

Plato's Method and the Neon Gods

The safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato --A. N. Whitehead



Since the Middle Ages Plato's works have customarily been taught in a manner that emphasizes the nature of their 'philosophical' content. But the nature of philosophy underwent a transformation over the course of the Middle Ages. In the Middle Ages philosophy lost its position as the quintessential intellectual pursuit and the way of life that leads to ultimate understanding. The Church interposed its priests on the path of understanding in order to interdict the possibility of direct experience: It established theology as a superior discipline to philosophy. Philosophy became merely a subsidiary that supplied theology with concepts and techniques, rather than a way of life. Even though modern philosophy initially freed philosophy from its medieval subordination, philosophy still has not recovered its thorough existential despite several centuries of development.

With the advent of Medieval Scholasticism ... we find a clear distinction being drawn between theologia and philosophia. Theology became conscious of its autonomy qua supreme science, while philosophy was emptied of its spiritual exercises which, from now on, were relegated to Christian mysticism and ethics. Reduced to the rank of "a handmaid of theology," philosophy's role was henceforth to furnish theology with conceptual—and hence purely theoretical—material. When, in the modern age, philosophy regained its autonomy, it still retained many features inherited from this medieval conception. In particular, it maintained its purely theoretical character, which even evolved in the direction of a more and more thorough systematization. Not until Nietzsche, Bergson, and existentialism does philosophy consciously return to being a concrete attitude, a way of life and of seeing the world. (Hadot 1995, 107-8)

Plato

Plato's initiation into the Eleusinian Mysteries testifies to direct, ecstatic experience as an essential complement and purpose of the intense mental focus that yields his intellectual endeavor. In *Phaedrus* he describes the experience as a "madness that is heaven sent." (244b) It is an attainment of the highest mental effort at the extreme of the soul's toil and struggle. "It is there that true being dwells, without color or shape, that cannot be touched; reason alone, the soul's pilot, can behold it, and all true knowledge is knowledge thereof." (247c) (Hamilton and Cairns 1961)



Plato is not always taught with attention to his concern for direct experience, nor with a discussion that emphasizes a method for achieving such experience. We have no explicit description of Plato's method, but we do have Porphyry's testimony that his teacher Plotinus used it: "by meditation and by the method that Plato teaches in the Banquet [*Symposium*]" Plotinus "lifted himself ... to the first and all-transcendent divinity." (O'Brian 1975, 16)

Despite the lack of explicit description, we can characterize Plato's method in terms of its purpose, "the ecstasy of madness [and its process, namely] the strict context of dialectics. These are the two ways Plato knew about because he had experienced them both and because he could not avoid traveling both paths. That in the *Phaedrus* he pursues these two paths almost simultaneously and with equal energy characterizes the special tension and unique quality of this astonishing work. (Friedlander 1969, 242)

Plato states the process and purpose of his method in his *Seventh Letter*:

One statement at any rate I can make in regard to all who have written or who may write with a claim to knowledge of the subjects to which I devote myself—no matter how they pretend to have acquired it, whether from my instruction or from others or from their own discovery. Such writers can in my opinion have no real acquaintance with the subject. I certainly have composed no work in regard to it, nor shall I ever do so in the future, for there is no way of putting it in words like other studies. Acquaintance with it must come rather after a long period of attendance on instruction in the subject itself and of close companionship, when, suddenly, like a blaze kindled by a leaping spark, it is generated in the soul and at once becomes self-sustaining. (Letter VII, 341c-d) (Hamilton and Cairns 1961)

In the *Symposium* Plato has Socrates describe clearly and in detail Diotima's method of meditation for attaining direct, ecstatic experience. (Socrates describes Diotima as "a woman who was deeply versed in [the topic of Love] and many other fields of knowledge (201d)). Her process compares to the stepped mental training of Tibetan Buddhist monks.

Diotima's method has seven steps:

1. Love one body.
2. Consider how related one body's beauty is to another's.
3. Love every lovely body but no particular one.
4. Grasp that bodily beauty is nothing compared to that of the soul.
5. Contemplate the beauty of laws and institutions.
6. Contemplate science—the beauty of every kind of knowledge.
7. Achieve the final revelation.

Although the method of the *Symposium* has usually been approached intellectually by modern commentators, the ancients viewed it as a meditation practice, as noted by O'Brian above.

In Plotinus's words:

Roused into myself from my body—outside everything else and inside myself—my gaze has met a beauty wondrous and great. At such moments I have been certain that mine was the better part, mine the best of lives lived to the fullest, mine identity with the divine. Fixed there firmly, poised above everything in the intellectual that is less than the highest, utter actuality was mine. (IV, 8) (O'Brian 1975)

Porphry, as noted above, not only affirms Plato's method as a meditation practice, but he and Plotinus testify to its effectiveness.

Plato presents yet another version of what we might think of as 'the mystics stepladder' in the *Republic*, his massive treatise on the nature of justice, from (a) the balance of things manifest in the just harmony of the ideal human character to (b) the right proportion of elements and organization in the ideal state. As a central issue in his treatise, Plato characterizes knowledge in terms of a Divided Line (509e), a line divided unevenly overall and then divided in the same uneven proportions in the lower and upper sections.

Some meanings

Ecstasy-Literally means "stand outside," a paradoxical experience in which the self stands outside itself.
Madness-for Plato is not 'insanity,' but a state of extreme emotional intensity such as a person might experience at a rock concert.
Mystical- derives from the Greek *mystes* that means someone who is initiated in rites devoted to a god or goddess, such as Dionysius, Orpheus, Demeter, or the like.
Dialectic-back and forth conversation that people engage in when they are willing to give up their own opinions and biases and search for a mutually understood truth.

PLATO'S ANALOGY OF THE DIVIDED LINE		
Intelligible World	Objects The Good	Mental States Intelligence (noesis) or Knowledge (episteme)
	Forms Mathematical Objects	Thinking (dianoia)
World of Appearances	Visible Things Images	Belief (pistis) Imagining (eikasia)

Knowledge begins with the aesthetic apprehension of objects that present to a person's five senses. The next step is mastery of the rules that guide capable everyday behavior, rules like speaking truthfully, being trustworthy, behaving with integrity, etc., the kinds of rules that express the beliefs underlying ordinary morality. Both levels of understanding apply to the common world of things that seem to exist in what we now think of as space and time. Our common concepts of space and time, however, are modern, basically created by Descartes and Newton. The Greek culture of Plato's time did not think as we do that the objects of sensation are made up of inert matter, atoms and molecules. Rather, the objects of sensation in the ancient world had some kind of animation, not just the animation of beasts and insects, but also a less obvious animation of wind and river, of trees and grasses, and even more subtle animation of rocks and mountains. The ancient world inherited the shamanic understanding that everything manifests something called 'spirit.' In a shamanic understanding that persists even today in indigenous peoples, even the outboard motor that propels a boat on the river has spirit.

Knowledge at a higher level than the ordinary world of the of appearances, of sensations, and true beliefs, opens a realm of abstractions. A child may understand that it is important to tell the truth, but it takes a more developed moral sense to understand, for instance, the concept of justice. Plato thought of justice as an ideal, a sort of abstract something that had for him an existence similar to numbers or the law of gravity. One can appreciate such things even though one cannot see them. A child may learn counting first by looking at its fingers. As it progresses in school, it can move from addition to multiplication, then perhaps algebra and calculus and geometric ideas. This moves a person into Plato's 'intelligible world.' As we continue up this ladder, we begin to arrive at questions like why is there mathematics and even why is there a world? These sorts of questions, Plato thought, are the concern of philosophy.

Plato thought, based on his most profound experiences, that even these very abstract questions do not comprise the ultimate level of understanding. Rather, he says, beyond the experience that can be attained by dialectical reasoning about questions that might have intellectual answers, there lies a wondrous vision of the essence of beauty (*phusis kalon*). It ultimately lies beyond any description. Diotima says,

There bursts upon [the candidate for initiation] that wondrous vision which is the very soul of the beauty he has toiled so long for. It is an everlasting loveliness which neither comes nor goes, which neither flowers nor fades, for such beauty is the same on every hand, the same then as now, here as there, this way as that way, the same to every worshipper as it is to every other.

Nor will his vision of the beautiful take the form of a face, or of hands, or of anything that is of the flesh. It will be neither words, nor knowledge, nor a something that exists in something else, such as a living creature, or the earth, or the heavens, or anything that is—but subsisting of itself and by itself in an eternal oneness. (210e-211b) (Hamilton and Cairns 1961)

The concept of the Divided Line is very abstract, so Plato tries to convey it with the analogy of a cave.

Imagine, he says, a cave where men sit with their backs against a low wall just high enough that it extends above their heads. They are chained to that wall in such a way that they can only look at the cave wall opposite, where they see only shadows. The shadows are created by puppeteers on the other side of the low wall, who stand between a fire and the low wall. Shadows of puppets are cast on the wall that the chained men see. The men spend their time guessing what the shadows are doing.

Imagine next that one of the men breaks free of his chains and can turn around and see the fire and how the puppets are used to create shadows on the far wall. The unchained man excitedly tries to tell the others how the shadows are made, but the other men know of no other world than the shadows on the wall,



which is the only world that is real for them. They assume that the unchained man is mad, babbling nonsense.

Next, imagine that the man is able to climb arduously up out of the narrow entrance of the cave into the upper world. It is so bright that his eyes are blinded to anything but reflections in puddles. Eventually the man's vision adjusts so that he can see the actual objects in the upper world. Finally, he is able to squint and look at the sun, the supreme source of light that enables all vision. In Plato's cave analogy, our ordinary world is a realm of shadows rather than realities. Someone who manages to find out that most people are preoccupied with shadowy things like pride, desire, money, and fame seems like a fool to those who are preoccupied with the shadows. One who goes further to discover true illumination may, in turn, seem like a fool even to people, like professors and psychologists, who may have seen beyond the shadows, but who have not achieved ultimate enlightenment.

Plato's Cave Allegory is a story of struggle up from the underground, like Hades. It describes a process that goes from a womb like cave through a struggle that might take place in the birth canal, and emergence finally into the light. It is a representation of a process of death and rebirth, death to the womb world and rebirth into the world at large. Plato's concepts help understand the theories of Stanislov Grof about Holotropic Breathwork as a process. Plato's Divided Line also illustrates a way of thinking about stages in meditative disciplines. Plato's mysticism has significance for the phenomenology of psychedelic experience.

Unfortunately, however, attention to Plato by culture of the Psychedelic Renaissance in the early twenty-first century has narrowly focused only on the role of the putatively psychedelic potion *kykeon* in the ceremony of the mysteries of Demeter at Eleusis. The potion is believed to have been derived from the ergot fungus that grows prolifically on heads of rye and other grains. (Wasson, Hoffman and Ruck 1998) Ergot is also the material that Albert Hoffman was working with when he accidentally discovered the psychotropic effect of LSD, a compound he derived by slightly modifying ergot. There are no explicit reports of the rites at Eleusis, but much can be made of the fact that the symbol of the goddess Demeter was a sheaf of grain. Although initiates were sworn to secrecy, Pindar offers a general characterization of the rites as "dying before dying."



The focus of the rites at the temple at Eleusis was the story of kidnapping to the underworld of Demeter's daughter Persephone by Hades and of Demeter's subsequent efforts to rescue her. The central theme of the myth is death and rebirth, which also was tied in with the cycle of seasons. Demeter was the goddess of growing things. When the other gods would not help her get Persephone back from Hades, Demeter stopped all plants from growing. Initially that did not phase the gods, because they lived on ambrosia. But then they realized that humans would die when there was nothing to eat, and there would be no one to worship the gods. A compromise was reached with Hades: Persephone had to spend six months with him (because she had eaten a single pomegranate seed while she was in the underworld), but then she would get to spend the next six months with her mother. Thus began the seasonal cycle of winter when plants die and summer when they grow.

The Immortality Key by Brian Muraresku (Muraresku 2020) is an example of the narrow focus of attention on the potion used in the Eleusinian mysteries, a focus that found extensively in the culture of the Psychedelic Renaissance. That focus reflects a limited understanding of Plato's life and work. Plato was indeed an initiate (*mystes*) of the Eleusinian mysteries, but that was merely one episode in his life. Of far greater significance was the series of events surrounding the trial and death of Socrates. Plato, as a young, educated Athenian aristocrat aspired to the highest level of literary accomplishment for someone of his ilk, the honor attained by playwrights like Sophocles or Aeschylus. They achieved the highest

honor Greek society could award by capturing a laurel wreath at Olympics. Plato did in fact become the greatest stylist in the Greek language, but his interest in literal playwrighting was diverted by his encounter with Socrates, whom he made the chief character in his dialogues. Although Plato eschewed formal playwrighting, his early dialogues take the form of plays, even having quasi stage directions. Plato's portrayal of Socrates is vivid, suggesting his intense engagement with Socrates. Watching Socrates persecuted and executed was many times more intense than any psychedelic experience.

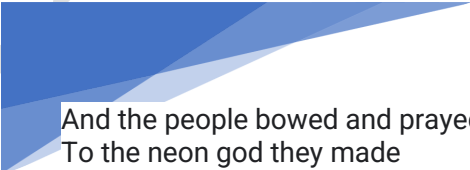
More important, however, than any moment of mystical experience is what Plato says is the necessity of long study and close companionship for comprehension to spring to light in the soul, something that merely taking a pill cannot achieve. Besides that, the profoundly extensive thinking and writing that Plato undertook contrasts greatly with the short Eleusinian ritual, which Plato and other initiates only partook once and which was offered only every five years. Plato's scorn for use of the Eleusinian potion outside of the ritual at Eleusis is evident in the *Symposium*. Alcibiades was a very competent general for Athens who went over to the Spartan side, but then managed somehow to regain position in Athenian politics. He is reputed to be perhaps the only person who managed to steal the Eleusinian potion, thereby violating the oath of secrecy required of all initiates. Plato portrays Alcibiades rudely ending the dinner and speeches of the *Symposium* by bursting in with an unruly, disruptive gang of inebriated revelers. Alcibiades's profanity is like that of today's neoshamans, who snatch potions from the indigenous cultures that give them their genuine powers and sell them to gullible Westerners.

For all the homage paid to the potion of Eleusis by the Psychedelic Renaissance, only a few things have come out of the current era or the decade of the 1960's preceding it that remotely compare with the work of Plato. That work, which has endured for two and a half millennia, is the broad foundation of Western intellectual attainment. It is a good starting point for innovating the creativity that is critical to insure the survival of humanity beyond the planetary crisis of the twenty-first century. A few things yielded by the decade of the 1960's show some prophetic promise.

The Neon Gods

In 1967 there were prophets on every corner in Haight-Ashbury. The pools of their eyes reflected psychedelic rainbows, although few pots of treasure could be found at the rainbow ends. But it was easy and exciting to plunge into those pools and dive for pearls. A scant few found them, a few others drowned, no longer able to hold their breath.

The task, as always, was to find the true prophets and harvest the rare pearls. Ken Kesey prophesied the collapse of the myth of mental illness whose rubble we are still trying to pick our way through today. The personal computer was a pearl that came out of the psychedelic oyster. Stewart Brand forecast the Web with *The Whole Earth Catalog* and was one of the first to capitalize on it. At least we know these things so far. But there is still a way to go because the only test of prophecy is time. Two prescient books bear important witness:



And the people bowed and prayed
To the neon god they made
And the sign flashed out its warning
In the words that it was forming
Then the sign said, "The words on the prophets
are written on the subway walls
In tenement halls"
And whispered in the sound of silence.

-Paul Simon

- *From Prime Green: Remembering the Sixties*, by Robert Stone.

On returning to California from a long stay in London, at the time of the Attica Riot in New York state Stone notes:

The California of our youth, whose very name was magic, had been transformed into an industrial landscape. The orchards that had not been good enough for us as we found them, that we had felt the need to illuminate and gild with the wine of astonishment and hang with acid lilacs, were orchards no more, they were Silicone Valley [filled with terrifying artificial intelligence.].... The drugs which we believed so important a part of our liberation, the key to music, the doors of perception for an elite, became a mass youth phenomenon.... We used drugs in imitation of European decadents, but in the end we allowed drugs to be turned into a weapon against everything we believed in.... Our expectations were too high, our demands excessive; things were harder than we expected....

In our time, we were clamorous and vain.... We wanted it all; sometimes we confused self-destructiveness with virtue and talent, obliteration with ecstasy, heedlessness with courage.... Nothing is free, and we had to learn that at last. Every generation must—be it romantic or pragmatic, spiritually striving or materialistic as a copper penny.... We were the chief victims of our own mistakes. Measuring ourselves against the masters of the present, we regret nothing except our failure to prevail. (Stone 2007, 227-229)

- *From Counterculture to Cyberculture*, by Fred Turner

To many [the technologies of the Internet] still seem to promise what the strobe lights and LSD of the Trips Festival once offered the hippies of the Haight: access to a vision of the patterns underlying the world, and by means of that vision, a way to join one's life to them and enter a global, harmonious community of mind.... And to [an] extent they have rendered their believers vulnerable to the material forces of the historical moment in which they live....

Yet, as the short life of the New communalist movement suggests... information technologies will never allow us to escape the demands of our bodies, our institutions, and the times in which we find ourselves.... we remain confronted by the need to build egalitarian, ecologically sound communities. (Turner 2006, 262)

The inventor of the early video game Merlin, Bob Doyle, offered ideas for free to anyone who wanted them. The task, as always, is to implement them. But before that, it is necessary to sort out the ideas that can be fruitfully implemented, like finding the true prophets. The one I favor is Stanislav Grof, who inherited his mantle from Albert Hofmann. Grof made the only useful characterization of Hofmann's 'problem child,' calling it an "unspecific amplifier." In modern psychological terminology it is the unconscious that is amplified.

The Platonic predecessor of Freud's psychoanalytic talk therapy, a process whose goal is to make the unconscious conscious, is dialectic that facilitates recollection, as in *Meno*. And recollection is connected to the even more ancient idea of transmigration. Alfred North Whitehead has developed a modern scientific framework for this phenomenon with an update of Plato's cosmology. Whitehead's process philosophy suggests an updated starting place for creative innovation, and it provides a means to identify fruitful prophecy amidst the welter of claims in the psychedelic renaissance.

Many of the prophets have trumpeted psychedelic vision, mistakenly thinking their visions are idiosyncratic to psychedelic substances. As Grof points out, however, the substances are only amplifiers, and we must separate substances from what they amplify just as we separate loudspeakers from the sound they amplify, like music must be separated from an amplifier. In many cases what captures people's attention are side effects of the substances, their perceptual amplifications and physiological correlates. The side effects are often the source of various distinctions people make between substances. The significant, central psychedelic experience is the same across substances, as Grof suggested, amplification, not peripheral amplification of one's senses and psychotropic changes, but amplification of the journey of ascension described in Plato's Divided Line.

What is amplified is the Whiteheadian event that is the actual, existent moment, which is always becoming and perishing, and so never really is the being (*ousia*) that Aristotle ossified in his attempt to systematize Plato. The first level of the Line amplifies the past and provides the apparent solidity of the ordinary world. Amplification then enlarges the second level by comprehending the moral feelings of relatedness to others. The third amplifies the guidelines of rationality, and the fourth penultimately Plato's ideas. Ultimately amplification can intensify to comprehend the beauty (*kalon*) that inspires the feeling that all is one. Prophecy is the province of lower levels of the Divided Line, but when the final spark is kindled, there is no need to prophesy, no need for neon gods. A blade of grass is a blade of grass, a grain of sand is a grain of sand, the sky is the sky, and light is in the sky.

A prevalent psychedelic mistake is to worship amplification as truth. The most important use of amplification for humans is its help in revealing one's psychology, one's past history. Amplifying awareness of my past provides the material that I need to study and question in order to gain self-awareness. And then not just awareness of my own past, but the whole past of the world, so that I can learn who I am in it and how I am in relation to other humans and to all the other creatures and to all the elements of all the organisms that I am one with.

References

- Friedlander, P. 1969. *Plato: The Dialogues vol.3; trans. Meyerhoff, H.* Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Hadot, P. 1995. *Philosophy as a Way of Life.* Malden, MA, USA: Blackwell.
- Hamilton, E., and H. Cairns. 1961. *The Collected Dialogues of Plato.* New York: Bollingen Foundation.
- Muraresku, B. 2020. *The Immortality Key.* New York: St. Martin's Press.
- O'Brian, E. 1975. *The Essential Plotinus.* Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett.
- Stone, R. 2007. *Prime Green: Remembering the Sixties.* New York: HarperCollins Publishers.
- Turner, F. 2006. *From Counterculture to Cyberculture.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Wasson, R, A Hoffman, and C Ruck. 1998. *The Road to Eleusis.* Los Angeles: Hermes Press.
- Whitehead, A. N. 1978. *Process and Reality Corrected Edition.* Edited by R Griffin and D Sherburne. New York: Free Press.