tübingen Interpretation of Plato's Inner-Academic Teachings*, ed. Dmitri Nikulin, 66.

ideas is always *from within* the context of modern culture and its ideas. Our ideas of historical ideas are always also our own and owe the sense they can make to our own contemporary context. There is always some mediation of the modern in our approach to the ancient. This point is driven home by Gadamer's hermeneutical philosophy, and indeed Gadamer sees negative theology here, the unsayable or ἄρρητον (*Die Idee des Guten*, 21). He also places this respect and awe before the unsayable supreme principle into continuity with Neoplatonism. My chapters on Plotinus, Porphyry, Proclus, Damascius, and Dionysius the Areopagite in *On What Cannot Be Said*, vol. 1, document this Neoplatonic mediation⁸. Krämer, too, embraces this Neoplatonic mediation as giving some authentic insight into the tradition of Plato's oral teaching, and yet he has declared the apophatic thesis that is so pronounced in the Neoplatonic interpretation to be inadmissible.

The Tübingen school researchers are dedicated to determining exactly what this knowledge of the ultimate principles may have been and entailed in express terms of definite doctrines. They propose a specific content based on their reconstruction of the unwritten teachings, the ἄγραφα δόγματα, through testimonials of Plato's students and their later repercussions. An enormous work of critical interpretation is necessary for this endeavor and has been painstakingly executed by Krämer, Gaiser, Szlezák, and their collaborators. They point insistently to Plato's reticence to fully divulge the ultimate principle(s) of his system in writing, which is spelled out most extensively in the *Phaedrus* and echoes motifs in the *Republic* regarding the idea of the good as the ultimate source and foundation of knowledge, which Socrates declines to expound in that context.

In the Tübingen school's archeological work of reconstruction, the passage from the *Republic* alluding to the Good beyond being indicates an ultimate principle or foundation that Socrates leaves unexplained. He thereby deliberately creates a lacuna. It was to be filled in by the doctrine of principles that was expounded orally for initiates alone. The Tübingen school compares the passage from the *Republic* with references from other dialogues as well as from the theory of principles in the tradition of indirect transmission of Plato's oral teaching concerning the One and the indefinite dyad. Aristotle's *Metaphysics* A.6, 987b 26-30 is key for determining the content of the unwritten teaching. Aristotle contrasts Plato's with Pythagoreans' teaching:

⁸ *On What Cannot Be Said: Apophatic Discourses in Philosophy, Religion, Literature, and the Arts*, edited with Theoretical and Critical Essays by William Franke (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), vol. 1: Classic Formulations.

But ... positing a dyad and constructing the infinite out of great and small, instead of treating the infinite as one, is peculiar to him [Plato]; and so is his view that the Numbers exist apart from sensible things, while *they* [Pythagoreans] say that the things themselves are Numbers, and do not place the objects of mathematics between Forms and sensible things⁹.

In the *Physics*, Aristotle refines this account by reporting that Plato actually recognized two different infinities: "But Plato has two infinities, the Great and the Small" (δύο τὰ ἄπειρα, τὸ μέγα καὶ τὸ μικρόν, *Physics* Γ.4 203a 15-16, Γ.6 206a 28)¹⁰. In either case, the second supreme principle is a material principle and passive with respect to the shaping power of the first principle. Since it has no form in and of itself it can hardly be said to "be" independently of the One that gives all things to be. It, too, therefore, would have to be admitted to be beyond being. It is not distinctly other than the One through the agency of which alone it can produce beings, serving as a sort of plastic material. Are these not images for the creative source of being that aim to capture the paradoxical facts of multiplicity in the universe and the presumed oneness of its source? They raise also the question of theodicy. The problem of how evil can exist as coming from an all-good Creator subtends Plato's thinking, as the *Timaeus*, for instance, makes evident in its presentation of the story of universal creation.

This comes out in the passage in chapter 6 of the first book of the *Metaphysics*, where Aristotle concludes that Plato:

... used only two causes, that of the essence and the material cause (for the Forms are the causes of the essence of all other things, and the One is the cause of the essence of the Forms): and it is evident what the underlying matter is, of which the Forms are predicated in the case of sensible things, and the One in the case of Forms, viz., that this is a dyad, the great and the small. Further, he has assigned the cause of good and that of evil to the elements, one to each of the two, as we say some of his predecessors sought to do, e. g. Empedocles and Anaxagoras ... (988a 8-16).

The fact that the doctrines are *unwritten* designates them with a figure of negation, and this is what is most fundamental in my view. They are a negative teaching, or a teaching by means of the negative. This is not categorically different from the dialectical method that Plato develops in his

⁹ W. D. Ross translation in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941). (22A in Gaiser's *Testimonia*)

¹⁰ Translation of R. P. Hardie and R. K. Gaye in McKeon.

dialogues. Socrates works fundamentally by undermining other characters' beliefs that they know something. The result of the dialogue is to negate their knowledge. Most significant about the unwritten doctrines as ultimate principles is not that they are orally transmitted but that they are *not* written, not articulated in a stable medium. They can be transmitted only in a contingent and transient manner. Such is the burden of Plato's statement in the *Seventh Letter*: "... no man will venture to express his deepest thoughts in words, especially in a form that is unchangeable, as is true of written outlines" (243a).

Of course, for Plato, what can be known perfectly are intelligible entities, not physical beings. Only those things that are unchanging and eternal admit of being objects of apodictic or demonstrative knowledge. But does such knowledge necessarily exclude ignorance in some respects, even while knowledge and even perfect knowledge is attained in others? Is not any kind of exclusive truth exceeded by an absolute, non-exclusive truth, one that cannot exclude its opposite?

Precise scientific knowledge of objects is also Plato's philosophical project, but it does not exclude making room for apophatic unknowing and even requires being accompanied by such unknowing. Our task in assimilating the lesson of Plato is to understand how to think these two gnoseological attitudes together and at the same time. A precise scientific knowledge generally seems to exclude any concession to unknowing. Science is certain of its objective knowing. Yet this claim to autonomous self-validation makes science incomplete by cutting it off from the whole of which it is part¹¹. It makes knowledge a self-enclosed and self-verifying circuit, but only by cutting it off from all circumambient context necessary to lend it its sense.

Krämer maintains that "the written and the unwritten doctrine for Plato stand in a relationship of implication and explication that is comparable to the relationship of *Realphilosophie* and logic in Hegel"¹². The explanation, however, is in the hypothetical realm of oral discourses, about which testimony is indirect. Only direct experience can furnish the knowledge that philosophers require, not formulas passed down through tradition. This is why I maintain that whatever words may be proffered orally in a lecture cannot give definitive knowledge. There has to be an experience beyond this objective knowing of defined concepts. Knowledge of truth of the order

¹¹ A. N. Whitehead makes a similar point in "Mathematics and the Good," in Paul Arthur Schilpp, *The Philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1941), 666–681: "There is no entity which enjoys an isolated, self-sufficiency of existence. In other words, finitude is not self-supporting" (670).

¹² Krämer, "Plato's Unwritten Doctrine," in *The Other Plato*, 70.

Plato aims at has to reach into the undefined and indefinable. Knowledge is absolute only as absolved or dissevered from concrete determination, even though it is only in concrete, verbal determination that this other of the logos can be experienced.

Hegel has an interestingly ambiguous relationship with the apophatic. He clearly registers the aspirations of a science or *Wissenschaft*, on the one hand, but on the other also a sense of the unconscious shadows of knowing as unknowing, as in Boehme, whom he adopted and christened the “Teutonic philosopher”¹³. This Hegelian ambiguity can be found already at its source in Neo-Platonic thinking of the absolute principle of all.

4. Plato's Unwritten Doctrines and the Question of Whether There Is a Rational Foundation for Being and Knowledge

Plato was not fundamentally interested in innovating in philosophy, and the answer he gives to the question of the foundations of knowledge is in crucial ways a continuation of that given by his pre-Socratic predecessors. For them, reason, the logos, was itself a revelation of a higher order of being, a sending or a summons from the gods. The core intuition of reason or logos as a kind of divine revelation relativizes all our human knowing, as the lightning flash of Heraclitus's astonishing Logos Fragment 50 makes clear.

Listening not to me but to the logos
It is wise to agree that All is One.

οὐκ ἔμοῦ ἀλλὰ τοῦ λόγου ἀκούσαντας
ὁμολογεῖν σοφόν ἐστὶν Ἐν Πάντα¹⁴.

Heraclitus's second Fragment, however, indicates that this is not so easy for human beings to do:

Therefore, it is necessary to follow the common. Although the Logos is common to all, the many live as if they had of it an intelligence of their own.

διὸ δεῖ ἔπεσθαι τῷ ξυνῶ· τοῦ λόγου δὲ ἐόντος ξυνοῦ ζῶουσιν οἱ πολλοὶ
ὥς ἰδίαν ἔχοντες φρόνησιν· (Frag 2)

¹³ See especially Glenn Alexander Magee, *Hegel and the Hermetic Tradition* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001).

¹⁴ Hippolytus, *Haer* 9.9.1 = frag 50. Hermann Diels, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, ed. Walter Krannz (Zürich: Weidman, 1951). I develop this reading further in “The Coincidence of Reason and Revelation in Communicative Openness: A Critical Negative Theology of Dialogue,” *Journal of Religion* 88/3 (2008): 365-92.

Indeed, starting from Fragment 1, Heraclitus has already noted that humans do not listen to the Logos and has spotlighted human beings' disconnect with this principle, which nevertheless governs all things.

Although the logos is always valid, humans are unable to understand both before they hear it and after hearing it for the first time.

τοῦ δὲ λόγου τοῦδ' ἐόντος αἰεὶ ἀξύνετοι γίνονται ἄνθρωποι καὶ πρόσθεν ἢ ἀκοῦσαι καὶ ἀκούσαντες τὸ πρῶτον¹⁵.

Plato elaborates the imagining of this difficult communication between divine and human intellect through his theory of the Ideas or Forms. The Forms hypostatize as a distinct level of reality the interface and interaction between the soul and the divine as the intentional lodestar of its knowledge. This is an intellectual and imaginative feat of inexhaustible consequence and world-historical scope: it indelibly marks the destiny of the West.

Presocratic philosophy is a crucial source for Plato's teachings and all the more so for his more esoteric teachings. Notably, Pythagoreans recognized the limit and the unlimited, *πειρον* and *ἄπειρον*, as fundamental principles, which count as crucial precedents for Plato's highest principles of the one and the dyad. But also on the other side of Plato, at the other end of this trajectory as it issues in an ongoing tradition, the Neoplatonic interpretations and appropriations of Plato can be taken as revelatory of the doctrine's purport and effective significance as a historical destiny. The Tübingen school has often acknowledged that there is "much affinity between the inner-academic teachings of Plato and later Neoplatonic interpretations of Plato"¹⁶.

Indeed, the Neoplatonic philosophers make many references to and are an important source of information about the inner-academic teachings assembled by the Tübingen interpreters. However, with the Neoplatonists, Plato's two-principles system becomes monistic. As Nikulin also remarks, "an important difference is that the Neoplatonic interpretations of Plato are monistic, whereas Plato seems to have accepted two first principles" (15). This apparent contradiction even inheres in Plato's own work. Plato counts generally as the paradigmatic dualist with his fundamental theory of two worlds, intellectual and sensible, establishing two hierarchically ordered realms and corresponding to two radically different types of knowing. Yet the insistence on unity as ultimate and foundational could hardly be stronger in Plato: it stamps its impress on his entire philosophy. Unity or oneness (ἕν),

¹⁵ Sextus Empiricus, *Contre les mathématiciens*, VII 132.

¹⁶ Dmitri Nikulin, in his introduction to *The Other Plato*, 15, highlights this acknowledgment.

identical with the good, is the principle granting being and intelligibility to all that is. Oneness alone is such a principle. Platonic idealism views all reality as one and good and good because it is one.

Does this ineliminable amphiboly in Plato's prescriptions for philosophy not betray an inability to offer a univocal account and representation of the ultimate truth and basis of his system? Words and their meanings are differential and necessarily exclusionary and not compatible with the nature of truth itself. They can offer only circumlocutions, at best orienting toward a truth that they cannot grasp.

Plato is also world-famous for having resorted to myths at the crucial nodal points in his philosophy. Is this common knowledge about Plato's use of myth challenged by the Tübingen School's interpretation? Their aspiration is to identify unequivocally Plato's true doctrine of foundations as inferred by indirect testimony concerning his unwritten teachings in which he would have revealed what he refused to commit to the unguarded and unsafe medium of writing. Krämer and his followers and collaborators have claimed to expose and expound in exact terms what the dialogues omit. Through painstaking comparison of all the sources and testimonies concerning Plato's teaching, they infer that the two principles of the one (ἓν) and the indeterminate dyad (ἀόριστος δυάς) were the ultimate principles in Plato's thinking. I am willing to accept this with the qualification that it is a verbal representation of the foundation of being and knowledge rather than this foundation itself. These principles themselves, I maintain, have to open themselves in relation to an indefinable and unverbalizable we-cannot-say-what that is their own basis and indeed the only basis for being and knowledge.

This might be understood even as a trivial point. Maybe the Tübingen scholars could accept it. But, from my point of view, it is a crucial qualification and nuance. It sweeps away the presumption that in stating these principles we have revealed the true foundations of being and knowing in Plato's vision and understanding. In the end, these principles are necessarily only representations of the unrepresentable. We have seen that Krämer and Gaiser actually admit this. Still, forgetting or ignoring this, Krämer has felt it necessary, at least in certain contexts, to explicitly reject such an interpretation because it relativizes any precise determination of such founding principles as he individuates. But I believe that his determination is, in the end, an arbitrary absolutization of a formulation that Plato indeed provides, but not as definitive. Plato's oral pronouncements about ultimate principles could be no more definitive than his writings. Such a view is contrary to the aims of philology to fix meaning in definitive terms, but it is profoundly consonant

with Plato's conception of truth and the only philosophically consistent and coherent view.

Trying to define an object of knowledge—which implies its being an object for an epistemological subject—strikes me as a modern approach to the quest for wisdom. The ancient and still medieval approach is rather to transform oneself into conformity with the real as a whole and its universal norms in order to “come into” (literally to *in-vent*) the knowledge of the truth¹⁷. *Invention*, such as it is found in Plato's famous myths, or again in the *Divine Comedy*, is an indispensable part of the way in which humans can relate to and participate in the truth of things and of the whole universe. The exigencies of philological science are very modern and much more at home in a modern secular age than in Plato's age still incandescent with religiously erotic intellect. This secularized view of science applies first and foremost to mathematics for us, but not for Plato.

5. The Mathematical Model

An important place is reserved for speculative mathematical reason in Plato's model of knowing. Of course, mathematics and numbers, too, are still highly susceptible of being eroticized in Platonic and Pythagorean optics. Mathematics can provide a model of calculative reason, and it has certainly become a means of subjecting everything to technical calculation and control in our modern, digitalized world. However, for Plato mathematics had quite a different and an eminently spiritual significance. The Pythagorean mystique of numbers inspires Plato and is transmitted to large swathes of Western culture in his wake.

The mathematical content of Plato's esoteric teaching was often combined with forms of theological mysticism and symbolism in the Middle Ages. Although *prima facie* mathematics seems, at least to us, antithetical to poetic and mystic approaches to knowledge, the poet Dante understands poetic art mathematically in metrical and numerical terms, especially in *De vulgari eloquentia*, Book 2, his technical treatise on versification. Numbers, as constitutive of the essences of things, turn out to represent a strong connection of Dante with Platonic and Pythagorean modes of thought. Starting from the *Vita nuova*, especially Chapter XXIX, Dante's love and inspiration, Beatrice, is designated as a 9, the square of the Trinitarian cipher for divinity: 3. The mysticism of numbers is pursued by Dante all

¹⁷ One classic articulation of this position is found in Pierre Hadot. See, for instance, his “Apophasisme et théologie négative,” in *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2002).

through his work, and the mathematical model returns in the *terza rima* construction of the *Commedia*, culminating in the final reference to the aporia of the geometer who cannot square the circle as a simile for the divine vision that leaves the human mind clueless as to how the vision it has been granted could be possible at all. Notably the vision of God as incarnate in the human “effigy” in Christ leaves Dante perplexed and reminiscent of the consternation of the geometer faced with the fundamental impasse that has baffled mathematicians ever since the Greeks:

Qual è 'l geomètra che tutto s'affige
 per misurar lo cerchio, e non ritrova,
 pensando, quel principio ond'elli indige,
 tal era io a quella vista nova:
 veder voleva come si convenne
 l'imgo al cerchio e come vi s'indova ...
 (*Paradiso* XXXIII.133-38)

Like the geometer who is entirely intent
 on measuring the circle, and cannot find,
 for all his thinking, the principle that he lacks,
 so was I at that strange new sight:
 I wanted to see how the image fit
 in the circle and how it could be placed there ...

In Plato's own time, non-Euclidean geometries challenged the totalizing, rationalizing geometry of Euclid, pointing to some gaps in his proofs¹⁸. There were, thus, since ancient times, critiques exposing some irrational roots buried within rational mathematical science. Vittorio Hösle, in his essay closing the collection of essential Tübingen school contributions edited by Nikulin, finds that, in light of certain impasses of geometry, Plato realizes limits to and the incompleteness of mathematical reasoning: “the passage from the allegory of the line suddenly acquires a clear meaning: the question concerning the sum of the angles (and thus the question concerning the essence) of a triangle, Plato seems to believe, cannot be solved by means of mathematics alone. The analytic method reaches its absolute limit here. The only way out would be to draw on intuition” (168).

However, invoking the principles of the Tübingen school, Hösle says that Plato did not accept this resort to mere intuition as the ground of proof

¹⁸ Vittorio Hösle, “Plato's Foundation of the Euclidean Character of Geometry,” in *The Other Plato*, 161-82. Fundamental behind Hösle is C. Muggler, *Platon et la recherche géométrique de son temps* (Strasbourg: Heitz, 1948).

in geometry because it is unscientific. Instead, Plato grounded geometry in his theory of two principles, the One (ἕν) corresponding to the right angle of a triangle, which is always equal to itself and thus one, and the other, the indefinite dyad of great and small, macro and micro, corresponding to the shifting measures of obtuse and acute angles. Thus, Plato offers an ontological foundation within his system for geometrical mathematics. He is not a skeptic, but neither does he simply proffer intuition as sufficient grounding.

This is not to say that intuition might not be necessary for a subjective insight into and appropriation of this supposedly objective grounding. There is also Plato's emphasis on the presence of geometrical truth already in the soul of the learner, the slave boy in the *Meno*, where such an example comes up. We are reminded by anamnesis of what we already know. The technical geometrical proofs function simply as catalysts to this reminiscence. Always pointing to the two ontological principles, as the Tübingen school does, does not sufficiently heed the way that these principles point beyond themselves to a higher, unifying ground that is not defined and cannot be expressed.

Where mathematical proof runs up against an impasse, Höhle, true to the Tübingen paradigm, evokes the *Prinzipienlehre* as the solution. For me, the impasse itself is the catalyst for breaking open to the wholly other and unsayable. There is no "solution" except in the Wittgensteinian sense of dissolving rather than solving the problem. Logic pushed to its limits breaks open into mysticism.

6. Unknowing of Ultimate Grounds—the Sense of Intuition or Imagining *Nous*

Christina Schefer has already reacted to the Tübingen school's paradigm change in precisely this direction by pointing to the unsayable beyond all definable doctrine. She has interpreted the Tübingen school's findings exactly as I have in a sense that turns Plato's doctrine toward a kind of mystical religious experience of revelation. She describes her purpose as not to refute the Tübingen school's thesis but to confirm and heighten the doctrine of the principles as consisting in an unsayable experience of the god Apollo¹⁹.

Konrad Gaiser himself, as Schefer notes, had already projected a stage of direct intuitive knowing of the One beyond the oral teaching of the master, which was already deemed to be a stage beyond the literary dialogues. Beyond

¹⁹ Christina Schefer, *Platons unsagbare Erfahrung: Ein anderer Zugang zu Platon* (Basel: Schwabe Verlag, 2001), xi.

what can be communicated by teaching (“Bereich des lehrhaft Mitteilbaren”) lies a realm of the completely unsayable (“Bereich des gänzlich ‘Unsaybaren’ [ἀρρητον]”)²⁰. The direct intuition of ultimate grounds by *nous* cannot itself be grounded. *Nous*, as intuitive knowing, is without grounds and is, to that extent, equivalent to a kind of unknowing. For skeptics, intuitive knowing is only a myth. In any case, any articulate account of it can only be constructed by imagination. *Nous* is, of course, a purely intellectual faculty. But anything we say about, or on the basis of, *nous* relies on imagination. Plato’s expositions of the ultimate vision of the One or Good resort to images and myths.

The knowledge of the ultimate principles or grounds cannot itself be grounded and therefore cannot be knowledge in the proper sense. It is more a type of experience and, to be precise, of life experience more than empirical experience of objects because it is ultimately experience of being as a whole (τὸ ὅλον; τῆς ὅλης οὐσίας) in the terms of the *Seventh Letter* (344b 2). Prepared for and triggered by philosophy and its dialectic, this intuitive, visionary experience produces insight into every being (ἐξέλαμψε φρόνησις περὶ ἕκαστον καὶ νοῦς, 344b 7). This experience is unitive²¹ (or non-dual) and would have to transcend that of the two first principles, as well of differential language and logic generally.

Logically, Plato’s theory of principles is dualistic—it comprises the One and the Dual—but to account for the origin of all things this system has to overcome all complexity and function as monistic. The theory of principles is viewed by the Tübingen interpreters as an “open system” (“offenen System”)²². Vision of the One reaches beyond logic and dialectic to unsayable Experience. Gaiser lucidly perceives that “here logical thinking cancels or sublates itself and gazes intuitively” (“hier das logische Denken sich selbst aufhebt, intuitiv geschaut”)²³.

Krämer himself admits this priority of noetic over dialectical experience (“Dieser Übergang zwischen dialektischer und noetischer Grunderfahrung”) as the decisive point in the Platonic system and in

²⁰ Konrad Gaiser, *Platons ungeschriebene Lehre. Studien zur systematischen und geschichtlichen Begründung der Wissenschaften in der Platonischen Schule* (Stuttgart: Klett, 1968 [1963]), 5.

²¹ Cf. Robert Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2011).

²² Hans Joachim Krämer, „Neues zum Streit um Platons Prinzipientheorie,“ *Philosophische Rundschau* 27 (1980): 1-38, citation 26f; Jürgen Wipperfurth, *Das Problem der ungeschriebenen Lehre Platons. Beiträge zum Verständnis der platonischen Prinzipien-philosophie* (Darmstadt 1972), XXVIII.

²³ Konrad Gaiser, “Platons esoterische Lehre,” in P. Koslowski, ed., *Gnosis und Mystik in der Geschichte der Philosophie* (Zürich/München 1988), 26.

any metaphysical system—as the presupposition of the entire discursive derivation of all reality²⁴. Yet Krämer also maintains elsewhere that “The dual-ground structure is fundamental for Plato’s world picture and does not allow itself to be reduced monistically” (“... Die duale Grundstruktur ist für Platons Weltentwurf fundamental ... und lässt sich nicht eigentlich monistisch reduzieren”)²⁵.

The Tübingen school authors recognize this instance of an unsayable experience as the final and fundamental ground of the Platonic system of knowing but also admit that they cannot, with their model and methods, explore and examine this dimension that reaches beyond the texts. This is really unwritten experience beyond the Tübingen school’s paradoxical focus on textual testimonies to what Plato did not write in his published dialogues. Gaiser, in *Platons ungeschriebene Lehre*, admits that this is territory which the Tübingen school’s textually based methods cannot explore and investigate:

In any case it is not possible to further discuss in this work the highest goal of the Platonic philosophy, of the noetic penetration of the causes of being and the blessedness and virtue (*Eudaimonie und Arete*) that are gained thereby. Here there can only be a question of holding open in the right way the possibility of such a heightening and confirmation of the teaching system. We cannot solve the central substantive and historical problem that lies before us with our means because the texts deliver no information about it.

Jedenfalls aber kann nun von dem höchsten Ziel der platonischen Philosophie, von dem noetischen Innewerden der Seinsursachen und der damit gewonnenen Eudaimonie und Arete, in dieser Arbeit nicht weiter die Rede sein. Es kann hier nur darum gehen, die Möglichkeit einer solchen Überhöhung und Bestätigung des Lehrsystems in der richtigen Weise offen zu halten. Wir können das zentrale sachliche und historische Problem, das hier vorliegt, mit unseren Mitteln nicht lösen, da die Texte hierüber keine Auskunft geben (12).

The Tübingen researchers recognize, and do much to expose, the apophatic dimension beyond all declarable principles, yet their philological means cannot deal with it scientifically.

For my approach, the problem is not really historical at all but one of reactualizing Plato’s thinking and essential experience transhistorically

²⁴ Krämer, “Die platonische Akademie und das Problem einer systematischen Interpretation der Philosophie Platons,” *Kant-Studien* 55 (1964): 69–101, citation 85.

²⁵ Hans Joachim Krämer, “Neues zum Streit um Platons Pinzipientheorie,” *Philosophische Rundschau* 27 (1980): 27.

in our own times. This is what the Neoplatonists did in the Hellenistic era and what perennial Platonism is challenged to do ever again in each new age of culture. The Neoplatonists' texts, like Plato's own, are full of indications concerning this experience that cannot itself be rendered in words. This dimension belongs to and opens the domain of religion or spirituality beyond what purely secular philosophical logic can discern.

7. The Cultic Context

The Tübingen authors' philological research points up acutely the cultic context of Plato's activity of thinking, and their reflections butt up against the ineffable intuitive visionary moment at the climax of the Platonic path of knowing. This moment is well acknowledged yet remains, nevertheless, marginal to what the philological method can really deal with, and so the center of attention in the Tübingen analyses remains oddly off-center. However, the Tübingen researchers do open Plato's thought towards its historical predecessors and successors exemplarily. They thus promote considering philosophical tradition in its wholeness.

Following many leads from the Tübingen school's research, Christina Schefer shows in detail how the dialogues with their verbal exchanges are set within cultic contexts that would harbor unwritten instruction in the theory of principles—but well beyond that in the unsayable experience of the epiphany of the god in the mystery religions at Eleusis or Samothrace. The dialogues are already full of references to these cultic contexts, whose rites Schefer then elaborates as shadowed in the practices and in the very conception of the Academy.

In the *Republic*, Socrates and Glaucus go down to the port Piraeus to “pray to the god and gaze upon the festival” (προσευξόμενος τε τῇ θεῷ καὶ ἅμα τὴν ἑορτὴν βουλόμενος θεάσασθαι, 1, 327a 2-3). Other dialogues, such as the *Phaedrus*, which is set on the banks of the Ilissus in a holy district, Agra, with its reminiscences of nymphs (Orythia playing with Pharmacia) and myths of the gods (Boreas, who carried her off), allude similarly to cultic settings.

Gathering or being together (συνουσία), giving and receiving teaching (παραδιδόναι or διδάσκειν), have been identified in their sources by scholars as alluding to the oral instruction in the Academy for initiates, but these practices also resonate powerfully with mystery cults and their teachings leading up to a *showing* without words. Ritual acts and demonstrations would put symbols like corn or the phallus before the eyes of those being initiated to represent a visitation of the god. The minor, including verbally

mediated, mysteries (μικρὰ μυστήρια) were propaedeutics for the great mysteries (μεγὰ μυστήρια) of Eleusis and the divine epiphany.

The *Phaedo* also, with Socrates's final bidding to Criton that he not forget that they owe a cock to Asclepius (presumably for curing him by death of the fitful fever of life), ends with a gesture of cultic sacrifice, a gift to the god (118a7-8). Reaching outside and beyond the text, this gesture invokes the god into presence, as in the mystery religions. This is how Socrates dies, with a gesture of piety and gratitude to the god embodied in a ritual act signifying, with an at first enigmatic symbol, the unsayable truth for which the philosopher in every moment of his life prepares to die. Socrates's death, in Plato's dramatization, performs an archetypal enactment of philosophy as a practice of dying and presents this philosophical, dialectical act as a kind of initiation into the mystery religions.

In Plato's dialogues, particularly in *Protagoras*, *Phaedrus*, *Sophist*, *Statesman*, *Republic*, *Timaeus*, and *Laws*, a limit to the discussion is signaled where a higher truth has to be left untreated and deferred to another time. There is a point in each dialogue—the climactic point at which it would reach to its ultimate truth or disclosure—where the main speaker breaks off before what cannot be adequately treated in the present context and by the available means. This persistent pattern of evasion is tantamount to an acknowledgment that the deeper dimension of truth alluded to is, in effect, unspeakable.

What all the dialogues indicate through these evocations of ineffable religious experience is that the "truth" of philosophy lies ultimately not in any definite verbal formulas but in escaping from the net of words and dissolving the illusions created by whatever verbal constructions. This escape is effectuated by praying to the gods and opening ourselves to our own unsoundable depths, the depth of being that we share with all other creatures and entities and are inhabited by ourselves. This relating to our common higher ground and to All is the movement of thought and spirit in which truth can be realized.

In this light, the verbal exchange of dialectic shows up as ritual action that does not define truth itself but rather gestures toward another realm beyond the verbal sphere in which truth can be intimated or touched or glimpsed. This changes the outlook and orientation of thought and of life itself. Our relations with others are then based on something else besides the calculable, finite relations with things that we possess and have power over. The truth of our being, as of being in general, can be found and experienced only in infinite openness to others, not in what can be verbally defined and thereby confined to a concept determined by a finite content and necessarily

exclusive sense. Dialectic without recognition of this higher, common, all-encompassing norm is bound to degenerate into a power struggle.

8. Contradiction and Cosmic Order – The Limits of Reason

Schefer inscribes Plato's metaphysics wholly into the cultic experience of the god Apollo (215-16). She elaborates in exhaustive detail how the Academy, in its ethos and expression, was entirely analogized to the Mysteries and how philosophy was practiced as a devotion to the god Apollo. The only difference is that the frightening component of the "mysterium tremendum et fascinans" (to echo Rudolph Otto, *Das Heilige*, 1963) is left out in the philosophical attitude of astonishment (θαυμάζειν), which Aristotle and Plato both place at the origin of this new activity called philosophy. Philosophy retains the fascination but not the fear. This difference, I wish to add, corresponds to the Axial Age turn or shift from the contradictory co-implication of good and evil in archaic cultures to the idealized systems based on the All-Good. Rational reflection purges the complexity of the real and presents a simplified, idealized model of reality.

The Mysteries remain archaic inasmuch as light and darkness, anguish and exaltation, life and death, are inextricable. Plato contemplates the ideas and finally the idea of the good in pure light without darkness. His doctrine is a way of sublating the real wholly into thought and language. Yet this rational order remains beholden to what is not thought and not said. Wholeness is achieved only outside the realm of the thought and spoken, which has self-reflectively sublated itself into pure self-consistency. This is what Platonic idealization, in a first movement, achieves. In the realm of pure ideas, the negative is erased. But placed back into its experiential context, open to the surrounding whole, thinking, too, must embrace the negative at its source springs. This it can do by recursively reflecting on itself and realizing its limits and orienting itself to that which it cannot think.

Truth is attained to in exceeding the exclusive perspective of any finite thinking into an infinite openness to others. As Blake put it, "If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man as it is, Infinite" (*The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*). The mutually exclusive narratives that Vladimir Putin's Russia or that NATO are telling themselves, or that Taiwan and the US or the People's Republic of China are propagating, would break open, and the realization that the truth is contained in no one's narrative but only in our mutual relatedness and beholdenness to one another would break through and shine out.

In the Mysteries, death is not to be overcome but is a passageway to new and exalted life. Demeter and Persephone unite the worlds of light and darkness by turns, corresponding to the seasons. Osiris, torn to pieces, engenders a son in the underworld as a new god. Although Plato conceives of pure being and purges negativity from the realm of the ideas, he remains ensconced in a cultic context reminiscent of pre-Axial Age culture and its holistic acceptance of the negative as inextricable from the positive. Apollo's light of truth as *aletheia* discloses beings in their being, but this can only take place in the shadow of non-being. The presence of being as disclosed is already in time, the time of the present. And so, in effect, the negative, the non-being of past and future, is already included in the eternal presence of pure being, as the subsequent history of thinking and poetic making in the wake of Platonic idealization so compellingly demonstrates. Epic and prophetic poetry, especially in its sublation of the religious cult, and not least through its lyrical transports, engages the whole human being, body and soul, in a dynamic that moves from inferno to paradise.

9. Conclusion—Aspiration to the Ideal as Ultimate Reality

The enormous, almost matchless transhistorical fecundity of the Platonic tradition across the ages depends, I believe, not on any specific determination in words of principles but rather on striving for a unity that can never be definitively rendered in verbal terms²⁶. The transcendence of form and of unity beyond any of their manifestations in the sensible and even in the conceptual world, including mathematics, opens the space in which contemplation of the One and its relation to the inexhaustible manifold of the cosmos transpires. The ordered relations between things are the manifestations of this oneness, and the variety of approaches to understanding the relations between things in their ultimate unity is the perennial substance of speculation in the mode we recognize as reaching canonical expression with Plato.

True transcendence is never positively determined but operates only as a limit to whatever determinations. Mathematics concisely illustrates the relation of the world of phenomena to its transcendent ground. In Plato's mathematical theory, the line is not made up out of points. Unlike material entities, mathematical points have no dimension at all (cf. Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 992a). The point is the limit from which the line can be conceived and defined. The line is then the limit of the plane, and the plane

²⁶ Gaiser, too, realizes this: "all words and statements convey no knowledge but can, at best, lead to it" ("alle Wörter und Sätze keine Erkenntnis vermitteln, sondern bestenfalls dazu anleiten können," *Platons ungeschriebene Lehre*, 586).

of the solid. These successive forms, however, are not composed of, nor do they comprehend, the forms that make them possible and limit them. The ultimate limit is encountered only as an aspirational ideal. Platonic unity is not *continuity*: it presupposes an epistemic break that grounds a principle of radical difference. Similarly, in arithmetic, 1 is not itself a number but rather the generative source of all numbers. Numbers exist only as composites of unities, whereas the one is incomposite.

Fundamental to Platonism is acknowledging an ideal reality as the source of all being and the norm of all knowing. This ideal cannot be humanly comprehended, not adequately anyway. It can, however, be related to in the various types of knowing that are humanly possible, practical as well theoretical, rational as well as ritual and experiential. Projecting oneself toward this ideal world or order is a logical consequence of the vision of the ideas or ideals that contradistinguish Platonism. The recognition of something unsayably good and exalted as our lodestar and goal and a norm for thinking follows as a consequence of thinking the ideal since all our finite apprehensions and conceptions fall short of the infinitely ideal. Creating such idealities is the genius of Platonism par excellence. Imagining the ideal lends itself to and has inspired untold poetic creations and creators throughout the annals of cultural history and still in the present.

The aspiration to the ideal, belief in an ideal whole in which we are all one, the idea that the ideal is possible for us and is more real than our own individual being and subjective perceptions, are overarching tenets of Platonism that I embrace, as long as their express form remains fluid and not fixed. As Iris Murdoch long ago perceived, Platonism is a matter of “unselfing,” and this process entails recognizing that other and even contradictory expressions in different cultures aspire to the same unity. The ideal certainly exists in the projection of human desire and imagination, whether or not it exists in the objective mode that Plato’s theory of ideas seems to suggest. The theory of ideas itself might best be taken as a necessarily mythic illustration of unrepresentable ultimate grounds.

The idea of perfectly objective, scientific knowledge is itself a myth. Any determinate object, such as science requires, is always already an abstraction existing only in relation to a subject. In the guise of mathematical rationality, the presumption of scientific objectivity has become the founding myth of our techno-scientific modern culture. But the representation of the objectivity of knowledge—emblematically with his theory of Ideas—is one of Plato’s great myths. We have unfortunately forgotten that Plato propounded it as a myth.

Christina Schefer reads Plato’s philosophy not as exiting from myth into the maturity of the logos, according to the usual account of philosophy’s

significance in intellectual history, but rather as restituting logos to its mythic origins (“Da die platonische Philosophie aus dem Mythos nicht heraustritt, sondern umgekehrt in ihn hinein...”) ²⁷.

Plato resorts to mythic imagination and remythologizes the supreme principle. This happens, for instance, in the *Timaeus*’s utterances concerning the unsayability of the first principle imaged as a Father:

But the Maker and Father of this whole universe is difficult to find and once he is found it is impossible to speak of him to all.

τὸν μὲν οὖν ποιητὴν καὶ πατέρα τοῦδε τοῦ παντὸς εὐρεῖν τε ἔργον καὶ εὐρόντα εἰς πάντας ἀδύνατον λέγειν (28c).

Michael Erler, unlike Schefer, rehearses the Tübingen school’s strictures against ahistorical appropriation specifically of Plato’s myths for apophatic interpretations such as I have presented here: “Modern, Romantically stamped representations of an in principle unsayable truth content of the Platonic myths, which extend our knowledge beyond that of the philosophical discourse, have no basis in the text” (“Moderne, von der Romantik geprägte Vorstellungen von einem prinzipiell unsagbaren Wahrheitsgehalt der platonischen Mythen, die unsere Erkenntnis gegenüber dem philosophischen Diskurs erweitern, haben keine Grundlage im Text”) ²⁸.

I grant that the basis of the recognition of unsayability is not in the text but in the experience of knowing itself and of striving always toward its limits and ultimate ground. The text serves merely as a means for this endeavor. It is mistaken to look for “evidence” in the text for the ultimate nature of knowing/unknowing. That is the procedure of philological investigation but not of speculative apprehension of truth through relating oneself to the whole.

I grant as well that the myths do not extend our knowledge of any object but rather express its ground (or *ungrunt*) in *unknowing*. The capital importance of honoring the unwritten doctrines lies in the opening of an indeterminate space (*chora*) for lived appropriation of the words of the text, whether they are written or oral. This process of progressive, critical

²⁷ Christina Schefer, *Platon und Apollon: vom Logos zurück zum Mythos* (Sankt Augustine: Academia Verlag, 1995), 2.

²⁸ Michael Erler, *Platon* (München: Beck, 2006), 56. Erler shows himself, however, to be highly perceptive of divine ineffability in Hölderlin’s poetry. See Erler, “Praesens Divinum: Mythische und historische Zeit in der griechischen Literatur,” *Platon als Mythologie: neue Interpretationen zu den Mythen in Platons Dialogen*, eds. M. Janka and Christina Schäfer (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Gesellschaft, 2002), 81–98.

unknowing by questioning all assumptions deconstructs the illusion of a self separate from what it knows.

This motif of knowledge as openness and endless striving is similarly critiqued by Erler:

In his essay 'On Plato's Concept of Philosophy,' Karl Albert rightly turns against modern interpretations, obviously influenced by modern ideas, that ascribe to Plato a concept of philosophy that stands for a fundamentally open and incompletable striving after truth for its own sake. Albert rightly emphasizes that a concept of philosophy implies a process, but this means a way with a set goal that, as numerous passages in the dialogues suggest, is seen as in principle reachable.

In seiner Schrift 'Über Platons Begriff der Philosophie' wendet sich Karl Albert mit Recht gegen moderne Interpretationen, die, offenbar beeinflusst von modernen Vorstellungen, Platon einen Philosophiebegriff zuschreiben, der für ein grundsätzlich offenes, unabschliessbares Streben nach Wahrheit um seiner selbst willen steht. Mit Recht betont er, daß Philosophiebegriff zwar einen Prozeß meint, ein Weg jedoch, dem ein Ziel vorgegeben ist, das, wie zahlreiche Stelle in den Dialogen nahelegen, als prinzipiell erreichbar angesehen wird²⁹.

"In principle" here should be understood to mean in representation but not in reality. It is crucial to represent the end of our striving, but this imperative belongs to language and discourse, and Plato, like Dante, recognizes that this is something constructed, made up, fictive, in comparison with the absolutely real. The striving for (or aspiring to) truth, at least inasmuch as it transpires in discourse, is not to be taken "in and for itself." It is only a means of relating to something or Someone absolutely Other.

Of course, knowledge is represented in the dialogues and especially in the unwritten teachings as having a definite, reachable goal. But is this representation to be taken at face value, with no allowance for any inflection of irony, or rather as another myth? Such a story is necessary for orientation of practical activity, but setting out toward a goal *as if* it were reachable does not decide whether it actually is reachable or not in an absolute sense. Knowledge represented as absolute is still only a representation. Only its effect in changing and transforming us can witness to true sovereignty or absoluteness of knowing.

²⁹ Erler, "Vom Werden zum Sein. Über den Umgang mit Gehörtem in Platons Dialogen," *Sein und Werden im Lichte Platons: Festschrift für Karl Albert zum 80. Geburtstag am 2. Oktober 2001*, ed. Elenor Jain and Stephan Grätzel (Baden-Baden: Alber, 2001), 123-43. Citation 123.

I recommend openness, moreover, not as opposed to closedness or conclusiveness. Instead, I recommend relating every kind of conclusion to the wider whole of which it is part and which it cannot encompass within itself. This goes paradigmatically for effects in relation to their causes or higher grounds. The basic intuition of Platonism that the physical, phenomenal realm is grounded in or generated by an intellectual and ideal or unchanging reality comes from the observation that there is a constant order to things in our world of changing phenomena: they are organized into kinds and follow set patterns in their transformations. This order is not itself given by any necessity in the phenomena themselves but apparently regulates them. Thinking about the ordered shifting around of phenomenal reality makes us think that it must have invisible structures regulating it. We are compelled to imagine unchanging archetypes in the purely intellectual world of thought. The imagination can project an ideal that would be the single archetype to which all phenomena of a certain type would conform. Plato formulates and bequeaths this thought to subsequent Western culture.

In the Romantic Age, for instance, Coleridge's doctrine of "primary imagination" (*Biographia Literaria*) expresses the creative role that Kant's philosophy had accorded to imagination in the *Third Critique* as the linchpin between the theoretical and practical reason of his first two Critiques. These are modern expressions of imagining the ideal unity of the real through intellect operating as imagination. Anciently, this limit of expression is enshrined in the ineffable Neoplatonic One or in the Good beyond being that is equivalent to the One in Plato's thought. Such unity can be expressed only through imagination since, in itself, it is beyond adequate expression and comprehension.

The ideal is the idea (ιδέα) that represents the oneness of a multitude. To strive for unity is to strive for the ideal. The mediation of representation is crucial here. We are reminded that representing the ideal is a task for the imagination. In striving for unity, we imagine the ideal and orient ourselves to the whole that embraces us all. The "us" or "we" becomes open to all beings and all reality. This is a quintessentially Platonic way to think. I grant that idealization is only one mode to be pursued in tandem with other, more directly realistic strategies. I believe, nevertheless, that Platonic idealization is necessary to preserve our world from degeneration and humanity from self-annihilation. Platonic idealization is a non-objectifying or de-objectifying mode of thinking. When it is trained on the transcendent or ineffable, it becomes the opposite of the reifying mode of thought (positing the separate existence of the ideas) with which it is more commonly confounded.

Recognizing others and striving for unity with them is necessary to keep us from tearing ourselves and one another to pieces. In language and even in thought, given the necessarily dialectical nature of thinking and discourse, with its differential linguistic logic, this ideal unity is not perfectly realizable. Yet imagining an ideal of oneness can orient our language and thinking to the unity that cannot be properly expressed or conceived and that alone can redeem and pacify the conflictual predicament of our naturally separate existences. Profoundly considered, the language of God (theo-logy) offering images for the source and origin of all, expresses just this ideal of unity.

This imaginable oneness is not, however, a unity *instead of* or in preference to difference or diversity: it has no contrary. This is why it is imperative that this One or the Good transcend all linguistic, necessarily divisive formulations. Only such language-transcendent oneness can permit and encourage the greatest possible unity to flourish. It does so by protecting the diverse elements against one another, gathering them into mutual amity and orchestrating their common life, even when this life includes natural forms of predation and exploitation as parts of the concert of the whole.

This free aspiration to the infinitely open and ideal, as the quintessential Platonic gesture, also suggests why philosophy, in its democratic destiny, does not so easily merge with religion or let itself be wholly folded back into the cultic context. Luc Brisson and modern political philosophers such as Leo Straus bring out this apparent incompatibility³⁰. Philosophy questions that hierarchical world based on the authority of the priest and of ranks or castes of initiates and opens a new horizon on the basis of the relation of each individual directly to the absolute. Rather than remaining sequestered in secret cults and esoteric transmissions, philosophy ventures out into the dawn of the infinite openness of all to all. However, this must remain infinite openness to the unsayable source of the real and remain free with respect to all human determinations of it. It is understood by Plato and the tradition he spawns as the divine source, the fount of love and justice. Philosophy thus remains beholden not to theology but rather to the *negative* theology that is theology's own original source and inspiration.

In this negation of theology, knowing is ultimately not so much about determining an object as it is about opening oneself to an Other that reveals itself to us in the ways that it transforms us. When this Other is related to in the metaphysical dimension of wholeness, it cannot be delimited. Instead,

³⁰ See Lawrence Lampert, *The Enduring Importance of Leo Straus* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), particularly Part I, "Strauss's Recovery of Exotericism."

this Other determines an infinite opening of the knower/unknower. Being infused and overcome with what knowers cannot think on their own confers the experience of revelation. We lose the sense of our own separateness from others and understand our identity with them. We perceive ourselves and others in the dimension of the in-finite. Such visionary insight is what has made Plato so compelling throughout so many ages. 

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