



PLATO'S ADVICE ABOUT HOW TO AVOID BECOMING A PHILOSOPHICAL BASTARD: MOVING THE PROBLEM OF THE ONE AND THE MANY TO THE PROBLEM OF UNIVERSALS

Peter A. Redpath, Ph.D.

(1 of 3)

Precisely to show how Plato used the philosophical discipline of metaphysics to give birth to the problem of universals, I will start by first considering some things that, in one of his most famous dialogues, *The Republic*, chiefly through the character of Socrates, Plato told us about becoming a philosopher. As someone who, like all the philosophers before him, started philosophy as a

human activity essentially related to experiencing the problem of the one and the many within the context of sense wonder, throughout his dialogues, Plato repeatedly made reference to the opposition between the one and the many and to how the peculiar way philosophers speak is connected to this opposition. The examples are so many that I need not cite all of them in particular to prove my point. Readers may simply check dialogues such as the *Meno*, *Symposium*, *Crito*, *Phaedo*, *Ion*, *Laches*, *Lysis*, *Charmides*, *Protagoras*, *Parmenides*, *Sophist*, *Laws*, and *Republic*. If they pay careful attention to these dialogues, they should easily be able to verify that my claim is true. Nonetheless, to prove this same point beyond reasonable doubt, I will take up this same issue in this chapter in relation to what Plato said in *Republic*, Book Seven, because, in this section of this work, Plato engaged in a sustained reflection on the pedagogy involved in becoming a philosopher.

Republic, Book Seven, starts with Plato's famous "Myth of the Cave." Plato presented this story at this point in his dialogue as an example to show how, as he just finished saying in Book Six, "Philosophy . . . the love of wisdom, is impossible for the multitude" (the many), and how strange, alien, the nature of philosophical education is likely to appear to the many.¹

Since most people conversant with philosophy are familiar with this story, I will not go into it in detail, other than to mention that, within the context of his account, Plato made sure to indicate that "in naming the things they saw" the people in the cave would be naming appearances, but would think they were naming the things that were causing the appearances.² Only the person who was able to escape from the cave and, eventually, come to know the Good (which causes everything else but is the last thing seen) is the philosopher and would rightly understand how to name things.³

In preparing to explain the nature of philosophical education, Plato had Socrates tell Glaucon that they had to use this image of turning the soul's vision from appearances to the Good.⁴ Then Socrates proceeded to explain the nature of this sort of psychic turning in more precise, less metaphorical, detail.

He started to do this by saying, "education is not in reality what some people proclaim it to be in their professions. What they aver is that they can put true knowledge into a soul that does not possess it, as if they were inserting vision into blind eyes." Next, he stated that his argument indicates the proper analogy for the change education effects is not that of filling an empty vessel.

The true analogy for this indwelling power in the soul and the instrument whereby each of us apprehends is that of an eye that

could not be converted to the light from the darkness except by turning the whole body. Even so this organ of knowledge must be turned around from the world of becoming together with the entire soul, like the scene shifting periactus in the theater, until the soul is able to endure the contemplation of essence and the brightest region of being. And this, we say is the good, do we not?⁵

Socrates then speculated that “an art of the speediest and most effective shifting or conversion of the soul, not an art of producing vision in it,” might exist. But it could only do so for an eye that already possesses vision, “but does not rightly direct it and does not look where it should.”

He maintained that such an art would resemble servile, or bodily, arts, inasmuch as it does not pre-exist in the soul; and we have to cause it by habit and practice. But such a liberal art, or as Socrates more precisely called it, this intellectual virtue or

excellence of thought, it seems, is certainly of a more divine quality, a thing that never loses its potency, but, according to the direction of its conversion, becomes useful and beneficent, or, again, useless and harmful. Have you never observed in those who are popularly spoken of as bad, but smart, men, how keen is the vision of the little soul, how quick it is to discern the things that interest it, a proof that it is not a poor vision, which it has but one forcibly enlisted in the service of evil, so that the sharper the sight the more mischief it accomplishes?⁶

Plato might have had in mind Alcibiades as the sort of precocious man possessed of some intellectual cleverness but lacking in the requisite moral virtue to become a philosopher.⁷ Today, we might think of one, or more, professional politician. Whatever the case, Socrates continued by saying that, had the moral part of this small-souled person’s psyche “been hammered from childhood” and had it freed more the intemperate dispositions that turned its vision downward, if “it had suffered a conversion toward the things that are real and true (that is, toward first principles and causes), that same faculty of the same men would have been most keen in its vision of the higher things, just as it is for the things toward which it is now tuned.”⁸

Socrates asserted that, strictly speaking, people uneducated and inexperienced in truth, and people who want to spend their lives in uninterrupted learning for the sake of learning, can never adequately rule a city, because the first live aimless lives, and direct all their actions aimlessly, and the second will not voluntarily seek to engage in politics because they believe “that while still living they

have been transported to the Islands of the Blessed.”

Since the wider context of Plato’s consideration of education was his study of how to establish the ideal city so as to find there true justice, he had Socrates maintain that the only way he will be able to do so is to force philosophers “to live an inferior life when the better is in their power.” The just city that he is founding is concerned with the happiness of the whole city, not that of one group, even of philosophers. Hence, he told Glaucon, with whom he was then speaking, that, in forcing philosophers to rule, “We shall not be wronging . . . the philosophers who arise among us, but . . . we can justify our action when we constrain them to take charge of the other citizens and be their guardians.”

In this way (unknowingly describing escape from the modern city sprung from Cartesian doubt and modern subjective idealism), Socrates said, “our city will be governed by waking minds, and not, as most cities now, which are inhabited and ruled darkly as in a dream by men who fight one another for shadows and wrangle for office as if that were a great good.”

Socrates claimed that philosophers “will assuredly approach office as an unavoidable necessity, and in the *opposite* temper from that of the present rulers in our cities.”⁹ Plato’s ideal city only becomes a determinate, or real, possibility on the condition that some way of living better, some happiness higher, than political life exists.

For only in such a state will those rule who are really rich, not in gold. But if, being beggars and starvelings from lack of goods of their own, they turn to affairs of the state thinking that it is thence that they should grasp their own good, then it is impossible. For when office and rule become the prizes of contention, such a civil and internecine strife destroys the office seekers themselves and the city as well.¹⁰

Socrates said that only the life of the true philosopher looks with scorn upon political office, for this precise reason: only true philosophers are worthy of holding political office because “those who take office should not be lovers of rule. Otherwise there will be a contest with rival lovers.”¹¹ Clearly, this is because, in Plato’s mind, the philosopher is *unique*, different from, and *opposed* to the *many*, those who seek political office for personal gain.

Since rule in the ideal city necessarily demands involvement of philosophers, Socrates’ next question to consider was how do we produce philosophers and how may they “be led upward to the light even as some are fabled to have ascended from Hades to the gods?” Socrates’ answer was that, as he had said in his Myth of the Cave,

true philosophy is that ascension to reality that is “a conversion and turning about of the soul from a day whose light is darkness to the veritable day.”

All well and good. Most people who call themselves “philosophers” probably get his message. But, metaphors aside, more precisely, what did Socrates and Plato mean by this conversion and turning of the soul? Socrates immediately explained his meaning by considering the question of what powers effect this turning and conversion.

Since the general education thus far under consideration in the *Republic* had been for rulers, or guardians, Socrates maintained that this study must be useful to soldiers, but must go beyond the training in “music” (the liberal arts, or poetry, as he and Glaucon have already described music). The reason for this, as Glaucon explained, is that music had “educated the guardians through habits, imparting by the melody a certain harmony of spirit that is not science, and by the rhythm measure and grace, and also the qualities akin to these in words of tales that are fables and those that are more nearly true. But it included no study that intended to any such good as you are now seeking.”

Since music, gymnastic, and the servile arts, as then popularly understood and taught, were inadequate propaedeutics for effecting the philosophical habit of mind, Socrates suggested that Glaucon and he should “take something that applies to all alike.” He then referred to the “common thing that all the arts and forms of thought and all sciences employ, and which is among the first things that everybody must learn.” Since this thing is common to all the arts and all forms of thought, and is something all science uses, while Socrates did not refer to it as such, at first glance, it would appear to be some sort of logical or metaphysical being because logical reasoning and metaphysical principles apply to everything we know.

The way Socrates explained this common thing, however, was as “that of distinguishing one, two, and three. I mean, in sum, number and calculation. Is it not true of them that every art and science must necessarily partake of them?” While Glaucon readily agreed, at first glance, the correct answer to the question Socrates just posed appears to be, “No,” unless Socrates was referring these predicates to their subjects in some sort of metaphysical, not mathematical, way (for example, by predicating the term analogously to mean “measuring”).

At the same time, in a way, what Socrates said is true, even mathematically considered, for, in a way, all linguistic development (a necessary condition for developing science), presupposes our ability to limit the length of sounds we produce to form words, and order-

ing words one after the other (word order), to form sentences. Both require some rudimentary arithmetical and geometrical skill. We derive our first understanding of all our concepts of measuring from our sensible experience of real quantity.

Whatever the case, Socrates' point was that mathematical study is conducive to awakening philosophical wonder in us. Hence, he said, "It seems likely that it is one of those studies which we are seeking that naturally conduce to the awakening of thought, but that no one makes the right use of it, though it really does tend to draw the mind to essence and reality."

Why? Socrates immediately explained by indicating to Glaucon that some reports our perceptions give us "do not provoke thought to reconsideration because the judgment of them by sensation seems adequate, while others always invite the intellect to reflection because the sensation yields nothing that can be trusted." Apparently, then, Plato thought that the philosophical habit of mind presupposes our experience of "reports" or "communications" from perceptions that provoke our minds to engage in reconsideration of what we have perceived and that, absent such provocation, we cannot become philosophers. Becoming philosophers, in some respect, involves *semiosis* and awareness of opposition.¹² (Later in philosophy's history, St. Thomas will go so far as to say all our knowledge starts with sensible signs: "Knowledge of a thing starts with certain external signs.")¹³

Glaucon thought he understood what Socrates meant and immediately said, "You obviously mean distant appearances . . . and shadow painting."

In reply, Socrates told Glaucon that he had totally missed Socrates' meaning. So, Socrates immediately clarified his point: "The experiences that do not provoke thought are those that do not at the same time issue in a *contradictory* perception. Those that do have that effect I set down as provocatives when the perception no more manifests one thing than its contrary, like whether its impact comes from nearby or afar."¹⁴

Socrates then illustrated his point to make his meaning more clear. He held up three fingers (the little, second, and middle). Whether he spoke of them as near or far, he said:

Each one of them appears to be equally a finger, and in this respect it makes no difference whether it is observed as intermediaries or at either extreme, whether it is black or white, thick or thin, or of any other quality of this kind. For in none of these cases is the soul of most men impelled to question the reason

and to ask what in the world is a finger, since the faculty of sight never signifies to it at the same time that the finger is the opposite of a finger.¹⁵

Clearly, Plato's argument immediately above involves the problem of how we signify, or think, and talk about what we perceive, and the problem of opposition. The problem is clearly semiotic.¹⁶ Communication from sense perception that provokes us to become philosophers changes the way we think and talk about, or signify, what we perceive. Many ways we sense things do not impel us to question, to ask the reason why. And those that do arise from sense perceptions that simultaneously involve us in a sense and intellectual experience of opposition conveyed by apparently conflicting signs. Since, in Socrates' example to Glaucon, our sense faculty never signifies to itself that a finger is not a finger, is the opposite of a finger, whence comes our simultaneous sense and intellectual experience of opposition?

Since the experience of a finger being a finger is not the cause, Socrates immediately asked Glaucon, "what about the bigness and smallness of these objects?" Or consider "the relation of touch to thickness and thinness, softness and hardness." Is it not the case that the operation of each of our senses to objects is as follows?: "In the first place, the sensation that is set over the hard is of necessity related also to the soft, and it reports to the soul that the same thing is hard and soft." In short, is it not the case that our different sense faculties report to us different objects and opposing relations, or opposites, related to those objects?

Such being the case, Socrates, again, directed Glaucon's attention to the problem of communication, signification. Simultaneously, something we perceive causes the soul to receive opposite communications, significations, reports. Hence, Socrates continued: "Then, said I, is not this again a case where the soul must be at a loss as to what significance for it the sensation of hardness has, if the sense *reports* the same thing as also soft? And, similarly, as to what the sensation of light and heavy means by light and heavy, if it reports the heavy as light and the light as heavy?"

Glaucon conceded, "Yes, indeed, . . . these *communications* to the soul are strange and invite reconsideration."¹⁷

Such being the case, Socrates replied that "naturally," in such cases, "the soul first summons to its aid the calculating reason and tries to consider whether each of these things reported to it is one or two. . . . And if it appears to be two, each of the two is a distinct unit."

That is, given our experience of conflicting reports from our percep-

tion, our intellectual faculty immediately starts to consider whether our opposing communication is coming from one perceived object and perception or from two. For example, is perceiving a finger and perceiving a small, versus large, finger, one perception or two? Clearly, such determination involves counting. And if we do not, or cannot, count to two, we cannot have any perception of sensory opposition and opposing communications.

Each perception considered in itself is numerically one, and of separate, singular, objects. But considered together (thought of as two) we think of them as if they were not really separate, as not really numerically one. We are now thinking of one and one, while really separate, as not separate. Hence, of this simultaneously-and newly -thought-of-one-and-one (considered *together* [as a unit]: this single, or separate, two considered as numerically-one unit measure, this single two), Socrates immediately said: "If, then, each is one and both two, the very meaning of "two" is that the soul will conceive them as distinct. For if they were not separate, it would not have been thinking of two, but one."

When our sense of sight so unites really separate beings, such as the "the great and the small," and thereby sends a miscommunication to the human intellect that things that exist separated and need not co-exist in reality, things that are really two (or many), nevertheless now, in this perception, do so co-exist and are not separated, but are one, Socrates maintained that "it confounds" these qualities in its report to the soul. In so doing, it compels "the intelligence" to separate them, "to contemplate the great and the small not as confounded but as distinct entities, in the opposite way from sensation."¹⁸

According to Socrates, this is just the sort of sense experience of opposition that gives rise to philosophic wonder. Hence, the following discussion between Socrates and Glaucon immediately ensued:

And is it not in some such experience as this that the question first occurs to us. What is the world, then is the great and the small?

By all means.

And this is the origin of the designation *intelligible* for the one, and *visible* for the other.

Just so, he said.

This, then, is just what I was trying to explain a little while ago when I said that some things are provocative of thought and

some are not, defining, as provocative things that impinge on the senses *together with their opposites*, while those that do not I said do not tend to awaken reflection.¹⁹

Clearly, Socrates maintained that philosophic wonder, wonder in any respect at all, is impossible absent “provocative” awareness, or sense perception that communicates to our intelligence perception of semiotic opposition, of some multitude signifying opposition to unity. Absent such semiotic sense experience, we cannot distinguish intellectual experience from sensory, much less philosophical from non-philosophical.

Immediately, Socrates asked Glaucon, “To which class, do you think number and the one belong?” That is, are number and unity visible, or intelligible, entities?

Given Glaucon’s inability to conceive the answer, Socrates told him to reason the problem out from what they have already said. If we could adequately see unity through our sense of sight or some other sense faculty, unity would have no need to draw our minds to apprehend its being in cases like that of simultaneously conflicting perception of the finger just described. If we coincidentally, simultaneously, experience some opposition confounded with our sensory perception of unity “so that it no more appears to be one than the opposite,” then, Socrates maintained, “there would forthwith be need of something to judge between them, and it would compel the soul to be at a loss and to inquire, by arousing thought in itself, and to ask, whatever then is the one as such, and thus the study of unity will be one of the studies that guide and convert the soul to the study of true being.”

Glaucon claimed that visual perception, especially, involves such opposing communication. “For we see the same thing at once as one and as an indefinite plurality,” that is, a many. For example, we see the same kind of thing (specifically, say, “finger”), as tall and short. Since experience of this sort of communicative opposition is true of unity, Socrates reasoned that it must also be true of “all number.”

Moreover, since counting and “the science of arithmetic are wholly concerned with number . . . [a]nd the qualities of number appear to lead to the apprehension of truth,” Socrates concluded that he and Glaucon would have to include counting and the science of arithmetic among the studies they seek. “For a soldier must learn them in order to marshal his troops, and a philosopher because he must rise out of the region of generation and lay hold on essence or he can never become a true reckoner.”

That is, to become a philosopher, we must do more than sense differences or possess an art that never attempts to understand first principles and causes considered as such, like the simple art of counting, or singing, which put to right use principles whose causes a person with mathematical science and the science of music are able abstractly to consider and understand, but the singer or student of mathematics need never grasp considered as such.

NOTES

1. Plato, *Republic*, trans. Paul Shorey, in Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (eds.), *The Collected Dialogues Including the Letters* (New York: Pantheon Books, Bollingen Series 71, 1966), Bk. 6, 494A. My addition in parenthesis.
2. Plato, *Republic*, Bk. 7, 515B.
3. Id., 515B–518B.
4. Id., 517B.
5. Id., 518C.
6. Id., 518D–519A.
7. See Socrates' discussion with Alcibiades in Plato, *Symposium*, 213B–223D.
8. Plato, *Republic*, Bk. 7, 519A–B.
9. Id., Bk. 7, 519B–520E. Italics are my addition.
10. Id., 521A.
11. Id.
12. Id., 521B–523C.
13. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Metaphysics of Aristotle*, 2 vols., trans. John P. Rowan (Chicago: Henry Regnery, Co., Inc., 1961), vol. 1, Bk. 5, l. 19, n. 1048.
14. Plato, *Republic*, Bk. 7, 521B–523C. Italics in the block quote are my emphasis.
15. Id., 523D
16. See my treatment of the semiotic nature of wonder and the rela-

tion of semiotic experience to philosophy's origin in my article related to John N. Deely's groundbreaking work in semiotics, "Platonic Reflections upon *Four Ages of Understanding*," in *Semiotica* 179 (2010), pp. 83–101.

17. Plato, *Republic*, 523D–524B. Italics are mine.

18. Id., 523D–527C.

19. Id., 527C. The first two italicized words are from Plato's dialogue. The third (italicized phrase) is mine.

We welcome your comments, questions, or suggestions.

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

Is published weekly for its members by the

CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF THE GREAT IDEAS

Founded in 1990 by Mortimer J. Adler & Max Weismann

Max Weismann, Publisher and Editor

Ken Dzuga, Senior Fellow and Archivist

A not-for-profit (501)(c)(3) educational organization.

Donations are tax deductible as the law allows.