ON BEING AND BECOMING:
ANCIENT GREEK ETHICS AND ONTOLOGY
IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

by

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ABSTRACT

The development of Ancient Greek philosophy from Thales to Aristotle is traced and key ethical and existential themes relevant to the personal, political, and ecological challenges we face in the modern world are drawn out and discussed. I look at the development of Presocratic thought, examine Plato's critique of self and society, and consider Aristotle's view of nature. Possible misconceptions in modern interpretations of Plato and Aristotle are addressed; as are modern thinkers, influenced by Greek thought, who seek to rework our understanding of culture, technology, and self, as well as our relationship to the ecosystem. Throughout it is argued that a reengagement with the fundamental questions of Being and goodness that so fascinated the Greeks may aid us enormously as we struggle to rethink who we are, where we came from, and where we might be headed as the first decade of the 21st century draws to a close.

Keywords: Ethics, Ontology, Ancient Greek Philosophy, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Phenomenology, Deep Ecology

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Preface

I should say first that this project was written as part of an interdisciplinary course of studies in the humanities and therefore is not intended for a specialist audience. Rather, I address the educated general reader who may have encountered Plato and Aristotle (or some other Greek thinker) in passing, but who may not have had the occasion to consider the broader ethical and existential implications of their thought in great detail. I offer more summary and contextual information than one might find in a specialist thesis in classics or ancient philosophy, and less focus on specific issues of interpretation. I explore a fairly wide range of ancient thought rather than focusing solely on a specific text or problem—the tone of this project is certainly more speculative than analytical. Some advanced readers may find such an approach to be frustrating. This said, I hope that there will be others who find here an informative (if not completely comprehensive) introduction to Greek philosophy, as well as a primer that prompts the reader to consider both the practical and theoretical relevance of Ancient Greek thought in the modern world.

While I have allowed myself a good deal of freedom to consider a number of thinkers and to follow many interrelated threads of thought, I can say that this project undertakes three clear tasks: (1) Trace the general development of Greek philosophy from Thales to Aristotle; (2) Consider the historical context and significance of the thinkers and ideas I encounter; (3) Employ the first two processes to draw out key themes, observations, arguments, and comparisons that may be helpful or otherwise relevant to us in the 21st century. In keeping with the interdisciplinary mandate of my program, I will alternate between interests that are historical, literary, political, personal/subjective, philosophical and ecological. However, all of these areas will, I hope, be focused by a concern with basic existential and ethical matters—that is, our understanding of Being and some idea of goodness.

The problems inherent in dealing with ancient texts are seemingly endless. Aside from the difficulties inherent in translation, the thought of most ancient thinkers comes down to us in fragmentary form or through secondary sources often many centuries removed from the original thinker. In the case of Socrates, who wrote nothing himself, we have only the writings of Xenophon, Aristophanes' play *The Clouds*, and Plato's dialogues on which to base an account of his thought. As my focus will be on the works of Plato, the Socrates I refer to will be the ancient Platonic literary figure—in terms of cultural relevance it is clearly this Socrates and not the historical man who has exercised the most influence over the centuries. This said, and because Plato never speaks to us directly in the dialogues, we should be careful not to think of Plato's Socrates simply as a 'mouthpiece' for Plato's own ideas; the relationship, I believe, is much more complicated.

As for Aristotle, the collection of writings we have from him seem to be lecture notes (or something of the like) and as a result we should be aware that they may not represent his final word on things. Still, he does show a remarkable consistency in terms of the general way in which he expresses his experience of the world (causation, movement, form, matter, ethics etc.). I will focus on these elements in order to draw out this part of my thesis. Additionally, I have attempted to introduce, wherever possible, the key Greek terms so that the reader may begin to identify and consider the basic vocabulary. Again, I must make it clear that I will not attempt to deal with the finer aspects of interpretation or engage in the ongoing debates that arise here. As I suggested above, I am not qualified in this area and must be content to remain a fascinated spectator. Indeed, there are a numerous interpretations of the texts I consider, many of which sharply disagree with those I present here. My observations and speculations are not intended as contributions to scholarly debate in the field of Ancient philosophy. Rather, they are simply attempts to bring out fundamental ethical and existential problems of self, society and our relationship to the natural world—as I argue, these are problems we often seem to neglect or push aside in the modern world, but they are problems that are of principal concern to much of Greek philosophy. The readings I offer here are pieced together from my own study of the source texts (in translation), and from

what I have found to be the most compelling and useful readings offered by the specialists I have researched. Therefore, I rely heavily on the analytical work done by the scholars represented in my bibliography to deepen my reading of the source material, provide a testing ground for my own thoughts and insights, and to aid me in bringing Greek philosophy into the 21st century.

To this end, the recent work of David Roochnik has been particularly enlightening. I owe a great deal to his fine books, *Retrieving the Ancients*, and *Of Art and Wisdom: Plato's Understanding of Techné*, as well the reading of Plato's *Republic* presented in his *Beautiful City: The Dialectical Nature of Plato's Republic*. Martha Nussbaum's work on Aristotle has also been very helpful, especially her classic, *The Fragility of Goodness*, and the excellent essays in her edition of *De Motu Animalum*. The work of E.R. Dodds, specifically, *The Greeks and the Irrational* as well as *The Ancient Idea of Progress*, is an ongoing source of ideas and inspiration. Mark McPherran's *The Religion of Socrates* has also been very helpful in considering the Platonic/Socratic conception of the extra-rational.

Finally, while I will do my best to outline the key ideas and narratives contained in the texts I examine, the reader may wish to have the following source material on hand for reference: Jonathan Barnes' anthology, *Early Greek Philosophy*; Plato's *Protagoras*, *Gorgias,* and *Republic*; Aristotle's *Physics* Book II, *Metaphysics* Book VII, *Parts of Animals* Book I, *On the Soul*, *On Generation and Corruption,* and *The Nicomachean Ethics*. This is especially important with Plato as readers may wish to follow along in order to formulate and reflect on their own responses to the dialogues I examine. Additionally, readers interested in the ecological issues I discuss in Chapter Four may wish to consult Neil Evernden's, *The Natural Alien*, as well as Ezrahim Kohak's, *The Embers and the Stars*.

Introduction

The last five hundred years have been a period of remarkable progress for the human species. We have spanned the planet, walked on the moon, harnessed the power of the atom and mapped the genetic structure of life. The faith in human reason that began to hold sway in the 16th century has led to the development of technological marvels that have affected all areas of human existence. And for a time this view of the world seemed to offer the promise of humanity's domination over nature, just as it created high hopes for human self-mastery in terms of the political, economic and psychological forces that drive history. Increasingly however, the pledge of progress and social betterment that this world-view bestowed on humanity rings hollow.

The 20th century saw a great questioning of the grand 'scientific' theories of history, economics, race and the human psyche. And it experienced the dangerous utopian ideologies that emerged from the instrumental and often-tyrannical ways in which these theories were interpreted and applied. Perhaps most disturbing of all, the last century also witnessed the apocalyptic potential of our techno-scientific culture with the development of nuclear weapons, increasing levels of toxicity in the environment, and the rapid destruction of natural habitats and the eco-system itself. And while it may seem painfully clear to us now that thinkers like Marx and Freud were reaching for a brass ring that simply did not exist, the ideas of self and society that they and their contemporaries put forward estranged the individual from his or her own experience of the world and reduced the self to a deterministic cog in an economic/psychological machine. Indeed, the brilliant and revolutionary observations made by Darwin and Wallace have also been interpreted in ways that demoted the meaning of life to a blind evolutionary struggle: only the fittest do, and therefore should, survive.

The incredible virtuosity with which modern science is able to describe the way the world works and transform nature to suit our desires has obscured questions of

meaning—it has reduced the value of human experience to a mere epiphenomenon of matter and mechanics. Through our obsession with technology as the means by which we may satisfy our seemingly endless appetite for pleasure, distraction and progress, we have turned a blind eye towards the irrational drives that permeate our existence. And in doing so, we have almost completely estranged ourselves from the natural world that sustains us. This is not a pretty picture of things, but it is one that we in the West have been able to systematically obscure behind a hedonistic screen of consumerism, kitsch, and soft-nihilism—all at the expense of the natural environment and what we call 'the developing world'. Recently, however, we have seen the belief in a self-regulating global market come under serious strain; notions of democracy and freedom become increasingly vague and instrumental in the new regime of global economics; and the faith in progress and consumerism that blindly drives our ideas of society and self take on an ominous dimension with the growing environmental crisis. How might we begin to rework our sense of things? How might we go about aligning desire and reason in face of the complexity that surrounds us? How might we rediscover meaning and our place in the world?

The existential responsibility to know ourselves looms over us like never before. Now more than ever, it seems necessary for the individual to re-embrace and to take responsibility for the reality of his or her own experience of the world. But while the charge for true self-knowledge in the midst of a culture in ethical crisis is clearly a daunting one, it is not a task that we need undertake alone. Indeed, we may look back on our predecessors in Ancient Greece and consider that while these people enjoyed a great cultural and scientific enlightenment of their own, they too suffered a great crisis of meaning and self-knowledge. We may also take some solace in the fact that the thought of some of the first great figures in our intellectual tradition emerged in response to this stituation. In the pages that follow I will explore the work of some of these thinkers and consider the relevance of their thought in the modern world. I begin with a summary look at Presocratic philosophy. Here I hope to provide some background and context for the general reader; and to draw attention to some basic ontological problems that we continue to wrestle with today—most fundamentally, the nature and meaning of Being. Following

this, my chief concern will be with the thought of Plato and Aristotle and the ways in which they responded to the intellectual and political milieu in which they found themselves. I will also attempt to clarify some possible misconceptions and problems with the ways in which we have come to interpret their thought in the modern era. In the course of things I hope to draw out some of the key insights into human nature and the natural world made by these thinkers; and, perhaps most importantly, to consider what they may have to tell us about goodness and human authenticity as we struggle to rethink who we are, where we came from, and where we might be headed as the first decade of the 21st century draws to a close.

The First Enlightenment

Early in the 6th Century B.C. changes were occurring in the intellectual life of the Hellenic world that would have a profound and lasting influence on all of Western culture. The thinkers of this period began to move away from the traditional mythical conception of the world and increasingly strove to offer a reasoned account of things that was based on empirical investigation and rational insight. These thinkers began to recognise that the physical world functioned according to consistent laws; and they embraced the idea that the universe was knowable to the human mind. This new perspective, although not completely atheistic, moved away from the accepted Greek religion and its anthropomorphised gods; it questioned the ethical views found in the great poems of Homer and Hesiod; and it sought to replace the age-old explanations of natural and cultural phenomena furnished by the myths. The Greek Enlightenment that began in 6th century Ionia soon spread throughout the Hellenic world and played a major role in the development of the 5th century Athenian culture we often look to as the origin of the West.

As the thinkers of this period developed empirical investigation into the sensible world and refined logical inquiry into the abstract realm of rational thought, they began the ongoing dialogue of Western science and philosophy. Indeed, it was in the period spanning the 6th, 5th and 4th centuries B.C. that the philosophical questions we continue to wrestle with today were first clearly posed, discussed and developed: Is anything stable

and permanent, or is reality always changing? Are human beings capable of understanding reality as it is in itself? Or is the human view of reality always distorted or incomplete? Must reality remain a mystery? Can every thing be explained by material causes, even the human mind and soul? Are ethical values, such as justice and courage, relative? Do they depend on the individual or group that holds them? Or are there some absolute and eternal values that are independent of those who hold them? What sort of political community is most just? Is any political system better than democracy? Is freedom the highest and most important political value? What is the relationship between human beings and the natural world? Is nature and existence itself inherently meaningful? Or is it the human mind that imposes meaning onto the world?

Above all else, this period launched the pursuit of ontology, or the search for a true account of Being.[1] From Thales to Aristotle, knowledge of Being is the overarching concern that animates all of Ancient Greek science and philosophy—all other questions involving ethics, logic, epistemology, perception, causality, and movement seem to spring from it or relate back to it in one way or another. This is especially evident when one considers the important distinction that Greek philosophy makes between *being* (eternal, unchanging, unity or the One) and *becoming* (constant change, flux, or movement into and out of existence). Whether it is the early Presocratics attempting to give a *logos* of nature and the cosmos, Plato and Socrates searching for ethical truth, civic stability and self-knowledge through the dialectic, or Aristotle examining his hylomorphic experience of the natural world, ontological concerns are central. Whether the investigation at hand is abstract or empirical, scientific, aesthetic, or ethical, the nature of Being must be confronted regardless of the type of account one wishes to give. And indeed, the great Greek historians also confronted the nature of Being as they strove to offer explanations for the emergence and decline of cultures, cities, rulers, and customs

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1 In order to avoid confusion between different usages of the word "being" I use a capital B when referring to Being as such. I use italics when referring to the radicalised unchanging, eternal, and unified concept of *being* as part of the *being/becoming* distinction. I also use italics when referring to nature, culture, rationalism and empiricism as part of a philosophical distinction. Additionally, I have attempted to introduce the key Greek terms whenever possible as the flexibility of the Greek language means that many of these words cannot always be precisely translated into modern English. A term like "*archê,*" for instance, may take on several meanings depending on the context: "beginning," "origin," "source," "first principle," "ruling principle."

in terms of human accounts and historical laws rather than through myth or divinely inspired poetry;[2] as did the early medical writers when they searched for physical rather than supernatural causes for the diseases that affect body and mind.[3]

In terms of its overall structure, perhaps the most fascinating aspect of this early period of our intellectual history is its dialectical development. This is to say that much of the beauty of Ancient Greek philosophy lies in the diverse ways in which the search for knowledge of Being moves from thinker to thinker like a great dialogue to include issues of ethics and human authenticity. Of course, anyone who is familiar with the works of Hesiod and Homer knows that authenticity and some notion of ethics are central to the pre-philosophical Greek mind. According to Pausanias, the words "know thyself" (*gnothi seauton*) were inscribed in the forecourt at the temple of Apollo at Delphi. But this phrase is not some kind of new age mantra of personal power; rather, it calls upon the human psyche to be ever mindful of what kind of being it is—live in moderation, nothing in excess. And indeed, human authenticity is the central ethical theme underlying the existential angst of Achilles, as well as Odysseus' struggle to return home to Penelope and the very real human existence she represents. However, the thinkers of 6th century Ionia, and those that followed them in 5th century Athens and elsewhere in the Hellenic world, modernised the Greek world-view by asserting the individual's ability to actively query his own experience in order to better understand and give a reasoned account of the world around him. And for Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, this investigation necessarily required new models of what a good life and society might entail.

While the Greek Enlightenment did not cause traditional Greek religion and poetry to be completely pushed aside by the greater Hellenic community—the old myths and beliefs remained the primary educative and identifying force of the Greek world— human *logos* did begin to assert itself as an investigative and explicative entity that posed a serious challenge to the established view of nature and morality. The concepts of intellectual advancement, critique, rhetoric and scholarship are born in this period, as are the institutional conceptions of law and politics we have come to take for granted today.

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2 See Thucydides, Book I, 21.Herodotus is less overt in his assertion of historical cause, butbe does show leanings in this direction—e.g. His 'rationalizing' approach to the stories of Io and Europa (*Histories* 1).
3 See Hippocrates, *On the Sacred Disease*; also, *Airs, Waters, and Places* Pt. 22.

A progressive notion of human possibilities begins to emerge here: the traditional idealisation of the past is exchanged for a concern with the present and the possibility of a better and more prosperous future; and a conception of *techné* (art or craft/the teachable products of human reason directed towards some specific end) emerges as a pursuit that may make life more secure in face of the general contingencies of existence.

And of course, the Greeks of the 5th century famously developed their music, theatre, art and architecture to express their contemporary condition, reinforce their ideals, and warn against the dangers of excess and civic disunity. At its best this was a cultural aesthetic of measurement, balance and restraint—one that celebrated life while it recognised the often-tragic nature of human existence. As Nietzsche and so many others have pointed out, for the Greeks, it was all about the fullness and authenticity of one's engagement with life. There was, famously, the Athenian ideal of getting things right, politically, personally, spiritually, intellectually and aesthetically. But however appealing the clarity of this ideal may seem, we should keep in mind that the Hellenic world was not the verdant cultural and intellectual Eden that many in the 18th and 19th centuries imagined, nor was Athens the bastion of pure balance and rationality it is often assumed to have been. Life in the Ancient Greek world was as rough and uncertain as the landscape of Greece itself, and the human spirit was as susceptible as always to the dangers of greed, ignorance and superstition. This was a society almost perpetually at war and constantly plagued by factionalism. And we should also not forget that the great cultural advances of this period were predicated on slavery as well as the subordination of women and foreigners. Despite its remarkable cultural achievements the great Hellenic flourishing, could not sustain itself. Athens lost itself to excess and confusion, and its empire finally crumbled under its own hubris.[4]

So while we cannot ignore the enduring ideal this culture represents, we may also consider the rise and decline of Athens herself as an example of the transient nature of culture and empire, of the inequalities bred into civilization, and of the dangers inherent

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4 This is, of course, a greatly over simplified statement. However, the growing feelings of hostility towards Athens in the 5th century empire must have been fuelled by a number of events that could be described as 'hubristic' in the modern usage of the word—e.g. increasing tributes, the devastation at Melos in 416/15. Scholars like Victor Hansen have used the hubris theme to draw parallels with modern American hegemony. For more on this see Kagan 1975, Section X, XI; also see Pomeroy 2004, VII, VIII.

in progress and unchecked desire. And this seems especially relevant to us as our modern culture comes under increasing strain in the 21st century. The now traditional Western ideals of eternal economic growth, freedom, expansionism, democracy, technological progress and consumerism that were born from the innovations made by the thinkers of the 17th and 18th centuries, and which took on such a feverish life of their own in the 19th and 20th centuries, seem increasingly at odds, confused, and even dangerous with regard to our contemporary social and environmental condition. Indeed, we may begin to ask ourselves what the innovations and discoveries brought about by *our* great Enlightenment are worth if they have only allowed us to engage in a kind of destructive *Wertrational* with increasing virtuosity. Know thyself—it seems we must confront this ancient existential imperative anew. Now, however, the challenge is on a global scale as we struggle to rework or replace our traditional view of things with a conception of the world that may allow humanity to live in balance with itself and with nature. It is with this in mind that I suggest we might do well to return to the source, so to speak, in order to re-examine both the context and the thought of the great Ancient thinkers as we attempt to rethink the meaning of human being in the 21st century. Indeed, we may be in a better position than ever to benefit from their insights into age-old problems that we continue to confront as part of the ongoing process of understanding ourselves and the world in which we live.

In the following pages I will attempt to approach Greek philosophy from an open minded and conversational perspective. And in doing so I hope to show, for instance, how relevant Plato's critique of self and society is to us in the early 21st century, as well as what a welcome alternative to our oppressively instrumental conceptions of science, technology and nature may be found in the works of Aristotle. Above all else I hope to demonstrate that by engaging with these early philosophers we may rediscover the fundamental existential questions that so fascinated the Greeks, and that in doing so we may begin philosophy for ourselves—not as some purely technical pursuit, but rather as an ongoing investigation into the world and ourselves that asserts the value of subjective experience and that strives towards personal authenticity, responsibility and a true ethical sense of Being.

Overview

I have divided my examination into four chapters, each of which deals with a specific area or text(s) in Greek philosophy and its potential implications for us in the modern world. Each chapter begins with its own introduction that outlines in detail the issues to be discussed. I will therefore not go into any great depth here. However, I do think it helpful at the outset to have some idea of the basic themes to be covered in each chapter and of how they may relate to each other. Here, then, is a brief outline of what is to come.

Chapter One offers an overview of the development and key themes of early Greek philosophy—or Presocratic philosophy as it is called. Here I introduce the basic ontological and epistemological issues that prefigure the thought of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. Chief among these is the distinction I mentioned above, between *being* and *becoming* (the eternal One and the many in flux), which in turn gives rise to problems and sub-distinctions that animate much of subsequent philosophical investigation in the West. In the course of the chapter I begin to consider the problems associated with purely abstract approaches to knowledge and being, and with those that embrace a totally empirical view. In doing so I hope to raise a few key questions in the mind of the reader: In what does reality consist and in what ways may we know it? What is the relationship between some notion of mind or soul and the physical world? What kinds of experiences are truer, those based in pure reason and logic or those that come from direct empirical sources? And, finally, what might be the consequences of a world-view that reduces ethics and the experience of value to culturally relative by-products of human beliefs and conventions?

Chapter Two takes up this last concern and moves the discussion of Being and knowledge into the realm of ethics. Through an examination of Socrates' confrontation with the sophists[5] in Plato's *Gorgias* and *Protagoras*, I consider how the character of

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5 The question of exactly who the sophists were, what they taught and the degree to which their thought influenced the Athenian political milieu of the 5th century is the subject of ongoing discussion. Some scholars, such as Kerferd, argue that the sophists constituted a coherent and important intellectual movement; and that thanks to the testimony of Plato, the sophists have been incorrectly labelled in various ways as poor thinkers. For my part, I tend to agree with argument of those, like Barrow, who suggest that given the evidence we have—albeit that much of it comes from Plato and his clear desire to disassociate Socrates from other thinkers of the time—there is little to suggest that a "movement" existed in any important sense. While it does seem likely that some individual sophists may have had important things to

Socrates manages to reveal a deep, but unexamined or repressed concern with goodness and virtue in even his most amoral interlocutors. Often these are 'enlightened' men who have abandoned justice or virtue as mere conventions, and who use the words 'justice' and 'virtue' instrumentally towards some notion of 'natural right'—which, for them, favours the natural acquisition of material wealth, power and pleasure by the stronger or better (an attitude not so different from those Social Darwinists that emerged in the late 19th century). To close this chapter, I open the question of what knowledge of virtue or goodness might entail. I ask whether or not Plato's ideal conception of ethics should finally be understood as a purely rational art of counting and measuring, or if technical thinking might play a more limited role in terms of knowing justice, goodness and the self. Here I begin to consider a view of Plato that is somewhat different from the stern rationalist he is often understood to be: rather than Plato the 'theoretical optimist' who seeks to secure the fragile notion of goodness by reducing ethics to cold rational acts of calculation. I begin to consider Plato the existentialist, the poet-philosopher, psychologist, and mystic who faces up to the irrational aspects of human experience and who seeks to encourage honest self-reflection in the minds of his readers.

Chapter Three centres on a reading of Plato's most comprehensive work, *The Republic*. In order to better understand its contemporary significance, as well as the larger social and political problems the dialogue seeks to address, I begin with a brief look at the historical and intellectual context in which *The Republic* was written. Following this I attempt to bring together the many threads I introduced in the first two chapters. Here I consider Plato's relationship to revelation and the extra-rational in more detail; and I examine the remarkable way in which Plato's total dialectical conception of philosophy––his intertwined ontology, epistemology and ethics—strives to unify the disparate elements and distinctions found in the thought of the Presocratics and the Sophists by 'elevating' philosophy towards knowledge of "The Good." In the course of my reading of the *Republic* that follows, I attempt to demonstrate how a dialectical view of the dialogue reveals it not to be the static treatise on quasi-totalitarian government that many think it

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say, there were clearly others whose motives and views seem to have been questionable. Regardless, it is clear that Plato and other thinkers of the 5th and 4th centuries thought that many of the sophists contributed, consciously or otherwise, to a debilitating and misguided rejection of notions of objective truth, particularly in moral matters. See Kerferd 1981 and Barrow 2007 (Appendix 1).

to be. Rather, I attempt to show that the dialogue is an ongoing conversation that invites the reader to discuss the meaning of democracy, morality, education, philosophy, freedom, knowledge, personal responsibility, and human authenticity—one that asks us to consider the power of desire and the limits of reason and technical thinking, as well as the nature of philosophy itself. To close, I consider a few of the many ways in which Plato's dialogue focuses our minds on the most basic problems inherent in our contemporary conceptions of politics, ethics, desire and self, as well as the language, terminology, and technology we so often take for granted.

In Chapter Four, I consider how Aristotle returns philosophy to the world of nature and empirical experience while retaining the strong ethical dimension imbued into it by the Platonic/Socratic project. I attempt to demonstrate here how Aristotle's teleological conception of nature has been largely misunderstood in the scientific age and I consider what his view might offer us with regards to the environmental challenges we face in the 21st century. I suggest here that in terms of coming to an ethical understanding of the creatures and things that constitute the ecosystem, Aristotle's contribution to the ancient discussion of *being* and *becoming* may offer a welcome alternative to the rather instrumental conception of the natural world and low estimation of subjective experience our contemporary techno-scientific culture espouses. Perhaps most importantly, I will consider how his conceptions of *orexis* (reaching out to the world) and *eudaimonia* (happiness or, as I prefer, "the flourishing life") might be extended to include the eco-system itself, and thus allow us to better understand the moral meaning of nature. Finally, in order to show how this manner of thinking may be reasserting itself in our times, I conclude with a brief look at the ways in which 20th and 21st century phenomenology re-addresses the fundamental Greek concern with ontology and human authenticity. I look here at the ways in which phenomenology reasserts the value of direct human experience that Aristotle and Plato so clearly embraced; and I consider how this view may help us to experience nature—and all of Being for that matter—in a more authentic, meaningful and altogether ethical light.

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The Dialectic of the One and the Many

It has often been remarked how modern many of the early or 'Presocratic' philosophers seem to us today. This is especially noticeable with a thinker like Democritus and his remarkable insight that all of existence is but atoms and void. In a broad sense too, the resonance the Greek Enlightenment has with the modern world-view is difficult to ignore. Like the advances made by the modern scientific revolution that began in the 16th century, the materialistic and proto-logical accounts of reality that appeared in the 6th and 5th centuries B.C. played an enormous role in the emergence of a progressive intellectual and cultural environment where the development of new arts and ideas was central. But while this new rationalism set Western philosophy and science in motion, there were those who found something dangerously lacking in it. Although the thought of the early Greek philosophers created much of the groundwork on which the thought of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle rests, it is largely vacuous in terms of ethics. And it is precisely this moral void that inspired Socrates to make his famous turn.

In Plato's dialogue, the *Phaedo*, Socrates responds to his interlocutors, Cebes and Simmias, on the subject of generation and corruption (coming into and out of being) and in doing so he is compelled to give an account of his own philosophical development (96b-107a). Here Socrates reveals that despite his initial fascination with his predecessors, and the diverse ways in which they attempted to explain the causes of

things in material terms, he finally came to the realisation that he was "by nature totally unfitted for this kind of investigation" (96c). He tells of how he became so confused or "blinded" by these studies that he lost the commonsensical knowledge of things he seemed to possess beforehand (96c-97c). Socrates then explains that he embarked on a 'second sailing' in which he turned to dialogue or "the speeches" as his principal mode of investigation. The drama of the *Phaedo* is marked by the fact that it takes place on the day of Socrates' execution—the dialogue is, above all else, a defence of the philosophical life; its principal concern is the nature of the human soul/mind, or the *psuché*. And although it is certainly questionable whether or not Plato proves the claim for human spiritual immortality he makes in the *Phaedo*, the discussion surrounding this issue does prompt the reader to question whether or not purely rational, quantitative or material accounts of things are sufficient to fully explain the world and the way we experience it.[5]

Indeed, we may pause here to reflect on the fact that we do not naturally take ourselves to be merely blind masses of matter, nor do we first experience the world quantitatively. For example, we may consider whether or not a purely logical, material or quantitative description of the world is enough to understand the full meaning of a common determinate substance like water. And furthermore, we might wonder if such accounts may allow us to discern what is finally responsible for the coming into being of the one oxygen and two hydrogen atoms that constitute the quantitative definition of water in the first place. Perhaps more fundamentally, we may also reflect on the fact that the common experience of water clearly entails much more than the recognition of its molecular construction and behaviour. Water is the ocean and rivers; it is a staple of all life on earth; it is a source of awe and mystery just as it represents refreshment, comfort and pleasure. This is to say that water as a common intelligible idea is intimately bound up with a myriad of experiences that involve certain qualitative values. And these values and experiences, while meaningful, may not be entirely rational or logical in a strict sense. So while the quantitative or material view of water may allow us to make useful predictions about how the substance may behave under certain conditions, water is clearly much more than a quantifiable subject of scientific investigation. And if

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5 For a fuller account of this see Roochnik 2004, p.93-101.

something as common as water illuminates the epistemic limits of physics and logic with regard to the human experiences of value and meaning, then what about the rest of the natural world? What of politics, human customs, and the reason and meaning of human action? What of desire, emotion, belief and the self? Indeed, at this point we may further query the scientific perspective: are mind and soul mere epiphenomena of matter? Is human consciousness reducible to quantifiable material causes as modern neurobiology and cognitive science asserts?[6] Is the self an illusion? Or might these experiences reveal an aspect of reality that extends beyond theories of matter or even reason itself?

For Plato and Aristotle the world and our experiences of it are, above all else, value-laden. And while they do not reject the task of natural science out of hand, they do see it as being philosophically incomplete as it fails to account for the very real experience of qualitative value which, for them, permeates all of existence. For Plato and Aristotle, it is not cosmology or physics that holds the key to understanding the final cause and purpose of things (although, especially for Aristotle, scientific investigation may certainly play an important part in this search). Rather it is through the study of ethics that the true meaning of existence is revealed.

Although Plato shows how Socrates finally rejected many of the conclusions made by his predecessors, the essential epistemological and ontological problems and questions these early philosophers uncovered were carried with him on his 'second sailing'. And indeed, Plato's rather radical conceptions of eternal 'ideas' and 'forms' did not simply spring fully formed from his imagination. Rather, they emerged as his contribution and reaction to a long and difficult investigation into the nature of Being that had been going on for at least a century before he was born. While the Presocratic philosophers may not have been chiefly concerned with ethics, their investigations into

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6 Simmias' 'harmony theory' of the soul in the *Phaedo* seems to prefigure all of these questions. Simmias suggests to Socrates that the *psuché* is akin to the harmony produced by a musical instrument. He claims that, like the sound produced by the lyre, the *psuché* is immaterial but dependent on a material form (the body) for its existence—thus the soul is a phenomenon (or epiphenomenon) of material reality. Socrates attempts to refute this theory first by pointing out that while harmony is ruled by its material components (the lyre) the body does not rule the *psuché* (92e-93b). Socrates then asserts that the harmony produced by the lyre is a purely quantitative measure of the degree to which the instrument is in tune (93b-94b). Distinctions regarding the *psuché*, on the other hand are evaluated through qualitative means—we value some souls because they are virtuous and we detest others for their wickedness. Cf. Roochnik 2004, p. 93-99.

the nature of Being set a dialectic in motion that continues to animate philosophy in the West to this day. They created and developed a new ontological and epistemological framework that permitted the development of both rational and empirical modes of investigation into the nature of things. But these early philosophers did more than simply prefigure logic and scientific inquiry. The new ways of looking at the world they introduced stood in stark contrast to the traditional accounts of nature and creation; and, as a result, they posed a serious challenge to the old beliefs in which the gods, nature and mankind were unified in myth. The general intellectual environment that this new rationalism introduced must have played more than a minor role in the changing moral climate of Socrates' Athens[7]—one where measurement and reason triumphed for a time; and where the old morality came under increasing strain in face of the new purely material 'reality' of *phusis*, the imperative of progress, and the ethical relativism of the Sophists.

Indeed, much of our modern conception of knowledge and Being resonates with the highly quantitative, materialistic, and reductive view of the world that Plato appears to reject in the *Phaedo*. And the ethical implications that this view of things brings with it appear to be increasingly detrimental to our own personal and political wellbeing and to that of the natural world that sustains us. I will consider these social and environmental aspects in much more depth in Chapters 2, 3 and 4. To begin, however, I would like to bring out some of the key elements and difficulties in the Presocratic philosophical framework to better understand the ontological and epistemological concepts, problems and distinctions that, in many ways, made the thought of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle possible. As I suggested in the Introduction, Greek philosophy, from Thales to Aristotle, can be seen as a great dialectic of Being: it begins with the Ionian physicists and cosmologists, and then, like a Platonic dialogue, it moves from the realm of nature and appearances 'up' to the abstract realm of reason, ethics, mind/soul and revelation. Finally, with Aristotle, it 'descends' and reconciles itself with the manifold experience of the creatures and things that constitute the world, enlightened now with an understanding of virtue, purpose, and knowledge of 'The Good'.

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7 For more on this see Dodds 1973, Chapter 1.

From Muthos *to* Logos

> *Tell me these things, Olympian Muses,*
>
> *From the beginning, and tell which of them came first.*
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> *In the beginning there was only Chaos, the Abyss,*
>
> *But then Gaia, the Earth, came into being,*
>
> *Her broad bosom the ever-firm foundation of all,*
>
> *And Tartaros, dim in the underground depths,*
>
> *And Eros, loveliest of all the Immortals…* (*Theogony*, 114–120)

Ancient Greek philosophy is often divided into four periods that begin with the Presocratics. "Presocratics" is our name for a group of remarkably original thinkers who lived before and during the life of Socrates,[8] and who essentially took on the task of reworking the Greek conception of the cause and nature of existence. Beginning with Thales of Miletus (*circa.*585 B.C), they include the early Ionian cosmologists, Pythagoras, Heraclitus, the Eleatics (Parmenides, Melissus, and Zeno), Empedocles, Anaxagoras, the atomists (Leucippus and Democritus) and the Sophists. The next period is for Socrates himself—the Athenian philosopher who lived from 470 to 399—; and the last two periods are for Plato (429–347) and Aristotle (384–322) respectively.[9]

Before philosophy, however, there was myth and poetry. And it was in the works of Homer and Hesiod that the Greeks found their ethical models, religion and overall world-view. Here we find many of the ideas that defined some notion of Greek-ness in the Ancient world. And indeed, in a culture that was addicted to competition, and where conceptions of wealth, power and honor were prized elements in an existence that was essentially understood to be a zero sum game, the common narratives that this collection of diverse city-states shared in these poems may well have kept them from destroying each other completely.

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8 As Barnes points out, "The adjective is ill-chosen; for Socrates was born in 470 an died in 399, so many of the 'Presocratic' philosophers were contemporaries of Socrates. But the label is familiar and it would be idle to attempt to erase it." (Barnes 2001, p. xii)

9 I do not omit Hellenistic philosophy unintentionally. For some scholars Ancient Greek philosophy and Hellenistic philosophy are subcategories of Ancient Philosophy. Hellenistic philosophy includes Greek, Roman, Arabic, Syrian, and Egyptian influences. For the purposes of this project I focus only on the development of philosophy in the Hellenic world from Thales to Aristotle.

Homer's poems tell the story of the Trojan War and of Odysseus' return from Troy. We learn here of the great Greek heroes and the ethical codes under which they lived (and to which Greek society was to aspire) as well as of the relationship between the gods and humanity. But while there are references in Homer's poems to topics that would later be taken up as areas of philosophical or scientific inquiry,[10] the works of Hesiod seem to be more influential in this regard because they deal more explicitly with nature and creation.[11] Hesiod describes himself as a shepherd visited by the Muses while tending his sheep on Mount Helicon and who was thus inspired to write poetry. And indeed his poem, *Theogony*, begins with a call to the Muses: "Tell me these things, Olympian Muses/From the beginning, and tell which of them came first." (*Theogony* 114–16) This invocation implies that for the 8th century Greek mind, human reason alone was incapable of conceiving of reality and that it was necessary to look to some divinity for inspiration.[12] *Theogony* is a genealogy of creation and as such it recounts the origin of the gods, the earth, the sea, the sky, and the physical world. Here Hesiod describes the beginning as 'Chaos'[13] (or the 'Abyss') but offers no explanation of how the world might have emerged from this state of unintelligible emptiness. He also tells us that sexual desire is the primal force behind the growth of the world. *Eros* is introduced at the beginning of the creation myth as the primal animating force responsible for all future generations, but no clear account is given why one god might be born from another.[14] All of this implies that the fundamental problem of how something or, indeed, everything might arise from nothing may not have troubled the early Greek mind, which seems to have been content to take the cause of creation on faith.

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10 See Kirk, Raven, Schofield, 2006, Ch.1

11 "Hesiod… represents an apparently quite new attempt to systematize the ancient myths. … with the evident intention not only of reducing age-old mythical material to some kind of order but also of demonstrating the ultimate sources of Zeus' grandeur." (Ibid, p.34-35)

12 It may be argued that I put too much emphasis on what may be simply a poetic convention of the period. However, scholars as eminent as Dodds have asserted the importance of the muse in early Greek poetry: "… it was detailed factual truth that Hesiod sought from them [(the muses)], but thoughts of a new kind, which would enable him to piece together the traditions about the gods and fill the story out with all the necessary names and relationships.'' (Dodds 1968, p.81)

13 The meaning of Chaos is not the same as it is in English. In Greek, it means "abyss," "gap," or "emptiness."

14 See Long, 2007, p.47-49. Cf. Roochnik, 2004, p.12-17.

In 6th century Ionia, however, a new way of looking at the world was emerging that would pose a serious challenge to the traditional mythical understanding of things. On the island of Samos, in the town of Miletus, and elsewhere on the Ionian coast of the Aegean, a confidence in the power of human reason and observation was developing which led to bold new accounts of nature and creation. Ionia was a busy cosmopolitan place bustling with new ideas and innovations; and as an important area of trade, it existed at the margins of the established Mediterranean cultures like Egypt and Babylonia and was thus able to enjoy access to the great knowledge accumulated by these civilizations without being subject to the bureaucracy or religious dogma that held sway in the cultural centers. This meant that the intellectual and cultural environment of 6th century Ionia allowed for a relatively unfettered exchange of ideas from around the known world. Here knowledge was unusually free to be developed and applied in a progressive way; and this created fertile ground for philosophy and the development of natural science. This intellectual environment led to, among many other things, remarkable new conceptions of the material structure of existence; early theories of evolution; the recognition that diseases were not punishments from the gods but rather imbalances of material substances in the body; notions of historical rather than divine causes of human events; the concept that the earth was a planet going around a sun; and the idea that the celestial bodies were not gods but rather that they were material entities. In brief, this period transformed the mythical Chaos into a philosophical Cosmos, Abyss into organization. It was now argued that nature was not entirely unpredictable; and it became clear that there were regularities in the Cosmos that allowed for the discovery of consistent laws of nature.

And indeed, in 585 B.C. (according to Herodotus) Thales of Miletus is said to have predicted a solar eclipse.[15] This remarkable achievement was not the result of divine inspiration. Rather, it was carried out by careful observations of the heavenly bodies, studies of established knowledge, and through deep rational reflection on what the

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15 See Herodotus, *Histories* I.74, 75, 170-1.

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possible implications of these examinations might be.[16] According to Aristotle, Thales was 'the founder' of what came to be called 'natural philosophy'. The Greek word *phusis*, which is the origin of 'physics', means nature; and thus the first Greek philosophers were *phusiologoi*, or those who offered *logos* of *phusis*.[17] We also learn from Aristotle that Thales was the first to properly conceive of an *archê*,[18] or that eternal source from which all things come into being and to which all things return. Above all else, the early Ionian *phusiologoi* who followed Thales attempted to give an account of the *archê* that Hesiod seems to pass over as an unknowable mystery.

For Thales, the *archê* was water: all things come from and return to water, but water itself endures always; water is the eternal, ultimate and unifying principle of reality.[19] Aristotle suggests that Thales came to this conclusion by observing that moist things nourish all beings and that water is the essence of moisture (*Metaphysics*, 983b18–27). And although Thales' conception of the water *archê* might seem rather naïve or even ridiculous to us, it is important to consider what a considerable advancement his perspective on the world is over the traditional view of Hesiod. For Hesiod, the *archê* is an inexplicable *Chaos*.[20] Thales, by contrast, offers an account of the *archê* by means of empirical observation and rational insight. He seems to have no need of a Muse or *muthos*—his is a work of *logos* alone. According to Aristotle, Thales is the first Western thinker to properly introduce the idea that reality can be conceived of by the human mind. And the year 585 B.C. is among the most important dates in all of human history as it

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16 There is some debate between scholars as to whether or not Thales' actually accomplished this task, and if he did, to what degree he was indebted to Egyptian or Babylonian knowledge in doing so. Still, there is little doubt that Thales' activity as a statesman, engineer, mathematician and astronomer affirm his place as a thinker that was deeply curious and profoundly reflective regarding the nature of things both physical and political. See Kirk, Raven, Schofield 2001, Ch. II.

17 For a brief but informative account of Aristotle's view of the *phusiologoi* see Algra in Long, 2007, p. 49-54.

18 The origin, source, beginning, the first or ruling principle—many modern scholars, citing Theophrastus, claim that it was in fact Anaximander that first used the specific term "*archê*" in this way. See Kirk, Raven, Schofield, 2001, p.108.

19 There are Homeric precedents to this view: "…even the streams of Okeanos who is the begetter of all…" Iliad XIV, 244. Plato refers to this in the Theaetetus (152E) in his perhaps not quite serious treatment of Homer as the precursor to the Heraclitean notion of flux: "Homer, who by saying 'Okeanos begetter of gods and mother Tethys' declared all things to be offspring of flux and motion. See also, Aristotle Met.1. 3, 983b27 and 983b6–984a4. For a full account see Kirk, Raven, Schofield, 2001 p.10-16.

20 We might pause here to consider that the modern "Big Bang" theory may have more in common with Hesiod than Thales!

represents a clear shift in Western thought towards a new concern with the possibilities of human reason and observation. This new emphasis on human *logos* opens the door to distinctly modern conceptions of science, medicine, history, law, politics and ethics—all of which may now begin to be understood in terms of human experience and reason rather than solely through the old reliance on myth and religion.[21]

Thales' younger contemporaries in the Ionian town of Miletus, Anaximander and Anaximenes, developed the conception of the *archê* in their own ways.[22] Like Thales, Anaximander believed that there was an *archê* that could be discovered by the human mind. But where Thales' *archê* is an ordinary, determinate element of experience, water, Anaximander's *archê* is "*to apeiron*" (the "indefinite," "unlimited," or "indeterminate"). Anaximander seems to have reasoned that because the *archê* is the ultimate principle and cause of reality (it is by definition the principle by which anything can be) it cannot be properly identified with a determinate substance. For him, all things that we can see and touch, like water, come into and go out of being; the *archê*, however, must be indeterminate if it is to be the fundamental causal principle of Being. For Anaximander, water or any other determinate mutable substance cannot be the origin of itself, let alone the principle of everything.

This 'response' by Anaximander to Thales is important because it raises two basic but interrelated distinctions that are fundamental to all of Western philosophy.[23] First of all, where Thales is essentially basing his account of the *archê* on empirical observation, Anaximander relies on reason—*to apeiron* is not a phenomenon that is experienced directly, rather it is a concept arrived at through abstract thought. This is a significant development because it foreshadows the epistemological distinction between *empiricism* and *rationalism* that leads philosophy down its various paths towards idealism, relativism, scepticism and so on. Secondly, it is here that the basic ontological disagreement about the nature of reality seems to be first set in motion—where some

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21 See Roochnik, 2004, p. 20-21.
22 It is tempting to think of a Milesian teacher student lineage that moves from Thales to Anaximander to Anaximenes. Although there really is no evidence to support it, such a schema it has been adopted asearly as Theophrastus in order to give some sense of organization to early Milesian thought. As it seems to do no damage to the ideas, and as it helps with comprehension, I have adopted it here. Cf. Roochnik, 2004, p.21. Also see Kirk, Raven, Schofield, 2001, p.101.
23 See Roochnik, 2004, p. 22-23.

purely rational or *a priori* notion of immutable and eternal *being* is contrasted with the changing experience of worldly phenomena in the realm of *becoming.*

The younger Milesian, Anaximenes, may have agreed with Anaximander that Thales' water *archê* was flawed, but he also appears to respond to a serious problem with the concept of an indeterminate *archê*: he recognizes that to think about something is necessarily to think about something that is determinate. That is, Anaximenes seems to understand that the indeterminacy of Anaximander's *to apeiron* finally renders it unintelligible: it is an entirely abstract concept that cannot be properly thought or talked about on its own, and therefore it cannot be properly communicated.[24] Thus *to apeiron* seems to be closer to Hesiod's *Chaos* in terms of its explicative powers. For Anaximenes, the *archê* is air.[25] He sees air as having a great advantage over water in that it is, in a sense, intangible: the degrees of density at which air can exist are very great; and Anaximander thought it might be condensed or rarified to become a great variety of things. However, like water, air is intelligible—it can be properly thought of, experienced and talked about. And so, for Anaximenes, air seems to be the better candidate for the *archê* because it combines the experiential and determinate qualities of Thales' determinate water *archê* with the more ethereal qualities of Anaximander's *to apeiron.*[26]

This search for the principle of Being ignited a new intellectual movement; and as the debate over the *archê* spread around the Hellenic world it began to take on a distinctly mystical dimension. Religious thinkers like Xenophanes of Colophon took up the discussion, positing that the *archê* was one all-encompassing god. Although Xenophanes' investigations into Being did include empirical examinations into the nature of the physical world, he seems to have reasoned, like Anaximander, that the *archê* had to be essentially different from all other determinate things of worldly experience. Xenophanes' *archê* also possessed a distinctly cultural dimension as his conception of god stood in clear opposition to the anthropomorphic Olympian deities—the belief in

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24 Ibid p.24.
25 See Kirk, Raven, Schofield, 2006, p.144-151.
26 The Theophrastean account, as preserved by Simplicius, states: "Anaximenes… a companion of Anaximander, also says like him that the underlying nature is one and infinite, but not undefined as Anaximander said, but definite, for he identifies it as air; and differs it in its substantial nature by rarity and density." (DK 13 A5) For more on this see Algra in Long 2007 p. 57-60

which he understood to be false, dangerous and ultimately immoral.[27] Xenophanes' god is one and eternal; it does not move but somehow moves everything else—a precursor to Aristotle's notion of the 'unmoved mover'. Furthermore, Xenophanes offers a proto-logical account of the necessary existence of god as opposed to the traditional Greek conception that was based on little more than blind faith. Indeed, Xenophanes' conception of god as Being might be considered as a proto theology that resonates with later pantheistic thinkers like Spinoza.

Pythagoras also came from Ionia—from the island of Samos—but he and his adherents set up colonies in the western part of the Hellenic world. Based in Croton, in Southern Italy, the Pythagoreans took up the discussion of Being in a way that further mystified the rational approaches of Anaximander and Xenophanes. For the Pythagoreans, the universe was a *kosmos*—an ordered mathematical whole. It was a 'One' out of which everything emerged and into which all would return. This *archê* was based on a rational intuition that was inspired by a quasi-religious fascination with whole numbers: because numbers are stable and permanent, the Pythagoreans saw mathematics and geometry as the perfect *archê*; whole numbers cannot be directly sensed and do not change as sensible things seem to do, they are, however, completely intelligible.[28] And so the Pythagorean conception of Being agrees with Thales and Anaximenes in that the *archê* must be determinate and intelligible, but it also incorporates the position of Anaximander and Xenophanes which demands that the *archê* must somehow transcend the matter it organizes. For them, only the rational and quasi-mystical pursuit of mathematics leads to true knowledge of reality—empirical observation is a second order experience.

The Milesians, Xenophanes and the Pythagoreans all attempted to understand and to offer a rational, albeit increasingly mystical, account of Being. That is, they were all trying to comprehend, and offer accounts of the one principle of *being* that unifies the manifold world of *becoming*. But once one arrives at some stable concept of the *archê*, the question emerges as to exactly how the changing world of *becoming* participates in the unchanging and eternal realm of *being* such a concept of *archê* leads to. Indeed, these

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27 See Broadie in Long, 2007, p.209-213
28 See Huffman in Long, 2007, p.66-75. Cf. Roochnik, 2004, p.28-30.

two conceptions of Being are so fundamentally different from each other that drawing a substantial connection between them is an extraordinarily difficult task. And to make matters worse, we are also faced with the problem of whether one should give more epistemic weight to empirical experience or to pure rational thought in an attempt to give a *logos* of Being as such.[29]

The Radicalization of Being *and* Becoming

Up to this point we have examined the emergence and development of the ontological notion of *being* and *becoming* that is fundamental to all of Western philosophy. Now, however, we must begin to confront the difficult, and to this day unresolved, epistemological problems that this distinction carries with it. Therefore, we must look briefly at the extreme approaches to Being offered by Heraclitus and Parmenides.

In order to deal with the problems I outlined above, Heraclitus and Parmenides seem to reject the notion of *being*/*becoming* altogether—each adopts one side of the distinction and rejects the other. Indeed, the radically polarized positions they adopt really seem to clarify the parameters of the discussion of Being as it develops into the 5th century. Heraclitus (approx. 540-480) represents both a culmination of Ionian empiricism, as well as a radical departure from the Milesian notion of the *archê*.[30] His solution to the problem of *being/becoming* is essentially to eliminate *being* from the equation, at least as it is understood as non-moving and unchanging. For Heraclitus, reality is like a river, it flows. And while he seems to believe an *archê* of some kind exists, he claims that humans always prove incapable of understanding it: "They do not understand that by being in variance with itself it coheres with itself: a backward-stretching harmony, as of a bow or lyre" (B51); "One must realize that conflict is common to all, and justice is strife, and all things come to pass according to strife and necessity."

Heraclitus' account of Being may seem very unusual at first glance as his *logos* expresses the fluid nature of reality by being fluid itself. This is to say that Heraclitus

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29 See Roochnik, 2004, p.30-31.
30 See Hussey in Long 2007 for more on this.

seems to embrace the contradictions in the human experience of reality as being the only real truth that can be properly spoken of as such: "The road up and the road down are one and the same" (B60); "The same thing is both living and dead" (B67); "Changing, it rests" (B75); "It is not possible to step twice in the same river"[31] (B62). For many of his contemporaries, as for many philosophers today, contradiction must always be avoided and paradoxes must always be resolved—Heraclitus' position is, for many, essentially irrational and nonsensical. For Heraclitus, however, contradiction seems to be the only honest and rational way to describe the flux we experience in the world. He finds a kind of unity within the constant change and plurality of existence; or rather, perhaps, the flux and opposites create the unity.[32] And indeed, empirical experience tells us that over time things do seem to transform into their opposites: living things die, upward becomes downward, hot things become cool and so on. Thus, for Heraclitus, the only stability is change and it would seem that, for him, it is not possible for any statement to be purely and eternally true—every true statement is also, eventually, false.

Heraclitus clearly recognizes and does not shy away from the variable nature of appearances, but his total acceptance of the experience of flux does seem to produce a strong element of ethical relativism in his thought: "The sea is the purest and the most polluted water: to fishes drinkable…to men undrinkable and destructive" (B61). "Pigs rejoice in mud more than pure water" (B13). "Asses would choose rubbish rather than gold" (B9). We might ask, what kind of *logos*, if any, might underpin this changing and relativistic view of the world? The closest Heraclitus comes to divulging any kind of account of things lies in his comments about fire: "The cosmos, the same for all…was always, is and shall be: an ever-living fire…" (B74). But he also writes: "War is the father and king of all…." (B53) "A lifetime is a child playing…the kingdom belongs to a child" (D52). Both war and child's play are often chaotic and, in reality, loosely structured at best. And fire, for Heraclitus, seems to be the "archetypical form of matter. The world order as a whole can be described as a fire of which measures are being extinguished, corresponding measures being rekindled… it has always been and always will be, in this condition" (Kirk, Raven, Schofield 2006, p.198).

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31 For more interpretations of this famous quote see Kirk, Raven, Schofield, 2006, p.195-197.
32 See Hussey in Long, pp.93-98. Cf. Kirk, Raven, Schofield, 2006, p.186-200.

For Heraclitus, fire[33] is, at the very least, a symbol or metaphor for the constant change of the universe. This is, of course, a radically non-Milesian view of the world, but it is nonetheless extremely honest about the experience of impermanence and flux. Indeed, most of us living in the 21st century can probably envision a day when water may become more valuable than gold or oil. But while the fluid, contradictory and relativistic thought of Heraclitus seems to reject the quest for the fixed and permanent *archê* as delusory, his perspective has problems of its own. In terms of explicative potential, Heraclitus' view finally seems more like *muthos* than *logos*. And if his highly relative perspective is to be accepted completely there are serious ethical implications that follow.

In Elea, in the mid 6th century, an intellectual movement emerged that offered a powerful and purely rationalist alternative to the largely empirical Ionian tradition—and especially to the radical views of Heraclitus. We considered above how Anaximander's *to apeiron* and Xenophanes' unmoving god may have been early responses to Thales' empiricism; and how the Pythagoreans further mystified the nature of Being through mathematics. Now the Eleatic movement from the West advanced this abstract approach and focused exclusively on proto-logical accounts of existence that gave complete priority to reason over appearance. Truth, for the Eleatics, was to be found through logic, not the empirical examination of nature. Parmenides (515-440) was at the center of this new school of thought. He completely denied the epistemological value of sensory perception and appearances, and he drew a clear distinction between belief or opinion (*doxa*) and Truth (*alêtheia*). Unlike Heraclitus, Parmenides was committed to a pure rationalism. For him, *doxa* is linked to *becoming* and is philosophically worthless. *Alêtheia*, on the other hand, *is* Being and is the proper subject of all rational thought.

Parmenides offers three potential options for inquiry into Being. The first is the way of *alêtheia,* which affirms the position that "Being is"; the second affirms the concept of non-Being; and the third suggests that "both Being and non-Being" are (this last view Parmenides associates with *doxa* and *becoming*). Furthermore, he asserts that it

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33 Heraclitus' use of fire may, at first glance, seem to be simply in keeping with the traditional conception of the four original elements. However, many scholars do see his view of fire as unique and there is quite a bit of discussion surrounding it—for Heraclitus, fire seems to stand above or permeate all the other parts; it doesn't seem to combine or interact with other elements; it represents the "world order as a whole."

is impossible to properly think of non-Being or "nothingness." For Parmenides, to think at all is necessarily to think of something. And thus, for him, non-Being is not a logically tenable concept; it is unintelligible like Hesiod's *Chaos*. As a result of this, the perspective that asserts the reality of both Being and non-Being—the position of *doxa*, or the way things appear to be; indeed, the very condition necessary for the reality of *becoming*—is equally false. For Parmenides, only the position that "Being is" is logically and philosophically acceptable: " [do] not let habit born from much experience compel you…to direct your sightless eye…but judge by reason (*logos*)" (#7).

Parmenides claims that *doxa* is formed by habit; and through our sensory experience we have come to believe in the illusion of *becoming*. He reasons that *being* is eternal, for if it were not it would have to have come from non-Being, which cannot exist—*being*, he reasons, cannot perish as it is logically incoherent for it to not be. Furthermore, *being* cannot be more than one, for if it were then a part of *being* would "not be" another part of *being*. By this view, reality must be an indivisible, and unchanging unity. Thus Parmenides is really the first philosopher in the West to completely separate appearance from a purely rationalistic conception of reality—even the Pythagoreans seemed to offer some account where mathematics were, in some sense, the cause of the lesser reality we experience.

Where Thales and Heraclitus both base their accounts of reality on empirical experience, Parmenides rejects this as an illusion and focuses on pure reason as the 'Way of Truth'.[34] Much of Western philosophy is animated by the tension inherent in the opposition of these two positions, resulting in empiricists like Hume and Locke, rationalists such as Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz, or thinkers like Kant who attempt to reconcile the two. And in terms of Greek philosophy, there is a very strong sense in which the extreme views of Heraclitus and Parmenides set the parameters in a discourse that would, in various ways, attempt to reconcile the problems inherent in their radically polarised positions. Indeed, it seems that at the extremes of *being* and *becoming* a crisis occurs: language and meaning break down. If all is change, paradox, or relative, as seems to be the case with Heraclitus, how can anything be defined, properly known or

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34 See Sedley in Long, p.114.

communicated at all? How can meaningful discourse occur if some kind of shared understanding of basic principles and definitions is impossible?[35] And, on the other hand, if reality were one, unified, unchanging Being, as Parmenides suggests, then to speak of anything else would be an error. All we could properly say, perhaps, is "Being is." But even that could imply that something else is not, which seems logically incoherent by this light—for Parmenides there is no such thing as 'not being.' We also would not want to distinguish between the 'Being' and the 'is'. In fact, the use of any signifier becomes logically tenuous by this view and we are ultimately left with "   ". In the end it seems that while Parmenides can think 'up to' his concept of Being, once he arrives at it there is, paradoxically, no-one-thing to think about—indeed, his *logos* is perhaps the most mystical we have encountered.

So it seems that while the total embrace of flux and relativism means that at best one can really only speak to one's self, the acceptance of pure monism implies that one cannot properly say anything at all. All of this notwithstanding, Heraclitus and Parmenides do offer powerful points of view that cannot be easily dismissed. And they do prefigure Socrates in the sense that they both see the world as a unity (although they could not disagree more sharply on the nature of it). The playing field is now marked, so to speak, for the contributions of Democritus, Empedocles, Anaxagoras, the sophists, and most famously, Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, all of whom will attempt to somehow reconcile *being* and *becoming*—or in the case of the last three, strive to create some line of communication through the ocean of silence that separates these radically opposed conceptions of Being.

Early Attempts at Reconciling Being *and* Becoming

The thinkers of the 5th century recognised the profound insights made by both Heraclitus and Parmenides into the nature of Being. Many attempted to retain Parmenides' logical view of *being* without falling into his total rejection of the experience of *becoming*; just as others tried to preserve Heraclitus' honest account of the flux of *becoming* while recognizing the value and clarity of pure logic. Indeed, some of these 5th century thinkers

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35 See Roochnick, 2004, p. 34.

may have been attempting to de-mystify Greek ontology and return to the materialism of the early Ionian thinkers.

Perhaps one of the most famous and successful attempts to integrate *being* and *becoming* can be found in the atomism of Democritus (460-370). He was from Abdera, in Thrace, and may have been the student of an Ionian man named Leucippus.[36] Democritus' theory has two main components, namely, atom and void. The Greek word "*atomos*" means "unable to be cut"; and like Parmenides' *being*, Democritus' atoms are eternal and indivisible entities. He postulates that the universe is comprised of an infinite number of atoms that differ in shape and size: the atoms move through the void and combine to form the objects of experience, which then pass away as the atoms disperse to form new combinations. In this way, atomism preserves the unity and changelessness of Parmenidean *being* in the eternal atom itself, as well as the Heraclitan flux of *becoming* with the possibility of atomic movement. Democritus' atomism was rediscovered in the 16th century A.D. by Gassendi and formed the basis for the corpuscular theories of matter in the 17th century as well as for modern atomic theory. And like the modern conception of matter and Being, Democritus' theory is quantitative rather than qualitative. Furthermore, like Parmenides, his theory postulates that reality and our experience are, in fact, quite different from one another.[37]

Other thinkers of this period also tried to reconcile *being* and *becoming* in perhaps slightly more qualitative ways. In Sicily, Empedocles (circa 490-430) offered a pluralistic view of Being that combined four fundamental and unchanging "roots" (fire, air, water and earth) that combine and separate in various ways to form the things that comprise the sensible world. Two basic forces, "love" (*philia*) and "strife" (*neikos*) direct the coming together and separation of these "roots"—or what later thinkers would call "elements" (*stoicheion*). When "love" is active, the roots combine; when "strife" is dominant, they separate. Thus Empedocles too attempts to retain the permanence of Parmenides' perspective while recognizing the experience of change by positing two basic components to Being. Where Democritus offers atoms and void, Empedocles posits

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36 For a full account of the 'Ionian response' see the final section of Kirk, Raven, Schofield, 2006, p. 352-434.
37 See Roochnik, 2004, p.49-52.

"roots" and the force of "love/strife."[38]

Like Democritus and Empedocles, Anaxagoras (500–430) also offered a theory with two basic components. He was a pluralist like Empedocles but his theory used a concept of "seeds" as the underlying and eternal material of reality: under the governance of a universal rational force that Anaxagoras calls "mind" (*noos*) the seeds interact in an infinite number of ways to form the sensible fabric of reality[39] (a precursor, perhaps, to Leibniz's monads). In the *Phaedo* Socrates states that he was initially attracted to Anaxagoras because of his insistence that there must be some kind of intelligence behind the arrangement and cause of the universe, but reveals that he was finally disappointed by Anaxagoras because his conception of *noos* was inconsistent and because his account of things relied too much on mere description (97c-99b).[40]

The Moral Void

While there is, of course, much more that can be said about all of these thinkers, we now have a basic outline of the new ways in which the nature of reality was coming to be understood in the Hellenic world. But while the thinkers we have considered so far clearly got Western philosophy on its way in terms of the study of nature, knowledge and Being, they tell us very little about the value of human experience. These philosophers work at a high level of abstraction and generality. And while materialistic thinkers like Empedocles, Anaxagoras, and Democritus do offer compelling ontological accounts that attempt to reconcile plurality and flux with some notion of a consistent and eternal universal force(s) or entity, they tell us very little about how one is to live a good life. Serious questions now begin to emerge regarding the relationship between human experience and the true nature of reality. And the epistemic problem of communication between pure rationalism and empiricism remains—language, value and the individual

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38 For a fuller account of the Empedoclean reconciliation see Kirk, Raven, Schofield, 2006, p.288-294. See also Graham in Long, 2007, p.159-180.
39 See Kirk, Raven, Schofield, 2006, p.357-384.
40 For a concise examination of Socrates' attraction to, and ultimate rejection of, Anaxagoras see Roochnick, 2004, p. 99-100.

are either atomised by the centrifugal force of Heraclitus' relativistic flux[41] or crushed into silence by the logical 'black hole' of Parmenides' 'One'.

The work of the early Greek philosophers represents a crucial turning point in the intellectual history of humanity. It is the beginning of a noble, courageous and necessary quest for true knowledge. But as this spirit of inquiry spread around the Greek world it also aroused a confusing polemic. The new philosophy estranged rational thought and direct empirical experience from each other; and it contributed to a problematic distinction between the new conception of nature (*phusis*) and the conventions and values of humankind (*nomos*). Indeed, the diverse philosophical issues we have just begun to consider came to be intimately bound up with the political/cultural milieu and its needs and desires which, in the case of 5th century Athens, was entering a state of crisis. Indeed, times of great discovery, certainty, and progress are often followed by periods of ignorance or apprehension; certain avenues of study, ideas and modes of thinking are encouraged while others are ignored or suppressed; facts and great ideas may take on excessive importance or continue to be embraced because of their ability to satisfy desire; or they may become distorted out of ignorance and malevolence, and eventually contribute to confusion, decadence and cultural decline.

Returning now to Socrates and Plato, we may begin to consider that while Plato's dialogues clearly offer a response to, or development of, the thought of the Presocratics, they can also be seen as powerful responses to the growing moral apathy he witnessed in late 5th century Athens. As much as Socrates' famous turn to 'the speeches' was motivated by purely philosophical concerns, it must have also been inspired by what he saw as a need for intellectual clarity and a great moral re-centring within his society. His confrontation with his many interlocutors in Plato's dialogues—and eventually, with Athens herself—sees him facing these concerns head on. Socrates pursues knowledge of the values and virtues that ground the practical existence of the human soul. And like many of the Presocratics, his search is dedicated to the possibility of some kind of stable and objective Truth (or an *archê*) that binds the changing world of day-to-day experience.

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41 "The everlasting and exclusive coming-to-be, the impermanence of everything actual, which constantly acts and comes-to-be but never is, as Heraclitus teaches it is a paralyzing thought. Its impact on men can most nearly be likened to an earthquake when one loses one's familiar confidence in a firmly grounded earth." (Nietzsche, 1962, p.54)(Cf. Roochnik, 2004, p. 33-34).

However, as we considered at the beginning of this chapter, Socrates must go beyond quantitative and material descriptions of things in order to approach his goal; and furthermore, as his method is based in dialogue, he cannot allow himself to be caught by the logical gravity of Parmenides' total monism. So while Socrates charges himself with reconciling the epistemological and ontological problems that arise out of the highly dualistic Presocratic conception of *being* and *becoming,* he must do this in a way that addresses the moral void created by the estrangement of *nomos* and *phusis,* and that encourages dialectic and the honest pursuit of self-knowledge in his fellow citizens. This is, in so many words, his Delphic mission. As I will begin to show in the next chapter, Socrates attends to his task by turning the examination of the ontological and epistemological distinctions and problems associated with *being* and *becoming* inwards— towards the self and the *psuché*—as he attempts to reveal a transcendent and unifying concern for goodness in even his most confused and amoral interlocutors.

The Impossibility of Nihilism:
Sophistry and the Question of Ethical
Knowledge in Plato's *Gorgias* and *Protagoras*

It seems to be generally agreed that the principal concern of Presocratic philosophy lies in the pursuit of true knowledge of creation, the nature of the Cosmos, and Being as such, and not with regard to how one might best live one's life once one is in possession of such knowledge. It is, however, all too easy to adopt the view that sees Presocratic philosophy as inherently amoral. Many of the early philosophers, like Heraclitus and Xenophanes, do seem to be of the mind that their investigations and discoveries are to benefit humankind—the ethical aspects of Presocratic philosophy cannot be completely dismissed. This said, the ethical or value statements we do have from the Presocratics are rather vague in terms of their content. For example, Democritus tells us that it is "best for a person to live his life with as much contentment and as little distress as possible" (B189).[42] However, we have no comprehensive way of knowing how a person might go about achieving this state, only the vague promise that it "will come about if he does not take his pleasures in mortal things." (B189) Democritus also highlights an important

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42 For more on Democritus' moral writings see Barnes 2001, p.227-253.

philosophical distinction when he writes, "by convention (*nomos*) sweet, by convention bitter, by convention hot, by convention cold, by convention colour, but in reality atoms and void." (B125) Here Democritus seems to be positing the idea that the qualitative aspects of human experience are not themselves based in any fundamental reality, but rather that they are psychological creations of custom, habit, and convention (*nomos*). This perspective resonates with Parmenides separation of *doxa* and *alêtheia*; but with Democritus, the qualitative aspects of human experience come very close to being understood as epiphenomenal over the eternal and quantitative 'true reality' of atoms and void. As with Parmenides, this perspective sacrifices or diminishes *doxa*; it does not attempt to, nor can it, explain the way we experience the world or what the meaning of those experiences might be. Furthermore, this perspective strongly implies that there is no real truth to human experience and values; they are nothing more than mere convention and habit. By this light, and Democritus' advice about not "taking pleasures in mortal things" notwithstanding, it seems that a life lived "as cheerfully and with as little distress as possible" could mean a great many things to many different people—for the tyrant, the criminal, the hedonist, the philosopher, or the average citizen, the good life would appear to be a relative proposition.

A similar devaluing of human experience is central to our conception of modern science and knowledge;[43] and for many modern thinkers it is one of the key ethical problems of our times—a kind of dehumanising of knowledge and Truth that leads to moral relativism, nihilism, and a kind of reckless hedonism. In Chapter Four I will consider Aristotle's response to the Presocratics and consider more recent thinkers, like Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, who voice serious concerns regarding the world-view this position imposes in the modern era. For the moment, however, it will be enough to recognize that we need only make a very small step before we see the compelling but

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43 2,000 yeas after Democritus, Galileo would claim, "I think, therefore, that these tastes, odours, colors, etc., so far as their objective existence is concerned, are nothing but mere names for something that resides exclusively in our sensitive body, so that if the perceiving creatures were removed, all of these qualities would be annihilated and abolished from existence (Galileo, 1960, p.18) (Cf. Evernden p.57). And Hume in the 18th century writes, "The fundamental principle of philosophy is the opinion concerning colours, sounds, smells, tastes, heat, and cold; which it asserts to be nothing but impression in the mind derived from the operation of external objects, and without any resemblance to the qualities of the objects" (Hume, 1975, p. 226). Cf. Roochnik, 2004, p. 54-55.

largely non-ethical ontology and physics we have been examining clash in a rather confusing way with the political world of human values. Indeed, by this way of thinking the realm of nature (*phusis*) and that of human reason, laws and conventions (*nomos*) are estranged from each other. And it is just this uncertainty about the relationship between human experience and the true nature of reality that created such fertile ground for the relativistic ethical views that began to emerge in 5th century Athens.

Protagoras of Abdera (approx.485–415) responded to this environment by focusing completely on the human perspective. He twists the *phusiologoi* view of the world into a perspective that asserts the primacy of human belief, desire and will: He pushes aside concerns about the *kosmos*, atoms or the *archê*; and claims that the true nature of the universe and the gods—if they exist at all—is not knowable and therefore not worth investigating. For Protagoras, human beings are the center and the "measure" of all reality: "The human being is the measure of all things—of things that are, that they are, and of things that are not, that they are not" (B1).

Protagoras, and the sophists he is associated with, appear to have embraced a purely humanist and relativistic view of the world. For them, whether something is true or false, good or bad, depends on the person or group who holds that truth or value—virtue and ethics are plural and mutable rather than singular and true concepts. And indeed, if one holds the position that nothing is absolutely good or true in and of itself—or, as Democritus suggests, that the meaning of even the most basic human sensory experiences of the world are contingent—then the value judgments that guide human conduct do seem to be founded on nothing more than human convention and agreement (*nomos*) which do change from culture to culture and from time to time. By this light, human values and beliefs have absolutely no basis in nature, nor can they derive their authority from the gods or from some conception of Truth. Rather, they are—as Parmenides would no doubt agree—the products of habit, persuasion, and power.

Like many Sophists Protagoras taught the craft of rhetoric that goes hand in glove with this perspective. And this art of persuasion became central to political and legal life in the 5th century Athenian democracy where the ability to speak well and persuasively in

front of the Assembly was the key to political success.[44] However, the art of rhetoric, as Plato would have us understand it in dialogues such as the Gorgias, is a potentially dangerous practice by which the master rhetorician may convince anyone of anything. For Plato, the kind of rhetoric practiced by the sophists is unconcerned with knowledge or truth; it is an activity that leads to a kind of philosophical apathy, nihilism and a kind of reckless hedonism. Indeed, if one adopts a purely relative and humanistic view of the world then it seems only natural to turn towards the satisfaction of base desires and pleasure or the pursuit of power as the only real things towards which reason may be properly directed.[45] And by this view the only proper and universal moral logic would be one based on some notion of natural right where justice is simply the domination of the weak by the strong.

In what remains of this chapter I will attempt to demonstrate how Plato manages to draw this view into question through an interpretive reading of his *Protagoras* and *Gorgias*. In both of these dialogues concerning the great sophists, Plato's Socrates manages to reveal a deep, albeit confused and unexamined concern with justice in his interlocutors.[46] In these dialogues Plato seems to be suggesting that regardless of the relativistic conception of knowledge and virtue these men hold, and despite the confidence they have in the ability of the sophistic arts to fulfill desires for political influence and material riches, an attachment to goodness or justice as an end in itself permeates their very beings; and that this attachment, once recognized, cannot be easily ignored. I suggest here that with these two dialogues Plato is attempting to reveal a universal concern for justice and goodness that transcends or collapses the *nomos/phusis* distinction—one that is somehow more fundamental or true than the unexamined lust for wealth and power and the quasi-rational contrivances required for its satisfaction; and one that must be diligently (even courageously) attended to if any art or knowledge is to be

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44 For a concise but remarkably comprehensive account of this situation in 5th century Athens, see Woodruff in Long, 2007.

45 My concern here is with problems Plato and Socrates found in the self-serving and unreflective sophistic rhetoric of Protagoras and Gorgias. However, Plato's relationship to rhetoric is complicated and Socrates alternately praises and despises it in different contexts. And indeed, Socrates often shows himself as a masterful rhetorician in his own right. For a more complete look at Plato's relationship with rhetoric see Nichols 1998, p.1-24.

46 In effect I am arguing here against scholars like Nussbaum and Irwin, both of whom see nothing of the sort going on here.

properly, or meaningfully applied towards an ideal of excellence. To conclude this chapter I will open the question of what knowledge of virtue might entail: Are justice and goodness knowable to us purely by rational means? Might ethics be subject to some manner of measurement or counting, like the technical arts, in order to ensure its epistemic stability? Is a science of ethics possible? Or do virtue and self-knowledge entail a different kind of understanding in which reason and technical thinking play limited roles? First however, we must take a look at Socrates' confrontation with the Sophists in order to understand some of the basic ethical issues that concerned Plato and Socrates in 5th century Athens.

The Revelation of Justice in the Gorgias

In the *Gorgias*, Plato contrasts Socrates' conception of justice with that of the great rhetorician and his students. Here Gorgias claims to teach the ability to consistently win one's position in any political or judicial context without appeal to any true knowledge of justice, goodness or anything else for that matter. Indeed, rhetoric is initially presented here as an art or *techné* that permits the practitioner to persuade but not necessarily to teach the truth. For Gorgias, good and bad, justice and injustice seem to be relative concepts that are used instrumentally within a given context; there is no truth, only the winning argument. As an example of this, Gorgias himself relates how he is easily able to persuade medical patients to undergo painful and frightening treatments—a task that even a great doctor may struggle with unsuccessfully—without possessing any real medical knowledge himself (456a-c). However, in the course of things Socrates undermines the idea that Gorgias' rhetoric is any sort of *techné*. And in doing so he reveals some recognition of innate goodness in each of his interlocutors.

After some preliminary discussion, Socrates begins his questioning by pressing Gorgias to clarify the ultimate value of rhetoric. Gorgias finally proclaims "the greatest good that rhetoric brings about is freedom for yourself and rule over others in your own city" (452d-e). Furthermore, he promises the student of rhetoric the following: " [the] capacity to persuade by speech, judges in the law court, councilors in the council, assemblymen in the assembly, and in every other gathering whatsoever when there is a

political gathering; and indeed with this power you will have the doctor as your slave, and the trainer as your slave, for you can speak and persuade multitudes" (452e). And of course, in a direct democracy, such as that of 5th century Athens, public speaking is a very important skill—the ability to convince the *demos* of the goodness or justness of a given proposition is to have that position accepted as right by the people and thereby become law. So there is indeed a very real sense in which learning the art of persuasive speech could result in just what Gorgias promises.

Socrates now demands that Gorgias clarify the subject matter of rhetorical speech. After all, if rhetoric is an art, as Gorgias claims, it must have a clearly defined subject. After some back and forth, Gorgias claims that the subject of rhetorical speech "is persuasion concerning the just and the unjust" (454b7). And when asked whether rhetorical speech teaches the truth about justice and injustice, or merely persuades without teaching, Gorgias admits that rhetoric can only persuade—rhetoric, in the context of this dialogue at least, is the art of persuasive non-didactic speech (455a). Socrates himself offers a reason for this, "for the rhetorician would not be able to teach so large a mob such large matters in such a short time" (455a-b). Gorgias further claims that the art of rhetoric must be value neutral like other *technai* such as medicine and shipbuilding. He asserts that one cannot blame the teacher of rhetoric for the uses it is put to anymore than one can blame the shipbuilder for the ways his ships are used or the doctor who heals a man that goes on to commit evil acts (457c). But this claim creates a serious practical problem for Gorgias: because there will always be the possibility that some students of rhetoric will put its powers to unjust uses, it is very likely that Gorgias and his teachings will be seen as a potential threat to the city. Gorgias attempts to respond to this problem by asserting that no student of his could ever be unjust (this suggests that he is a teacher of justice after all) and that if any of them were found to be using rhetoric for injustice they should be dealt with most severely (459d-461b).

A moment's reflection should reveal the incoherence in Gorgias' position. On one hand Gorgias promises the student of rhetoric the ability to persuade anyone of anything (that it is just or unjust)—a compelling proposition for the politically ambitious. On the other hand, Gorgias asserts that the rhetorician who uses rhetoric unjustly should be

punished to the full extent of the law. To further confuse things, he then agrees to Socrates' statement that, "… the rhetorician, is manifestly one who would never do injustice, isn't he?" with an ambiguous, "Apparently" (460c). But if rhetoric is as powerful as Gorgias claims then the master rhetorician should be able to persuade his way out of any kind of litigation brought against him. Thus, while Gorgias claims that rhetorical speech is about justice, his position also admits the possibility that the highly skilled rhetorician might use rhetoric unjustly and be able to get away with it. He is forced to disclose the tyrannical potential of rhetoric by revealing its power to manipulate the hopes and passions of an audience in ways that benefit only the rhetorician himself. So it seems that for professional and perhaps even personal reasons (although this is not entirely clear at this point) Gorgias cannot give up on some notion of justice as some kind of guiding principle. Indeed, he asserts that justice should limit rhetoric in some way or another, but he cannot effectively show how this may occur without allowing his claims about the power of rhetoric to fall into contradiction. Thus Gorgias shows himself to be confused as to the true nature of justice and his conception of rhetoric can only be understood as unjust. And how, then, could he effectively teach justice to his students? Gorgias is reduced to silence.[47]

Polus and Callicles, the students of Gorgias, now take up the discussion. Polus complains that Socrates' refutation of Gorgias is false because Gorgias was 'shamed' into silence by practical concerns for his own wellbeing in Athens. Polus asserts that Gorgias was driven by convention (*nomos*) to speak of justice in order to conceal his true thoughts—"for who do you think would utterly deny both that he knows the just things and that he would teach [them] to others" (461c). Polus rather recklessly argues that by nature the power of rhetoric transcends conventional notions of just and unjust because it permits the fulfillment of desire and the natural superiority of the stronger and the better.

Socrates begins to reveal Polus' confusion, and to convince him that justice is better than injustice by discussing things like proper punishment, exercise, and medicine––things that may be painful, or unpleasant in the short term but that clearly have long

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47 For an extended look at Gorgias' possible reaction to the situation imposed upon him see Nichols, 1998, p.134-138. Also, as Roochnik points out, "Gorgias' characterization of rhetoric as value-neutral at 456d directly contradicts his claim to know *areté* at 459d" (Roochnik 1996, p.189).

term benefits. And in doing so he demonstrates why rhetoric cannot live up to any sort of proper epistemic or ethical claims. In contrast to the genuine *technai* which, in principle at least, work towards the excellence of their respective subjects, sophistic rhetoric deals with the short term satisfaction of desires, the gratification of pleasures, the appeasement of fears, and so on—it only *pretends* to offer knowledge and goodness and is therefore, as Socrates claims, shameful. Socrates argues that while rhetoric may be able to satisfy superficial desires and provide pleasure for the practitioner in the short term, it guarantees nothing in the long term. He finally convinces Polus that rhetoric is not a proper art at all but rather that it is a kind of patronizing speech, a knack, or as he also calls it, a form of flattery: "[Flattery] perceives, I do not say it knows but that it guesses, there are four branches of [techné], which always exercise their objects, namely, the body and the soul toward what is best, and then [flattery] divides the parts pretending it is that which it has insinuated itself into. It does not care at all for what is best, but it always hunts out foolishness by saying what is most pleasant, and it deceives those who are foolish by making it seem as if it is the most valuable thing of all" (464c-d).[48]

Here Socrates demonstrates how various forms of flattery pretend to be, or to take part in, real *technai*. And he does this in a manner that can be thought of 'geometrically'[49] or in terms of analogous equivalents that refer to the state of the body and soul respectively. In terms of the body, cooking and cosmetics merely flatter one into thinking that it is in a good condition; but gymnastics and medicine are therapeutic *technai* that actually do work towards the good of the body. And where the soul is concerned, rhetoric and sophistry may flatter it into an apparently good condition, while the real political *techné*, justice and legislation, if exercised properly, work towards the real good and excellence of the soul—thus rhetoric is to justice what cooking is to medicine; cosmetics are to gymnastics what sophistry is to legislation (465c).

Socrates then goes on to claim that those who charge blindly and tyrannically after power and wealth will never be happy. For Socrates, this is because once such riches and power have been attained they may cause the individual great harm if that

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48 For a detailed look at the relationship between rhetoric and techné in the Gorgias see Roochnik, 1996, p.179-192.
49 See Roochnik 1996, p.183. Also see the discussion of the 'Divided Oblong' in Plochman and Robinson 1988, p.53-73.

individual has no true understanding of how to use them well or in a truly good or advantageous way. And here we also begin to see the great difference in the way Socrates and Polus define what is good or advantageous. For Polus it is better to inflict injustice than to suffer it, whereas for Socrates, acting unjustly is symptomatic of the worst disease of the soul (474b-474c).

In response to Socrates' questioning, Polus alters his position by claiming that justice may be noble but that it is not advantageous, whereas injustice may be shameful but that it is clearly beneficial—i.e. Archelaus' murder of the young prince in order to attain the throne was beneficial to him but it was certainly not noble. This reveals that, in Polus' soul, what is good (for him this is what is immediately advantageous) and what is noble are estranged from each other; but he also clearly recognizes that the noble must be in some way or another better than the ignoble. He thus uncovers, in his own confused way, his conviction that noble things or acts must be good or admirable in someway; and that justice (related now to the noble) may be better than injustice (the ignoble) in the long term. Indeed, Polus finally reveals that he does and does not think that justice is good and therefore shows himself to be confused (477d-479e).

While Polus now seems convinced of the goodness of justice—he is turned around, or as Nichols[50] puts it, "bewitched"—Callicles will have none of this. He revises Polus' position and amplifies the distinction between nature and convention or law (*nomos/phusis*). He posits that whatever is good for us by nature is for that very reason noble by nature, regardless of what law or convention may dictate—what goes by the name of injustice, because it is more advantageous by nature than justice, is by nature more noble and admirable than justice (488b). For Callicles, injustice is shameful only by convention; notions of injustice and justice are merely creations of *nomos*. And so Callicles seems to suggest that Polus' eventual admission that "injustice is shameful" should have been accompanied by the words, "only by convention." Callicles goes further and offers a genealogy of justice and injustice by drawing a distinction between the strong and the weak. Here he claims that the convention that praises justice and condemns injustice was created by the weak to protect themselves from the strong—a

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50 See Nichols 1998, p.141.

kind of social contract. According to Callicles, these conventions were created simply to serve the interests of the weak: injustice is simply the interest of the strong seen from the point of view of the weak; natural right favors the strong and is the only true justice. Here he draws support for his argument from the animal world, the realm of human politics, and the poetry of Pindar—lions get the better of the sheep; the great Persian kings, Darius and Xerxes, expand their empire; and Heracles steals Geryon's cattle and gets away with it because of his superior strength. For Callicles, all these things occur with the blessing of nature because it is just by nature for the better and the stronger to have more than the lesser and the weaker. (482e-484c)

Socrates now engages Callicles on what the meaning of "better" might entail and asks, in effect, if it is really simply synonymous with "stronger" (489d-491a). Socrates points out that if the weaker individuals are able to band together and through their conventions and laws dominate the stronger—such as may be the case in a democracy— it is *they* who are by nature, and by Callicles' own definition, the better.[51] After a petulant display, Callicles changes his position. He states that it is not those with brute strength that should dominate but rather those with intelligence and courage—those with virtue (491c). Now, however, Callicles' image of natural justice becomes much more fragile: Where his earlier position of survival of the fittest seemed to preserve some notion of justice, or at least natural right, in the world, his revised position secures very little. Indeed, there is no guarantee that the virtuous (the pious, wise and courageous) will necessarily dominate in any political organization—any democracy, including that of 5th century Athens, will easily attest to this.

Now just as Gorgias could not disassociate himself completely from justice, and just as Polus could not completely turn his back on justice and noble acts once their true long term value was revealed to him, so too in the case of Callicles we find a deep concern with justice and goodness in a character that initially seems to hold a purely nihilistic position. Indeed, Callicles' attachment to justice becomes clear when we contrast his initial position with his revised position: According to his first argument, the result of every power struggle would seem to be just—the winner is the stronger and

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51 Cf. Nichols 1988 p.143

therefore right by nature; in Callicles' revised position, however, the more intelligent and courageous (the better) *ought* to win even when they do not. Democratic Athens is ruled by the inferior many and, according to Callicles, this is simply unjust by nature—this is not the way things *ought* to be. And here it begins to seem as though Callicles' initial position of 'might makes right' was not arrived at through reflection into the nature of justice, but rather as a kind of desperate and pained response to the realization that the virtues he really admires (courage, wisdom, piety) do not win out in the politics of the real world. Callicles cannot, finally, hold onto his first position because at his core he truly does admire virtues other than brute strength. And his nihilism is perhaps nothing more than a spiteful psychological shell created in response to seeing true excellence go down again and again. Still, he cannot find the courage to face up to his situation—or indeed, himself—and so he launches into a denial of justice and moderation that seems to be fuelled by nothing more than rage and frustration.[52] However, Callicles is unable to maintain his claims to a total nihilistic hedonism; and when Socrates takes this position to its logical extreme Callicles becomes disgusted.

In what remains of the dialogue, which is a great deal, Callicles reveals himself to be, in his own confused way, a deeply moral man—Callicles' growing anger with Socrates signals his frustration at having this repressed respect for justice shown to him. And, furthermore, he seems to see in Socrates yet another noble soul that will be eventually trampled down by the mob. Callicles' anger is, perhaps, a kind of moral frustration at what he sees as the fragile nature, or even the impossibility, of the values and virtues he holds most high—his apparent nihilism may well be a bitter symptom of his rejection of what knows in his heart to be most true. He is a deeply unhappy soul. And he is a weak one too, because for all his talk of power he feels himself to be helpless against the overwhelming force of the *demos*. Despite all that has happened in the dialogue, this weakness of character seems to render the possibility of Callicles turning to a virtuous or philosophical life unlikely, just it as it carries an ominous subtext for the political future of Athens.

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52 For a similar interpretation, albeit one that somewhat less emphatic about Callicles' repressed morality, see 'The Rhetoric of Justice' in Nichols 1998.

The Recognition of Courage in Plato's Protagoras

Turning now to the *Protagoras* we find another instance where the sophistic contempt for justice and noble or self-sacrificing acts is at odds with an unexamined admiration of virtue and goodness.[53] Here the great sophist, Protagoras, proclaims himself to be a teacher of political virtue—that is, of "good counsel" concerning the student's own affairs and how to become "most powerful" in politics (318e-319a). But we may ask, does this mean that Protagoras teaches his students to become good civil servants interested in furthering the common good? Or is he training them to be effective politicos who are only interested in furthering their own desires? When Socrates asks if Protagoras is a teacher of good citizenship, Protagoras responds deftly and obscurely with, "that is the very thing I publicly profess." (319a) But given Protagoras' rather slippery remarks earlier in the dialogue about the dangers inherent in his profession, as well his clear concern for the type of audience he addresses (316b) the answer to our question about exactly what he teaches is still not clear—although we may have our suspicions.

Socrates now questions whether or not political virtue can be taught. (319a4-5, 8-9) He suggests that when it comes to technical things, like shipbuilding or the training of soldiers, the people consult the relevant experts for their knowledge on the subject at hand. But when it comes to the question of how to best use the ships and soldiers we then enter the realm of politics and all citizens in the democracy may influence the decision as to how these things may be used. Socrates suggests that the kind of good citizenship that Protagoras claims to teach cannot be taught because otherwise we would ask to hear only from those who are experts—in the democracy, however, all citizens have a say. The question of exactly what Protagoras claims to teach remains obscure. And if it is some kind of political virtue, then the teachability of such a thing, whatever it may be, has also been brought into question. In response to this Protagoras relates his dazzling version of the myth of Prometheus and Epimetheus.

Protagoras tells us how, when it came time for the gods to create the mortals out of earth and fire, the two titan brothers, Epimetheus (afterthought) and Prometheus (forethought) were charged with giving the various creatures the various powers they

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53 My reading of the Protagoras often follows that of Bartlett's in 'On the Protagoras'. See Bartlett 2004.

would need to survive in the world. But Epimetheus neglected to save any powers for human beings; they were left naked, weak, and with no natural weapons like claws to protect themselves. (320d-4-8) In response to his brother's oversight, Prometheus stole the technical arts and fire from Hephaestus and Athena and gave them to human beings so that they might survive—they could now make weapons and shelter themselves. Despite all this, humanity fell on each other violently because they lacked the political wisdom that only Zeus possessed. So in order to prevent humanity from destroying itself, Zeus gave justice and a sense of shame to all humans; and he decreed that anyone not sharing these qualities must be killed or cast out. (322d1-5)

In response to Socrates' claim that political virtue cannot be taught, Protagoras, with his rendition of the Prometheus myth and the sub-text he imbues it with, asserts that everyone that lives in a political community can and does give political advice, not because there is no political expertise, but because all are supposed to possess that kind of knowledge already. According to the myth, Zeus gives all human beings a sense of what justice entails; and this, according to Protagoras, is why democracy makes such good sense.[54] But we must also keep in mind that Protagoras is speaking in front of fellow sophists as well as many young and wealthy Athenians all of whom are potential students. And so we might ask here, if Zeus has already instilled in us what we need to participate in politics, what good is Protagoras' teaching? Protagoras now begins to show that in reality it is the family and the political community, not Zeus, which teaches us how to behave in accordance with custom. He points out that people don't get angry with those who are small, weak or ugly because it is not their fault that they possess these characteristics by nature. However, people do get angry at those who are unjust, impious or immoderate because we suppose that their being that way *is* their fault—they could and should know better. He gently reveals that political virtue is not knowledge we are born with or possess by nature or through some divine dispensation after all. Rather it is knowledge we are responsible for possessing and propagating; and this is achieved with the threat of spankings, beatings or imprisonment. The myth, it seems, merely gives the useful illusion of a greater authority in order that the customs and laws may be accepted

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54 Protagoras, speaking in Athens gives a very practical nod to democracy.

unquestioningly by the polis. Thus, for Protagoras, political virtue is teachable and *is* taught in some manner or other by almost everyone that lives in a political community. And here Protagoras subtly suggests that if there are those, like himself, who can advance the teaching of things political beyond what parents and the political community can achieve then so much the better for those who can afford to have access to this knowledge. (328b-c) Indeed, it is here that Protagoras begins to subtly reveal to his potential students the delicate and dangerous nature of what he really teaches.

Protagoras may disguise himself with piety by employing the myth, but he also demonstrates that while Zeus (if he did exist) may care for the human race as a whole, he is completely indifferent to the fate of individuals. Protagoras uses the myth to make the compelling argument that the world was not created with the wellbeing of humanity in mind. Echoing Callicles, he implies that our political communities and notions of justice and injustice are artificial (the creations of *nomos*) and are thus full of problems. For Protagoras, the moral education that we get from the city and family is really nothing more than coercion or "forced commands"—a kind of brainwashing—that goes against our true nature. And now we may begin to gain a clearer image of Protagoras as a teacher of injustice and deception who offers his students a kind of liberation from what he sees as the unnatural bonds of *nomos.*

As Protagoras presents things, the world is epimethean—that is, thought follows rather than precedes creation. By this view, humanity attained fire and *techné* in spite of the gods and nature, and the only protection or comforts we have are invented by us through our arts. Beneath the rhetorical veneer and the *muthos*, the true human condition that Protagoras offers is one of complete abandonment: there is only the natural order that coldly ensures the perpetuation of the species; and even in this regard the animals are better off than we are as they can form harmonious social groups easily and are naturally fitted out for survival. Here Protagoras subtly introduces the idea that in order to restrain our selves from killing each other it is not necessary that Zeus the law giver actually exists, but simply that the majority of humankind believes this to be the case. In order to form relatively stable political communities the majority of humans need to believe in something greater than themselves that will, through punishment and reward, define what

is unjust and what is just. Protagoras adds, however, that some humans are unjust and that it would be madness for such people to admit to their injustice or to fail to pretend to appear to be just (323a-323c)—nowhere does he say that it would be madness *to be* unjust. And so, for Protagoras, political societies do not require the universal agreement that the unjust will always be punished and that justice is good, they only require that most people think this to be so: even if there are a few wise people who understand the truth about justice and the gods, political society will persist as long as they have the skill and cleverness to conceal their thoughts through devices like myth and rhetoric.[55] It would seem that, for Protagoras, it is just these enlightened people that have the advantage over the ignorant masses whose true natures are held in check by their belief in the conventional notions of justice, piety and moderation.

Socrates responds to this by posing what seems like an innocuous technical question, "Are justice, piety and moderation three separate virtues or are they all part of the same thing?" Protagoras responds that virtue is one thing and that justice piety and moderation are its parts. Socrates then asks, "Are these parts of virtue like parts of a face or parts like parts of gold?" Protagoras responds that they are like parts of a face with differing qualities from each other. (329d-330c) Socrates then asks, "do human beings also partake of these parts of virtue, some of one part, others of another; or is it necessarily the case that if in fact someone lays hold of one, he has them all?"(329e) Protagoras responds that because there are many who are courageous but unjust and because there are those who are just but not wise (those who faithfully follow the laws and customs of the family and city) the virtues may exist independently of each other. (329e5-6) This should raise further questions in the mind of the reader: Are some virtues mutually exclusive? Can the wise ever be just? Or is justice the area of the unwise followers of myth and *nomos*? And what about wisdom? Is it a virtue like justice, piety and moderation, or is it something else all together?

Until this point in the dialogue Protagoras has spoken of only three elements in association with what he calls political virtue—justice, moderation and piety. But he has also referred to wisdom and its associate, courage, calling them the greatest of all virtues.

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55 See Bartlett 2004, p. 71-76.

(330a) Furthermore, as I have just mentioned, Protagoras has claimed that some are courageous but not just, and that others are just but not wise. All of this strongly implies that, for Protagoras, there are in fact two kinds of virtue. On one hand there is (1) political virtue, which is made up of justice, moderation and piety; these are the qualities we need to get along with others in a given political community (good citizenship, or at least the appearance of it). Then, on the other hand, there is (2) wisdom, the greatest virtue, which allows the wise person to know the world as it truly is (and of course, the wise person needs courage to face up to the real world and to venture into foreign towns and teach as Protagoras does). According to Protagoras, then, there is a divide between political virtue and the true virtue of wisdom and its associate, courage. As a result of this, a person may be both courageous and unjust, or just but unwise. And so it seems that Protagoras offers his students a conception of wisdom as knowledge of the truth about the political world: the account of Zeus as the giver of justice is but a useful myth; justice, piety and moderation are mere conventions; and our attachment to all of them is merely a symptom of political life that we must learn to transcend if we wish to achieve true excellence and the fulfillment of our desires.

Socrates now begins to press Protagoras. He asks again about the unity of the virtues; and he suggests that justice and piety seem to be closely related, and wonders if wisdom and moderation might also be related to each other in some way or another. After a discussion of opposites, in which Protagoras is shown to contradict himself, he gives unwilling assent to both of these propositions. (332a-333c) It is Socrates' view that all virtue is a kind of unified knowledge (of what is still unclear) and as a result he wants to show that the virtues are not separable. And indeed, if Socrates wishes to demonstrate the unity of the virtues then it would seem that the task at hand is clear: somehow Socrates has to get Protagoras to agree that it is a mark of wisdom and moderation to be just and pious, and thus collapse the major distinction between 1 and 2 above. The question at hand now seems to be whether or not the wise and courageous will ever be truly just, or if justice, piety and moderation are virtues of the fools.

Socrates' rather dubious game of opposites proves nothing. However, it does put Protagoras on the defensive; it allows Socrates to amplify the discourse, and to clarify

Protagoras' distinction between virtues 1 and virtues 2 by asking if a person may be considered moderate or wise *because* he commits injustice. Protagoras responds cagily, "for my part, Socrates, I would be ashamed to agree to this, but many people do assert it." (333c) In this way Protagoras does not agree with this assertion directly, but nevertheless carefully allows it to be introduced and maintained in the discussion without having to take responsibility for it. And this also shows that despite the fact that Protagoras is becoming very rattled at this point in the dialogue, his skill at rhetoric makes it very difficult for Socrates to get straight answers out of him. Indeed, a clear capitulation by Protagoras seems increasingly unlikely; Socrates will have to take more drastic measures—a more boldly ironical and psychological approach—and attempt to reveal Protagoras' own unexamined attachment to the noble and the good.

Now follows an almost comical interlude where the audience restrains Socrates from leaving the discussion; and in which a rather long analysis of a poem by Simonides shows Socrates playing the literary critic and, perhaps, ironically demonstrating the futility of appeals to authority in situations such as this.[56] Once the discussion gets back on track, Socrates points out that Protagoras has claimed that there are five virtues—justice, piety, moderation, wisdom and courage—; and he tries to narrow the terms by again asking about unity: are these actually five names for one thing, virtue, or are they different or separate things with different characteristics? Protagoras, now rattled, modifies his position and claims that four of these are all interrelated or "reasonably comparable to one another" (349d2-4), but that courage remains separate. He argues here that one can combine great courage with impiety, injustice, or ignorance. By Protagoras' new position, courage is not necessarily associated with justice, wisdom or knowledge because it is amoral—as Bartlett puts it, "[courage] would seem to be rather a certain steadfastness or toughness of soul, whether for the sake of combat or illegal thievery" (Bartlett 2004, p.80). Socrates will now try to prove that courage is linked in someway with the moral virtues. But because he cannot challenge Protagoras rhetorically, Socrates' argument will have to be ironic and dialectical—he will have to show Protagoras'

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56 There is, of course, much more to be said about this section. For a more thorough account see Bartlett, 2004, p.76-79. In the *Republic*, Polemarchus also offers an appeal to the authority of Simonides that is pushed aside by Socrates (*Rep* I.331d–336a).

confusion by appealing directly to the moral conflicts within the sophist's own soul. Socrates does this by adopting a position that argues for a purely technical hedonism in order to take Protagoras' nihilistic ethical position, as well as his claims to possess a knowledge that is teachable, to their logical extremes.

Socrates begins with the claim that one must have knowledge or wisdom in order to have courage—well divers that have knowledge of well diving are more courageous with regard to that activity than those who do not; in general, those with knowledge can perform the risky job with greater confidence than others, whether that be soldiering, well diving or traveling from town to town teaching rhetoric. (350a-350c) Indeed, this is not a real departure from Protagoras' initial claims and he generally seems to agree to this position. Socrates advances this by claiming that no human being voluntarily seeks out what he knows to be bad, rather they go after the things that seem to be good. Here Socrates explicitly associates goodness with pleasure—we all seek pleasure, whether it is victory on the battlefield, wealth and power in the city, or the satisfaction of base desires. And if this is the case, Socrates claims, then both the courageous and the cowards seek out what they take to be good or pleasurable: for the coward this involves hiding or running away in battle, while for the courageous this means heading toward the front lines. And it would follow then that for the just this means following the laws of the community and the pursuit of good citizenship, while for the unjust this involves the fulfillment of one's own interests. Put simply this position asserts that the cowards and the courageous, the just and the unjust, simply disagree about what they know to be good.

In this way Socrates begins to present courage as knowledge of what is and what is not truly pleasurable and thereby good—by this view the cowards and the courageous are both, in their own ways, pleasure seekers. However, Socrates suggests that if courage is associated with knowledge and wisdom, it stands to reason that the courageous should be able to better calculate how to achieve greater and truer pleasure. By this argument, the pleasure that the coward may find in hiding is nothing compared to what the courageous may find in fighting on the front line—the courageous go into battle willingly

because they *know* that doing so is noble, good and thus pleasurable (360a1-3).[57] This development takes advantage of Protagoras' earlier qualification of Socrates' depiction of pleasure and good, where Protagoras states that pleasure can only be good if one "should live his life by taking pleasures in the noble things." (351c1-2)[58] This allows Socrates to clearly attribute the values of good and bad to the words noble and shameful respectively.

Socrates then characterizes the many as being unable to grasp what is truly good and noble for them because they make mistakes in the calculation of pleasure and pain. Here Socrates suggests the possibility of an art or *techné* of counting or measuring that would enable the practitioner to accurately determine the best means to maximize pleasure and minimize pain in order to ensure or "save" pleasure in its best form. (356c4-357e8) He implies that if courage, like the good and true pursuit of pleasure, is simply knowledge of what is noble then one should be able to arrive at such knowledge by purely rational means. Courage is now presented as a strictly utilitarian calculation; a process of counting and weighing 'units' of pleasure; a *techné* as stable, reliable and therefore teachable as geometry. And indeed, by this view the courageous become those who know better how to calculate their pleasure. (360a1-3) Socrates even seems to imply that under certain circumstances one might accurately calculate that it is better (more pleasurable) to run away and that this act would therefore be noble or courageous. Socrates' strategy, finally, is to strip courage of its commonsensical noble or self-sacrificing character. This argument does great violence to our common notion of courage: there is nothing self sacrificing here, only a cold calculation of what is best or more pleasurable; courage is now simply "knowledge of what's frightening and what isn't" (360d-e); and moral value is reduced to arithmetic.

Socrates has now changed his position from one that denies the teachable nature of virtue to one that apparently embraces it. Indeed, he *seems* to be saying something like, "yes, let's do away with the myths, convention and notions of common good; but let's go

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57 Bartlett writes, " the courageous man enters battle because he believes doing so to be noble, hence good—hence pleasant (351c1-2)!" I suggest that by the technical view being put forward here, the courageous man should have certain knowledge rather than mere belief. This compares with the knowledge the sophist is said to possess over the many who merely believe the myths and the conventions of the community.
58 Cf. Bartlett 2004, p. 82.

all the way and have done with our irrational, sentimental, qualitative, and self-sacrificing notions of virtue as well; we should work on maximizing individual nobility and goodness, which, because they are in fact quantifiable units of pleasure, are knowable purely rationally and are therefore inherently teachable as some kind of *techné*." However, even a brief look at Socrates' technical hedonism will reveal the many problems and inconsistencies it contains.[59] And this must be clear to Protagoras as well. Socrates' outrageous theory is clearly not intended to show us how he really feels about the nature of virtue, and knowledge. Rather he makes this strange argument to demonstrate the inconsistencies in Protagoras' position and to force the sophist, the audience, and the reader to examine how they feel about courage, the noble, the good, and what these virtuous qualities mean. Indeed, after Socrates offers and develops this position, Protagoras refuses to continue the discussion. He does not attack the clear logical problems or even the violation of common sense this argument rests on—there would be no point; he has nothing better to offer. By insisting on this technical/hedonistic view of goodness, Socrates, has thrown the proceedings into the absurd. But in doing so he has made it impossible for Protagoras and for us to ignore the complicated relationship we have with ethical knowledge. Protagoras, it seems, has the same reaction to this rather bizarre technical version of courage and nobility that we do. He is disturbed by it because he admires the courageous, as everyone does, for their ability to risk their own pleasure and wellbeing for something other than themselves. (395e1-4) Indeed, we are made to consider here the possibility that a certain kind of pain may be essential to true courage; that it may be knowledge of the value of pain, perhaps more so than pleasure, which enables us to think and behave ethically. However, everything in the dialogue thus far suggests that Protagoras should be happy to accept Socrates' technical hedonism. After all what could be a more efficient and certain way to teach people to "manage one's own affairs…" and to rise above the ignorance and superstition of the many—especially if the goal of these activities is to satisfy desire for power and wealth, and thus provide pleasure.

By taking Protagoras' rather nihilistic ethical position, as well as his claims to

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59 See Bartlett, p.82-84.

possess a knowledge that is teachable, to their logical extremes, Socrates has effectively beaten Protagoras with his own argument and, it seems, forced him to examine himself. I suggest that Plato, through his discussion of courage and pleasure, attempts to reveal in us the admiration for self sacrifice as a political ideal—a recognition that true political virtue works towards the good of others as much as the self. Plato also seems to imply that if we are to understand the true meaning of virtue we must, of course, look to our laws and customs, but more importantly we must examine each other and ourselves. Can political virtue be taught? The answer seems to be yes and no: the customs, laws and beliefs may be and are taught by the political community, however these teachings and ideals must be focused by a self-reflective being who (it is to be hoped) possesses the strength of spirit to honestly interpret and continually question the *nomoi* with the best interests of the society in mind.

We leave the *Protagoras* and the *Gorgias* with more questions than answers. However, the problems these dialogues illuminate are important and entirely relevant today. Indeed, both dialogues reveal the various ways in which we may think ourselves to be in possession of knowledge of what is best when in reality we are deluded. All of Socrates' interlocutors think of themselves as understanding a certain truth about the nature of social reality that allows them success—influence, wealth, pleasure and so on. And they all ascribe to the *techné* analogy in order to give their pursuit of individual pleasure the appearance of an epistemic grounding. Callicles, of course, is the exception for his position is far more passionate—his morality is unashamedly irrational—; but he does continually conflate what is pleasurable with some notion of what is good (thereby, perhaps, rejecting the ethical necessity of pain. With Polus and Protagoras, Socrates demonstrates the folly of conflating rhetoric and *techné,* as well as how the resulting confusion allows for pleasure, vanity and unmediated base desires to be disguised as ends in themselves. Again, "…it always hunts out foolishness by saying what is most pleasant, and it deceives those who are foolish by making it seem as if it is the most valuable thing of all." (464c-d) Socrates reveals this to Polus by using a clear 'geometrical' schema of analogous equivalents: cosmetics are to gymnastics what apparent health of the body is to true health of the body. Polus is shown that true *techné* requires hard work and entails the

rigorous development of skill and knowledge towards a proper subject. Things like sophistic rhetoric and cosmetics on the other hand give only the easy illusion of such things and have no proper subject, only the rather vague and irrational fulfillment of pleasure. And while Polus may not completely understand the inherent goodness of noble acts, he does at the very least recognize their value on practical grounds. With the sophisticated Protagoras, Socrates uses the arithmetical or *techné* analogy ironically[61] in order to show that the sophist's claim to *techné* and teachable knowledge with regard to justice are absurd and confused.

The exchanges with Polus and Protagoras offer us the opportunity to consider the ways in which we may be tempted or, indeed, persuaded to engage in activity or to pursue ends that merely appear to be good but that are harmful to us or to others in the end. Modern culture is almost completely dedicated to the pursuit of pleasure and the total rejection of pain; and much of our modern economy is dependent on maintaining the belief in appearances (of success, beauty, knowledge and so on). The now totally enmeshed industries of entertainment and advertising flatter, manipulate our vanity and insecurities from childhood in order to keep us consuming—always with technology's promise of something better or 'new and improved' luring us on. Desire itself is a carefully manufactured commodity; and of course there will always be those who claim to understand things as they are and who, as a matter of course, feel it to be their right to control or take advantage of the many. Additionally, we often seem to share Polus' confusion over what is noble and good. Of course, we all claim that justice is better than injustice—we punish our children not to increase their misery but to ensure their happiness later on. However, successful injustice is often tolerated, even praised in our society as long as it is executed with subtlety and in a way that maintains the appearance of excellence we associate with some ideal of the successful life. Perhaps more troubling is the case of Callicles. His nihilism and anger is symptomatic of a certain degree of denial, helplessness, and frustration we all feel as political animals. But as Plato attempts to demonstrate, Callicles' cynicism is a form of weakness or cowardice—one that we should be aware of in ourselves as we attempt to formulate the ethical judgments that

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61 See Roochnik 1996, p.228.

guide our lives.

Plato's arguments in these two dialogues are complicated and I have given only a partial reading of them here. Given what we have considered, however, we may begin to ask if we at the individual level must be completely intellectually and spiritually defined by our contemporary milieu. Plato seems to be suggesting that through the process of questioning our desires, as well as our unexamined notions of virtue and what *seems* to be in our best interests, we may be able to bracket out those spiteful and conflicting views imposed upon us by society, lay our souls bare, and be forced to confront our true selves. However, while Plato seems to suggest that such an activity may allow us to recognize our innate attachment to goodness and thus improve our lives, he also reveals that this process is painful as it often involves sacrificing immediate pleasures or even casting off problematic but closely held notions of who we are. Indeed, he also shows the various ways in which we push this attachment to truth and goodness aside and how we harm ourselves in doing so. Self-reflection is no easy business and there is no guarantee that Gorgias, Polus, Callicles and Protagoras, now that some revelation of the immanent nature goodness has been revealed to them, will pursue self-knowledge with any dedication.

What is Ethical Knowledge?

We have begun to consider the ways in which Plato's Socrates seeks to draw out and identify confusion and ethical disorder in the minds of his contemporaries, and we have also seen the ways he uses various analogies—especially that of *techné*—ironically or as protreptic devices in order to bring others to understand his position or to reveal flaws in the arguments of his interlocutors. But we still really have no idea in what ethical knowledge consists. If Socrates' use of the *techné* analogy in the *Protagoras* is indeed only an ironic device meant to debunk the great sophists claim to knowledge, then how does one go about attaining self-knowledge? While some innate sense of justice or goodness may be present and to us, how are we to properly understand it?

The *Protagoras* and *Gorgias* prompt us to look at our relationship to rhetoric and technical knowledge and to consider what their limits may be. These dialogues also ask

us to think about how this kind of knowledge or, indeed, the illusion of it, may be applied blindly (ethically speaking, like sophistic rhetoric) towards the fulfillment of unexamined desires and beliefs rather than towards the difficult pursuit of real excellence and goodness. And this is an especially important concern because in our modern techno/scientific culture it seems difficult to properly conceive of knowledge in any other way than as technical—not to mention the fact that we are constantly bombarded with rhetorical flattery from the media and advertising. Many of our activities as a society and as individuals are based around the marvels of technology; and much of our economy and immediate sense of wellbeing is driven by the luxuries provided by technological progress. Indeed, we have an attachment and dependency on *techné* that Plato could not have imagined. How then might we properly reconcile the quest for self-knowledge and the rather mysterious revelation of goodness that Plato seems to be advocating in these dialogues with the overwhelmingly complicated technological and pleasure driven Western world in which we live?

The humanist/rationalist project and the promise of progress it carries, both in Ancient Greece and in the modern world, has produced many outstanding achievements. Without it we would not have the kind of science, medicine, nor the many technological luxuries we enjoy today. *Techné* offers us a means by which we may take control over a great many things; because *techné* may be systematically taught and it its results verified by objective criteria—as is clearly the case with mathematics, orthography, or ship building for instance—it allows us a certain degree of control over contingency or, as Nussbaum refers to it, luck (*tuché*). Furthermore, technical knowledge may be applied with positive results to the physical world with the goal of developing and approaching ideals based on function and efficiency (the organization of matter into a house, or ship, the building of a weapon or tool). Or it may be directed towards the construction of logically coherent statements, the discovery of abstract mathematical truths, or, perhaps, the creation of linguistic devices that may influence the emotions, desires and rational processes of the human mind. The undisputed power of *techné* notwithstanding, the question remains, to what degree does *techné* and technical knowledge apply to ethics? Indeed, with all we have considered thus far we may reasonably pose the following

queries: (1) might technical knowledge, such as mathematics, aid us in a search for true ethical knowledge? If so, (2) are virtue and goodness knowable purely as *techné*? And (3), is there any way that the seeming disparity between nature and human values might be diminished or reconciled through the pursuit of ethical knowledge?

Plato, I think, would answer yes to 1 and 3 but no to 2. Although there exists a long tradition of distinguished scholars that sees Plato committed to the project of what Irwin[61] calls a "moral theory" (Irwin 1977), or, as Nussbaum puts it, "a science of practical reasoning" (Nussbaum 2009, p.89; Cf. Roochnick, 1996, p. 8) this position seems to play down the degree to which Plato may be employing ironic devices in order to provoke deeper reflection on the nature of virtue and the degree to which it is teachable (as well as the limits of *techné* itself). As I suggested in my reading of the *Protagoras*, Socrates' final appeal for a technical hedonism is, on the surface, based on vague speculation regarding the possibility of a *techné* that would allow us to accurately calculate what is truly pleasurable and thereby combat or cure weakness of the will (*akrasia*)—in my view this implies some kind of non-reflective linear or quasi-mathematical process that would, in effect, tell a potentially self-reflective being what to think (about virtue, pleasure, and goodness) thereby negating the need for the examined life itself. Again, Socrates is noticeably unclear how such a *techné* should come about or what it might entail. And, furthermore, while the lesser Sophists, Prodicus and Hippias, seem to be delighted at the proposition of the *akrasia* fighting *techné* (it offers the possibility of yet another means by which they may drain the pockets of the rich through their teaching) Protagoras reacts differently and backs away from the discussion. As I have discussed above, Protagoras' reaction to Socrates' (as I see them) ironic claims reveals that he instinctively understands, as we do, that no person or thing (craft or art) can tell the soul how to be truly courageous or virtuous; that true virtue can only come through difficult and painful self reflection and even self sacrifice—anything less would be the product of some form of flattery and would thereby be inauthentic.

So I suggest that a reading of Plato that takes into account possible ironic

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61 The reader may wish to consider Irwin's view of the *Protagoras* and *Gorgias*. His detailed analytical treatment yields conclusions that are quite different than those I offer here with my more interpretive and literary approach. See Irwin 1977, Ch. IV & V.

implications may open interesting and difficult questions with regard to, among other things, the relationship between *techné* and virtue. And while my reading certainly does not reflect the general view, there have emerged in recent years a number of scholars who have made compelling arguments against the position that sees Plato as an unrelenting technical optimist. David Roochnick writes, "Techné is important to Plato, to the rhetoricians, to us. It is paradigmatic of knowledge that gives us control. Because techné can be effectively, perhaps even systematically, taught, its possession can be certified. Because it so often treats subjects of pressing concern and usefulness, those who do possess it are well regarded, and frequently well rewarded by their communities. The *technités* is, quite literally, a professor: he avows publicly that he knows. Moral knowledge for Plato is far more precarious and difficult to recognize, far less systematic and professorial, than this. It is non-technical, and it is a problem." (Roochnick 1996)

This in contrast to Nussbaum, who takes Socrates' seemingly enthusiastic endorsement of the pleasure-measuring *techné* found in the *Protagoras* at face value; she sees nothing ironic here. Furthermore, Nussbaum deals with the problem of hedonism, which in no other dialogue is associated with goodness, by claiming that this was merely the young Plato's first attempt at creating a quantifiable ethics with the goal of 'de-fragilizing' goodness—"Socrates, *pro tempore*, tries out pleasure" (Nussbaum p.112)—a pursuit that, for Nussbaum and many others, defines most of the Platonic corpus.[62] Nussbaum also sees Socrates' technical hedonism as a kind of proto-utilitarianism that resonates with thinkers like Bentham and Sidgwick but she neglects to take into account the highly social locus of their thought—Socrates' ironic pleasure quantifying, as we have seen, is altogether self-serving and therefore cannot be properly understood as utilitarian. This said, however, Nussbaum's reading of the *Protagoras*, despite its possible flaws, does offer a useful insight. She points out that the dialogue "shows us an apparently insoluble tension between our intuitive attachment to a plurality of values and our ambition to be in control of our planning through a deliberative *techné. ...* that Socrates' *techné*,[63] like the arts of Zeus, creates new values and dependencies. … [and

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62 Cf. Roochnik 1996, p.230.

63 If we can say that Socrates possesses a techné. This refers to what I suggest is Socrates' ironic mock techné—the hedonistic counting Nussbaum takes at face value.

that] the task of curing pain may involve putting an end to humanness."(Nussbaum 2009, p.119-120) However, as I have suggested, Plato's project may not be to 'cure pain' but rather to seek knowledge of its value and even its ethical necessity as part of a political ideal based on self-knowledge.

The image of Plato as the stern rationalist that we have inherited from Nietzsche, and that has been developed in various ways by Nussbaum and others has created a perspective on Plato that scholars like Roochnick see as incomplete. Although Plato often uses *techné* as an analogy throughout the dialogues, he also constantly refers to other modes of knowledge that are not clearly compatible with *techné*. Indeed, Socrates continually refers to his belief that knowledge is recollection; his mysterious *daimonion* offers him seemingly infallible direction on what he must not do, and his conception of 'The Good' seems to transcend notions of counting, measuring or any other kind of activity that may be associated with technical reasoning. Referring to Plato's *Charmides*, Roochnick observes the following: "Suffice it to say here that techné implies a "linear" concept of knowledge: there is the subject, the knower who takes up the object or the subject matter. Because it is self-reflexive, self-knowledge, like the dialogue itself, is circular: the self knows itself knowing itself. As such it is entirely reasonable to expect this sort of knowledge to be "non linear," and hence to be "non-technical." (Roochnick 1996, p.126)

Although Socrates may expose the various flaws in the sophistic position from his relatively secure position in Plato's dialogues, it cannot be denied that Sophists put forward epistemic and ethical problems that persist to this day. And It is precisely because the Presocratics and the Sophists raise such powerful problems and questions about the nature of Being and ethics that we must continue to question whether reality itself may be permeated with some immanent value or quality (an *archê*) that allows us in some way or another to know the world in terms of ethical value; or if the contradictions, relativity and irrationality that appear everywhere in day-to-day experience are indicative of the illusory nature of ethical knowledge. Indeed, both of these dialogues end in a kind of impasse or an *aporia* with no definitive answers given to the principal problems at hand (can virtue be taught, what is justice, etc.). But the *aporiai* need not be understood

simply as flaws in the dialogues. Rather they may be seen as openings to think for our selves; they are invitations to query the discussion and our own perspective—to self-knowledge. Like Polus, Callicles and Protagoras we too may be struggling with the larger questions that dominate dialogues; but if we have been reading critically we find that, in the course of things, we come to ask new questions that were perhaps previously unconsidered. And perhaps in this way Plato's dialogues offer us a starting point from which we may begin to question ourselves and the world more deeply—thereby allowing us to better understand, or at least to recognize our relationship to goodness. Indeed, Plato does not want us basing our ethics simply on the word of authority, or by crunching pleasure-numbers through some kind of ethics-algorithm, as Nussbaum seems to suggest. He wants us to commit ourselves to the hard and ongoing work of self-examination that will allow us better understand the true ethical meanings of what we experience, what we say, and what we do. And indeed, with out such self-knowledge any kind of technical or material understanding of things—regardless of how brilliant it may appear—is quite meaningless.

As I will argue throughout my examination of the *Republic* in the next chapter, Plato's conception of philosophy includes but extends beyond purely technical knowledge. It accepts and faces up to the irrational aspects of human experience and the problems associated with self-knowledge—it is as poetic and psychological as it is technical and rational. As Plato invites us to join Socrates in his quest for ethical knowledge in the *Republic*, the search becomes increasingly self-reflexive even as the mode of investigation it requires is inter-subjective, the dialectic. And as we'll see, many of the problems with both Plato's actual city, Athens, and his 'City in Speech' resonate profoundly with the many issues we struggle with in the modern world.

Organising Desire in the Feverish City: Dialectic and the Ethics of Eros in Plato's *Republic*

> *SOCRATES: I mean that each one himself rules himself. Or is there no need of this, that he rule himself, but only that he rule the others?*
> *CALLICLES: What do you mean, ruling himself?*
> *SOCRATES: Nothing complicated but just what the many mean: being moderate and in control over oneself, ruling the pleasures and desires that are in oneself.*
> (*Gorgias*, 491d-491e)

Plato's *Republic* is considered to be the first great Western treatise on political philosophy. But although its initial and overarching concern is political, the issues addressed in the *Republic* extend well beyond the domain of politics to take on themes that are of a purely philosophical nature. The *Republic* consists of ten books that can be organised into a prologue followed by three sections. Book I introduces the interlocutors and presents the fundamental questions from which many of the subsequent themes and speculations will emerge. Above all else it asks: What is justice and what makes a just life better than a life of injustice? Books II, III, IV can be seen as comprising the first proper thematic section of the *Republic*. Here Socrates proposes the 'City in Speech'—a

city that is claimed to be just—and outlines its political and social construction. Books V, VI and VII are often referred to as the 'philosophical books' as they move beyond political concerns and into the realm of pure philosophy. And finally, Books VIII, IX and X find the discussion returning to worldly existential and political matters.

What makes the *Republic* so remarkable is that the questions it poses are still pertinent over two thousand years after it was written: What is justice? What is a good life? What is the role of education in society? Can censorship ever be justified? What makes a good ruler? Is it ever justified for a ruler to lie? To what extent are citizens free? What is the relationship between freedom, private property and the state? Are all citizens equal before the law? Should women and men share an equal place in society? Should the state have any role to play with regards to the family and procreation? Should everyone have equal access to health care? These are just a few of the themes Plato tackles in the *Republic* and they should seem very familiar—they are central to our contemporary discourse with regard to society and self.

That the questions and themes raised in the *Republic* resonate in one way or another with the modern condition is not a major point of debate. However, a great deal of contention does arise with regard to the political and social model that Plato presents in the 'City in Speech'. The ways in which the 'City in Speech' deals with democracy, property, freedom, family and justice have generated a great deal of controversy; and as a result the *Republic* has often been viewed as contrary to, and even threatening towards, modern notions of democracy and freedom. Many have claimed that the ideas presented in the *Republic* are dangerous to a liberal democracy, and some, like Bertrand Russell and Karl Popper,[64] have gone so far as to claim that the *Republic* is a precursor to modern totalitarianism. But is Plato's dialogue as dangerously subversive as it seems?

It is important to consider the *Republic* in terms of its historical context. By all accounts, Plato's Athens was floundering in superstition, bad politics and civil strife; and it was plagued by an education system that simply served the status quo. Plato's project was not to instantiate a closed and dogmatic political ideology, rather he sought to introduce an element of critique into what he saw as a confused society that was

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64 See Popper 1967; Russell 2004. For a concise look as Plato's critics (re: *The Republic*) see Barrow 1975, p.1-15.

drowning in its own hubris. However, many critics of the *Republic* tend to read the dialogue with a distinctly modern bias; they focus on passages where Plato seems to be advocating totalitarianism or radical social and political reforms; and as a result, their critique is often limited to the construction of the 'City in Speech' itself. Perhaps too eager to pull literal meaning out of the text, or to engage in purely analytical interpretation, some critics treat the *Republic* solely as a treatise and therefore miss the overarching significance of the dialogue as a whole. Although many would argue to the contrary, the *Republic* represents a living dialectical process in which the 'City in Speech' plays an important but limited role—seemingly full of paradoxes and contradictions, the *Republic* is an aesthetic object in its own right; it asks its readers to engage in an examination of self just as is demands them to place a critical eye on the political and cultural world that surrounds them.

Still, for those of us living in a time when notions of personal freedom and democracy are almost universally lauded in the West, some of Plato's remarks may seem shocking, even heretical. However, if we engage Plato with an open and critical mind we will find that he offers us a great deal to think about. Considering the *Republic* in context—both Plato's and ours—should, at the very least, give us pause to question whether or not our modern notions of democracy, freedom, progress and the liberal economy are indeed the universal and eternal truths we often understand them to be. Indeed, the unfolding of recent events in Iraq, Afghanistan, the Middle East, and on Wall Street, as well as our increasing dependence on the marvels and distractions of our technology, drives the need for such a critique disturbingly close to home. Indeed, many of the modern political, social and economic terms we cling to—those that we might feel Plato is forcing us to defend—begin to ring hollow when subjected to diligent and sustained criticism. Even a simple demand for clear definitions can result in a disturbing state of confusion. And this speaks to how fragile our cherished beliefs may be. Terms and words once habitually inscribed in the mind as political, social, or personal values can be used to undermine the very ideals they were meant to describe in the first place. Words can quickly become intellectual 'place-holders', devoid of any real meaning. Or, even worse, they can become shadows of the ideas and objects they were once invented

to signify: freed from the constraints of reality, logic and reason—though still retaining irrational psychological force—words and ideas can dangerously transform into instruments of power and desire. History, religion, science, and politics are not strangers to this phenomenon—they are victims of it. Above all, Plato wants us to engage in an ongoing battle against this kind of intellectual corruption, which he sees as leading towards political and social decay. Plato wants us to engage responsibly in the argument; to question the validity and authenticity of our values and assumptions; and to recognise the flaws in our thinking and language (and his for that matter). In any Platonic dialogue it is the reader who is the principal interlocutor.

My intention then is not to attempt to definitively defend or refute Plato, but rather to critically engage with his dialogue—to attempt to understand his text in its contemporary context, and to consider the themes and nature of his critique as they may apply to our own experience of the modern world. Therefore, my examination of the *Republic* begins with a look at the intellectual and historical context in which the dialogue was written. Here I briefly examine Plato's relationship to his philosophical predecessors and contemporaries, and I look at the political and social state of Athens late in the 5th century. I then move on to consider Plato's relationship to revelation, the irrational and the extra-rational—an often over looked aspect of Platonic thought but one that I believe plays an important role in understanding much of the style and content of the *Republic*. I continue with a close examination of the intertwined nature of Platonic epistemology, ontology, dialectic and ethics. Following this, I move on to an interpretive analysis of the text. Here I address the main themes raised in the *Republic* and discuss the broader dialectical nature of the dialogue as it extends beyond the construction of the 'City in Speech'.[65] Finally, I look at several of the themes Plato raises in a modern context and argue that despite the problems we may have with the particulars of Plato's 'city' itself, the model of dialectical thought presented in the *Republic* is of significant value to the modern reader—especially in terms of subjective authenticity and intellectual autonomy. As Robin Barrow points out, "The *Republic* is a great challenge to 'our

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65 The conception of Platonic dialectic that I will present here owes a great deal to David Roochnik's book, *The Beautiful City: The Dialectical Character of Plato's Republic.*

civilization'."[66] And as the *Republic* itself makes so clear, the challenge of civilization involves confronting a complicated, interconnected and changing web of knowledge, power, politics, belief and desire. In brief, the task at hand is nothing less than a rational structuring of our irrational drives and desires towards 'The Good'—or, the ethical organisation of *Eros* in a world of *Até*.

Athens and Socrates

The new rationalism the Presocratics espoused played a major part in what we now call the 'Greek Enlightenment'. And as I outlined in the Introduction, this new movement recognised the value of, observation, measurement (counting, geometry, mathematics) as well as the possibilities of human reason and the *techné* that springs from it. However, the Enlightenment came with a price. This new found faith in reason and *techné* tended to undermine the non-rational, but unifying myths, poetry and religious beliefs that gave law and convention moral foundation. And while there were those, like Solon and Sophocles,[67] who offered powerful warnings about humanity's fascination with its own brilliance, there were others, like Aeschylus, who seemed to praise mankind's achievements as the fulfilment of a divine ordinance.[68] In all, where the traditional Greek view looked back to a better and more-noble past, this new world-view, for better or worse, could only look forward—Athens had committed herself to the project of progress and had left the past behind in the shadows.

After the remarkable defeat of the Persians in 480-79, Athens quickly ascended to control over a large part of the Greek world. The Delian League, which had been set up to offer some unity between the Greek states soon developed into an Athenian empire. Contributions to the league effectively became tributes to Athens, allowing the Athenians to amass a formidable navy that it used to police and coerce the Greek world— paradoxically perhaps, the advancement of Athenian imperialism abroad was closely

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66 Barrow, p.2

67 Scholars like Dodds and Roochnick cite Solon's 'Prayer to the Muses' and Sophocles' 'Ode to Man' in Antigone (lines 332-75) as being indicative of this wary attitude. Cf. Dodds 1973, p. 8, 155 and Roochnick 1996, p.27-33, 57-63

68 In referring to Aeschylus' vision of Prometheus, Dodds writes, "The belief that man's achievements are not purely his own but are the outcome and the expression of a divine purpose was to Aeschylus—at least in my view—a basic religious postulate." (Dodds 1973, p.7)

intertwined with the development of its notions of freedom and democracy at home.[69] As Athens grew in strength, people were drawn to it because of its need for workers and craftspeople, but also because of its lively intellectual, cultural, and political life. The thinkers we examined in Chapter One pioneered advancements in the understanding of physics, mathematics, medicine and engineering that continued in this period; theatre, art and architecture also flourished. The legacy of political, social and economic reform that began with Solon in the early sixth century, and that continued with the tyrant Pisistratus and Cleisthenes, culminated with Pericles in the fifth-century.[70] These developments ingrained the democratic spirit into the hearts and minds of the Athenian people—which seems to have been inspired by and coupled with the general belief that through the pursuit of *techné* the human mind was capable of attaining some control over the contingencies of life and perhaps even some degree of mastery over the natural world. As Dodds writes, "… the fifth-century faith in progress may be seen in the new importance attached to the concept of *techné*—that is to say, the systematic application of intelligence to any field of human activity. This was happening and it was yielding results. Thucydides makes his Corinthian convoy warn the conservative Spartans that 'in politics as in any *techné*, the latest inventions always have the advantage'." (Dodds 1973, p.11) [71]

This optimism, as well as the enormous wealth the Athenians accrued from its 'allies' in the Delian League, made Athens a winning place of social, political and scientific innovation as well as an environment where a critical attitude towards traditional beliefs and practices was tolerated to some degree. As a result of this teachers like Protagoras and Gorgias came to Athens to give lessons in a wide range of areas—there were now a great many things to teach and money to be made doing it. Collectively these itinerant teachers were known as the Sophists I referred to in Chapter Two. And although they did advance the Greek understanding of a number of subjects including rhetoric, astronomy, biology, and physics, the greater Athenian populace viewed them with some suspicion. While the sophists did teach the art of rhetoric and argumentation

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69 Scholars such as Donald Kagan have drawn clear comparisons to the rise of American hegemony in the post World War Two era.
70 See Pomeroy 2004, V & VI.
71 See Thucydides I.71.3.

that was so valuable within the democratic Athenian political milieu, they took money for their teaching and employed a range of new and often confusing terminology. And, more often than not, they were foreigners and associated almost exclusively with the upper classes. Perhaps more troubling for the larger Athenian polis was the fact that the Sophists generally took an ambivalent stance towards traditional religion—a position which was viewed by many as a threat to the cultural and ethical stability the old beliefs were thought to maintain. Thus while the Sophists held an important place in the intellectual and political world of late 5th century Athens, they were generally viewed with some distrust and were often openly mocked by the community at large. This derisive attitude is probably best displayed in Aristophanes' *The Clouds*, in which the character of Socrates is portrayed as the rhetorician and physicist—the prototypical sophist. However, as almost any scholar or admirer of his will emphatically plead (Plato first among them) Socrates the man was no sophist.

Socrates did have a number of adherents who, for the most part, were young aspiring men from the upper classes—men like Critias, Xenophon, Plato and the infamous Meno and Alcibiades. But while the fact that he attracted these promising young men to him may have made Socrates seem like a Sophist, he did not refer to them as students, he did not hold formal classes, and he took no money from them. Additionally, Socrates was a citizen of Athens and did not teach the rhetoric that was the bread and butter of the Sophists. He also had a mystical and profoundly religious side to his thought—his *daimonion* and mission from 'The Delphic God', both of which I will touch on shortly. And while Socrates' views did reflect the history of Greek thought we have been examining, including the Sophists, his focus was exclusively on understanding moral truth, the nature of goodness, or the unity of the virtues. Indeed, Socrates did not try to instil some set of dogma into those under his influence; rather, his goal was to reveal the moral ignorance of his interlocutors though a discursive activity called *elenchos*, and then to raise awareness and understanding through the dialectic.

In the Platonic dialogues we find Socrates hammering away at definitions of beauty, goodness and justice. Often using irony as a lure or invitation, Socrates engages his interlocutors in a discussion of virtue; and through a process of questioning, he shows

how the assumptions or pretensions of the people with whom he speaks gets in the way of a clear understanding of truth. Socrates, finally, is not interested in the parallel rhetorical argumentation or debate taught by the Sophists; rather, he is concerned with a kind of collaborative communication that works towards revealing truth and goodness. However, while our view of Socrates may reveal his methods and motives to be quite different from those of the Sophists, it should not be difficult to see why the average Athenian may well have had difficulty discerning the difference between them. But Socrates' relationship to Athens goes much deeper than his penchant for revealing the moral ignorance of those he encountered in the Agora. Indeed, the person of Socrates seems to stand at the intersection of the many anxieties felt by the Athenian polis as the Golden Age of Athens crumbled in the wake of the Peloponnesian War.

Athens' domination and increasingly harsh and self-serving treatment of its neighbouring states inevitably led to conflict. And between 431-404 B.C. a bloody and protracted war was fought between Athens and Sparta. Following the war the victorious Spartans installed an oligarchy of thirty men to preside over Athens. One of the central figures of the Oligarchy was a man named Critias—the uncle of Plato and one of the acolytes of Socrates (many of the young men associated with this oligarchy were at one time or another associated with Socrates). In this environment Socrates, now late in life, was no longer viewed as the harmless dishevelled eccentric wandering around the Agora followed by a group of lazy young aristocrats. He became, suddenly, the mentor of a subversive group of young men who wished to destroy the democracy.

The Athenian democracy was restored in 404 after a brief but bloody period of civil war; and Socrates was arrested on nominal charges of impiety and corrupting the youth of Athens. However, his relationship to the Thirty via his association with Critias and others must have played more than a minor role in his trial and subsequent death. His combative and often inflammatory comments at his trial could not have helped either. Because of his unusual religious views, his apparent association with the Sophists, his connection to the Oligarchs[72] and other problematic figures like Alcibiades, we can see how Socrates stands at the intersection of the Athenian unease with regard to Sophistic

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72 In Plato's Seventh Letter he offers harsh criticism of The Thirty.

education, the decay of the old beliefs and religion, and the painful recognition of the fragility of their democracy and empire.

Athenian culture began to reassert itself as the fourth century progressed. However, the war did alter Athenian identity and morals, as well as the faith in *techné* and progress in a significant way.[73] The democracy had become the driving force of the empire, but the feverish drive to expand and acquire—to progress—had both fuelled and been driven by a political environment in which right was increasingly equated with the ability to persuade and where justice became synonymous with the will of the stronger. Like those young democrats, Polus and Callicles, the democracy itself became increasingly tyrannical and this ultimately led to its downfall.[74]

There is perhaps no better account of the radical moral shift Athens was undergoing in this period than the one we find in Thucydides. Here the great optimism and civic pride of the Periclean funeral oration is immediately followed by Thucydides' account of the plague and the moral decay into which Athens fell: "No fear of god or law of man had restraining influence. As for the gods, it seemed to be the same thing whether one worshipped them or not, when one saw the good and the bad dying indiscriminately. As for offences against human law, no one expected to live long enough to be brought to trial and punished." (*Thucydides II, 53*) Here the old faith in the ability of the democracy to maintain stability between the individual and the *demos* can be seen coming under serious strain. And furthermore, as Caizzi puts it, "…the collision between interest and justice (where justice signifies the principle of resolving conflicts without recourse to violence) is revealed most harshly in Athens' external politics. …[A]nd still more clearly [in] the famous declaration of the Athenian ambassadors to the people of Melos… . Instead, they hold that justice holds only between equals (i.e., between citizens or a single group) but not where the balance of power is unequal, as in foreign affairs. In this case, what applies in Hesiod's fable about the hawk and the nightingale (*Works and Days 202*): the one who is strongest wins." (Caizzi in Long 1999, p.323) Thinking back again to Polus and Callicles, this last phrase should sound quite familiar by now.

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73 See Dodds 1973, p.13.
74 I simplify greatly. See Kagan 1975, section XI.

Plato, Revelation and The Irrational

Plato was clearly influenced by the dramatic changes that Athenian culture was undergoing in the 5th century. Indeed, the magnitude and causes of the defeat of Athens must have made a huge impression on the young Plato who was twenty-four at the time: He watched his beloved city crumble beneath the effects of its own unchecked desires. He saw Athens expand beyond its sustainable limits and engage in arrogant and poorly planned military action against its neighbouring states; as Athens strove to gain power over others, it weakened itself at home. And after the war Plato saw his city put Socrates to death—the man whom, for Plato, was Athens' wisest and most pious citizen. In brief, Plato witnessed first hand what happens when a city loses itself to *Eros*.

But Plato was aware of another problematic aspect of his Athenian society as well. As we have already considered, the Greek Enlightenment was critical of the religious beliefs passed down from Homer and Hesiod; and figures like Xenophanes and Heraclitus attempted to refute or replace the series of inconsistent ideas of self and soul that the Classical Age had inherited. The thinkers of the Enlightenment saw this 'Inherited Conglomerate'[75] of religious and superstitious beliefs as incoherent, irrational, and ultimately dangerous for Greek society; and they attempted to replace it with reasoned accounts of natural phenomena and rationally constructed civic laws.[76] However, due to the absence of universal education, there was an intellectual gap between the ideas of the Enlightenment—which were reserved for a special few—and the beliefs of the many.

During the Peloponnesian war, cracks began to emerge in the relatively reasoned Periclean social fabric and the old superstitions and beliefs began to re-emerge. Increasingly, the intellectuals withdrew from public prominence. Indeed, they were often persecuted for heresy or corrupting the youth as the trial and self-execution of Socrates

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75 This term was put forward by Gilbert Murray and adopted by E.R. Dodds. Dodds writes, "The geological metaphor is apt, for religious growth is geological: its principle is, on the whole and with exceptions, that of agglomeration, not substitution. See Dodds 1968, p.179.
76 Among other things, Xenophanes attacked the morals of Homer and Hesiod and discredited the practice of omen reading, while Heraclites mocked the concept of ritual catharsis and questioned the value of burial rites.

will attest.[77] The polis was left to fend for itself amongst the growing number of foreign religious cults that began to flourish at the beginning of the Peloponnesian war.[78] This environment would likely have been just as irrational, but far more relativistic than in the pre-war days when the customs and beliefs of the 'Inherited Conglomerate' were, to some degree at least, collectively shared. But while this environment allowed sophists like Protagoras, Gorgias and Thrasymachus to thrive, there were those intellectuals descended from the rationalist Enlightenment tradition—most famously Plato, and later Aristotle—who did not completely break their ties with the polis.

Although it is possible that Plato's project was to attempt to stabilise the intellectual and political environment of post-war Athens and perhaps to introduce a counter-reformation, questions arise regarding his relationship to the irrational elements of human behaviour and psychology. Dodds asks the following: "First, what importance did Plato himself attach to non-rational factors in human behaviour, and how did he interpret them? Secondly, what concessions was he prepared to make to the irrationalism of popular belief for the sake of stabilising the Conglomerate?" (Dodds p.207) Plato's counter to the irrationalism of his day was not to simply reject it, but rather to give rational thought a 'metaphysical extension.' Indeed, most scholars seem to agree that, in addition to Socrates and the Greek Enlightenment, both the Pythagoreans of Western Greece and the Eleatics played a significant role in moulding Platonic thought.[79] This abstract rationalism may have inspired Plato to add, as Dodds calls it, a 'transcendental psychology' to the Socratic method—to mix the rational empiricism he inherited from the Enlightenment with the mathematical, logical and mystical elements of the Eleatics and quasi-shamanistic Pythagorean number cults. And this has prompted Dodds and other scholars to suggest that Plato's greatest creative achievement lies the melding of revelation with rational argument.[80]

Through these associations we may also begin to consider Plato's connection to the old Orphic tradition as well as to the mysticism of the ancient River Valley Civilizations, which some scholars see as the precursors to the Pythagoreans and the

77 See Bloom, p. 307-311
78 Dodds 1968, p.192-193
79 ibid, p. 209
80 ibid, Ch VII

Eleatics.[81] Furthermore, unlike many of the thinkers of the Enlightenment, Plato clearly recognises the value of *muthos*. Rather than abandoning Homer and Hesiod, Plato seeks to rework them in order to better suit the needs of his times—Socrates becomes the new philosophical hero and his words and deeds often hearken back to those of the great heroes Achilles and more often, Odysseus.[82] Indeed, Plato constructs his own *muthoi* in order to humanise or politicise his philosophical ideas so that they might be more widely understood, and perhaps, more deeply felt. But Plato's use of *muthos* and his apparent mysticism need not be understood in purely practical terms—that is, as quasi-rhetorical devices (or as Dodds terms it, "concessions") employed to flatter or 'bring along' those who may not be intellectually equipped for dialectic. There is every reason to believe that Plato and Socrates were believers in extra-rational or even supernatural forces that stood over or permeated human existence. As McPherran points out, "In Socrates we find what might be called a species of theist who believes that there *are* gods, but that our understanding of their nature and relation to us is extremely limited." (McPherran 1996, p.71) And it should also be said that Socrates' gods, unlike their Homeric and Hesiodic counterparts, are entirely moral and good.

In Plato's *Apology* Socrates claims that his philosophizing is a divine ordinance from the Delphic Oracle that commands him to push his fellow citizens towards moral knowledge and a good life. However, the Socratic 'religion' or mysticism is not one based in blind acceptance of belief—the divine signals Socrates receives from his *diamonion*, and the extra-rational revelations of goodness he experiences must be subject to rational investigation in order for them to become knowledge and so that belief may be founded on truth. Again, McPherran puts it well, "Insofar as this [(our virtuous happiness)] is likely to be a matter of concern to the gods, this constructive aspect of pious philosophical activity [(the justification of our beliefs through *elenchos*)] demands that we put our faith only in those beliefs we have rigorously tested *via* the *elenchos*." (McPherran 1996, p. 80-81) Thus, for Plato, the irrational drives and desires that permeate our physical and psychological existence must be subject to constant rational

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81 For more on the relationship between the relationship between the Pythagoreans and the Orphic cults, see Kirk, Raven Schofield 2006, p, 220-222.
82 For example, Socrates' entrance into the home of Callias in the *Protagoras* contains many clear references to Odysseus' encounter with the dead in Book XI of the Odyssey.

critique so that they do not spiritually dominate us and so that they may be directed towards what is good. We might say, then, that there is a sense in which Plato sees knowledge of the divine or extra-rational (The Good, The Beautiful) as the reason for philosophy, just as *Eros* is the force that drives it. But rational philosophical activity such as *elenchos* and dialectic is all-important in order to understand ourselves and our most profound experiences; to create beliefs and a world-view that is founded on truth; and to properly direct our desires towards virtue, happiness and what is truly good. In its healthiest state then, for Plato, the relationship between intellect, desire and revelation is circular, reciprocal, rationally organised and spiritually unified.

Plato is often thought of as a pure rationalist in the sense that his philosophy is understood as being ultimately concerned with abstract notions of Forms and mathematical truth that have little bearing on worldly existence and actual experience. But while the abstract or technical nature of Platonic thought is certainly a key element to consider in understanding Plato, we should be careful not to focus exclusively on the purely analytical or 'meta-mathematical' aspects of his work. In doing so we risk missing the equally important poetic, psychological, and revelatory elements of his thought, which in many ways bring his philosophy—this divine concern with The Good—'down to earth'. I suggest that Plato's understanding of philosophy and reason (*logos* or the kind of account of the world and ourselves he wants us to consider) is incredibly broad; that it goes beyond the reductive scientific or technical notions of reason we take for granted today. Plato recognises the irrational drives of man and the unstable nature of politics and society, but he also believes that mankind is capable of holding itself to a higher standard and is prepared to point the direction in a number of ways. He is a master of *muthos* and *logos*; and his entire concept of knowledge and being—his cosmology, rationalism and mythology—may be understood as intertwined elements of a quasi-religious pursuit that dialectically structures the irrational: the erotic drive is rationally directed towards knowledge of the pure, transcendental and extra-rational beauty of the Forms and 'The Good'; the true and proper object of *Eros* is knowledge and the revelation of goodness that comes with it. Thus, for Plato, the true, just and pious way for an individual to

navigate through the irrationality and contradictions inherent in day to day existence is through philosophy—the nature of which, for him, is thoroughly dialectical.

Plato's Ontology, Cosmology and Dialectic

> *The Power of the dialectic [makes] the hypotheses not beginnings but really hypotheses—that is, stepping stones and spring boards—in order to reach what is free from hypotheses at the beginning of the whole. When it has grasped this, argument now depends on that which depends on this beginning and in such fashion goes back down again to an end; making no use of anything sensed in any way, but using forms themselves, going through forms to forms, it ends in forms.* (*Republic*, 511b-c)

We have now considered in some detail both the political and intellectual environment in which Plato found himself. But before we move on to examine the political and existential aspects of the *Republic* we may do well to look at Plato's ontological and epistemological concepts more closely. Thinking back to Chapter One where I examined the cosmology of the Ionian *phusiologoi* and their rather decisive departure from the realm of *muthos*, it seems appropriate to begin this section with a brief look at Plato's rather mythical cosmology.

In the *Timaeus* Plato gives a spiritual dimension to the intertwined ontological and epistemological themes he raises in books VI and VII of the *Republic.* Here the concepts of knowing and being that Plato presents in the *Republic*—the idea of the Forms, the Divided Line and the Good—are developed into a kind of spiritual and cosmological myth/theory (an extension, perhaps, of the *Republic's Myth of Er*). And although Plato adds a great deal of quasi-mythical material to the *Timaeus* that is not found in the *Republic*, it is helpful to consider this later dialogue because Plato's conception of *being* and *becoming* is stated here much more explicitly. The *Timaeus* presents the Platonic universe as the creation of a divine Craftsman (*Demiurgos*) who is rational and beneficent and who bases his creation on a perfect eternal model. By imposing mathematical order onto chaos for the good of all, the Craftsman constructs the world to

be as perfect as nature permits—the beauty of the universe is the model for rational souls to emulate (28-29). And here Plato posits the now familiar ontological distinction between *what is always becoming and never is* (*becoming*) and *what always is and never becomes* (*being*). Not surprisingly, the former refers to the changing empirical world of sense and image, while the latter addresses the realm of true and eternal ideas (the Forms). In terms of epistemology, the world of *becoming* is equated with opinion or belief formed in response to sense perception, while the realm of *being* is approached through rational thought and intellection. And here again, Plato offers two categories— *true knowledge* and *true opinion* (37a-c)—that allow him to distinguish between the knowable and the speculative.[83] For Plato, true knowledge can only be derived from mathematics and dialectical inquiry into the Forms. The closest approximation to this is true opinion, which involves a set of judgments and speculations about the empirical realm based on knowledge of the Forms. In this way the classic ontological distinction between *being* and *becoming*, as well as the epistemological distinction between *knowledge* and *opinion*, establishes the framework for the entire Platonic cosmology, including the persuasive effects of the *Intellect* (Reason) on *Necessity* (Nature): Intellect pushes Necessity to approach perfection, but resistance by Necessity limits the degree of perfection the created world can attain. And although Plato makes no explicit connection here, it seems possible that the Intellect/Necessity relationship may be a development on the *Republic's* concept of the transcendent and immutable Good and its relationship to the changing and corruptible world of *becoming*. The *Timaeus* is an account of nature that is as teleological as it is theological. Indeed, Plato is not concerned here with making an account of nature as he found it through his senses. Rather, he attempts to explain the mythical Craftsman's ways to man and to demonstrate the relationship between the dialectic, the Forms, mathematics, and the Intellect through cosmological story telling. He offers a "likely account" (*Timaeus* 29d) of the nature and meaning of the universe— this is a mythical argument, a 'true opinion' founded on the immutable celestial movement of the heavenly spheres and the true perfection of the triangle as the divine form on which all matter is based.

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83 The true knowledge/true opinion distinction is also taken up in the *Theaetetus* and elsewhere.

At first glance Plato's cosmology may seem even more bizarre or problematic than Thales water *archê* or the rational, mystical, or quasi-religious models of Being put forward by Anaximander, Xenophanes and Pythagoras. However, a more comprehensive look at Plato's conception of Being and knowledge reveals it to contain a highly practical response to the serious problems of intelligibility, relativism, and morality we confronted with Parmenides, Heraclitus and the Sophists. As we considered in the first two chapters, Plato is not satisfied with accounts of the world that describe things in terms of physical attributes or through the purely material theorizing one sees with Democritus and the pluralists. And as much as Plato attempts to refute the pure relativism of Heraclitus and Protagoras by pointing towards some notion of Truth, he also cannot completely embrace Parmenides language crushing logical monism if he is to engage in discursive activity like the *elenchos* and dialectic. In the *Gorgias* and *Protagoras*, we saw Socrates searching to reveal to his interlocutors those qualities that truly unify or transcend various instantiations of things—especially with regard to virtue. As I presented things, Socrates seems to be asking us to consider whether or not the ethically fractured world-view of the Sophists is both rationally and spiritually tenable; his search for understanding of 'the thing itself' is a consistent theme throughout the dialogues. By continually asking variations on the 'what-is-it' question (*ti esti*)—What is rhetoric? What do you teach? Who are you? What is justice? Socrates presses his interlocutors to properly define themselves and the subject of their thought, and in doing so he strives to create the conditions that allow for the thing itself, or the Form, to begin to be revealed *in* the soul.

In Plato's *Meno*, for example, Socrates is asked if virtue or excellence (*arête*) can be taught but refuses to answer the question (70a-71c). This is because, for Plato, teachability is a possible attribute of virtue that cannot be properly discussed until virtue itself has been defined. Socrates then asks Meno, "What is virtue itself?" and Meno lists off a series of examples of virtue (71e). However, this is not sufficient for Socrates. He wants to know what all these particular instantiations of virtue have in common—what allows them to be known as virtue. For Plato, it is this examination and understanding of things in themselves that may allow us to avoid the relativistic pitfalls of sophistic rhetoric, to ground our practical decision-making in some kind of commensurability or

truth (or at least true opinion), and thereby to focus the irrational aspects of our existence (desire, emotion and our attraction to pleasure) towards what is truly good.

Putting Plato's *muthos* aside for the moment, we may at this point consider the raw epistemic and ontological schema on which Plato seems to base his dialogue and poetry. For Plato, the Forms are something like blueprints of intelligible reality[84]—they are perfect in and of themselves because they are unchanging and true; they are (in theory at least) directly intelligible to the mind, but only indirectly knowable through empirical representation. For example, for Plato, the Form of Right Triangle is an eternal and pure idea; it is exactly the same whenever it is considered and by whomever comes to consider it. And it is thanks to the intelligibility conferred upon us by the Form of Right Triangle that the drawing on the chalkboard, the image on the screen, and so on, may be understood as a right triangle. Plato does not seem to think that sensible images of triangles or spheres are true and real objects in themselves. Rather he sees them as participating in the Form of 'triangle-ness' or 'sphere-ness'—the higher the quality of the representation, the more fully they participate in the form and thus he more intelligible and true they are. Thus a mathematical idea or Form need not even be represented in the empirical world to be knowable and true. For example, irrational numbers like the square root of 2—unlike whole numbers such as 3—have no clear or immediate instantiation in the physical world but we can still make true statements about them. Additionally, in the *Phaedo*, Plato has Socrates employ the concept of equality to demonstrate how the human mind must invoke ideas of perfection in order to carry out evaluations such as measuring the length of sticks. And he suggests that because nothing can be perfectly equal in the realm of empirical experience, the fact that this perfect Form of Equality is intelligible to us is proof that higher knowledge comes to us *a priori*. This intuition is central to Plato's concept of 'recollection' and reincarnation. Indeed, Socrates argues on the day of his death that all knowledge is but recollection of eternal truths that have always been and because we have *a priori* access to this knowledge our souls too must be eternal.

What ever we make of this last conclusion, we shouldn't have too much difficulty

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84 "The work of the creator, whenever he looks to the unchangeable and fashions the form and nature of his work after an unchangeable pattern, must necessarily be made fair and perfect...." (Timaeus 28)

seeing why Plato sees mathematic and geometrical knowledge as representative of the realm of *being*. Indeed they are unchanging and completely intelligible; they provide, for Plato at least, the necessary proof that stable true knowledge is attainable. In a technical sense then, mathematics sets the epistemological standard on which the Platonic dialectic rests. Indeed, the dialectical method of investigation initiated by the Socratic 'what-is-it' question finds a seemingly irrefutable precedent of truth in mathematical and geometrical concepts like the odd and even numbers, equality, and the triangle—mathematics is the perfect entry point for dialectic. But why should we think these arithmetical 'Forms' should have any real bearing in terms of human values? After all, in the *Meno* Socrates finally seems to fail to define virtue itself. And in all of the dialogues a true account of ethical knowledge—the Form of virtue or The Good—is constantly pursued but never clearly articulated. And so while Plato clearly seeks to transcend the true but value-limited knowledge that mathematics provides, these implied ethical truths or Forms are never as neatly drawn for us as their mathematical counterparts. What then is this notion of Forms worth in terms of ethics if they are so difficult (or perhaps even impossible) to articulate in natural language?

As we have considered, the intertwined relationship between Platonic epistemology and ontology (presented perhaps most clearly by the Divided Line in the *Republic*) shows mathematical concepts to be eternal and somehow more real than the changing nature of empirical experience; they are in their essence stable, non-historic, and logically true concepts that exist purely in the realm of *being*. Thus the rather technical process of question and answer that strives towards definitions that are true and therefore immune to critique draws its epistemological authority from the fact that the Socratic what-is-it question (what defines *x* and only *x*)—as it is posed in geometry and arithmetic at least—can be answered definitively and clearly in the abstract but intelligible realm of mathematics. For Plato, the dialectical significance of this is not just that mathematics gives credence to the existence of Truth, but also that the arithmetical aspect of the dialectic process turns the human soul/mind around, from the realm of becoming (change, belief and contingency) to that of being (true knowledge, perfection,

unchanging and eternal truth) and excellence.[85] And in Book II of the *Republic*, for example, we see just such a turn occurring. In Book I of the *Republic*, Socrates encounters Cephalus, Polemarchus, Thrasymachus and Clitophon. Here the discussion remains well within the world of image, superstition and belief—the lowest rung on the Divided Line. And although Socrates refutes their respective positions, his arguments are largely rhetorical in nature and as a result no real knowledge is attained. However, in Books II-IV, Socrates—at the urging of Glaucon and Adeimantus—constructs a 'meta-mathematical' city in order to aid his interlocutors in knowing the Form of Justice. And indeed, Socrates does come to a provisional and quasi–arithmetical definition of justice as a harmonious triangulation of virtues—moderation, spirit, and wisdom. The 'City in Speech' is one of counting, ratio and proportion that attempts to describe political justice as a perfect non-historic mathematical relationship between city and soul. But while we can say that an important part of Plato's dialectical process is this search to know the Forms and truth in this analytical or 'meta-mathematical' sense, this aspect of Platonic thought is not an end in itself. Indeed, this 'meta-mathematical' response to the Socratic question is a 'stepping stone' or 'a spring board' in a larger dialectical process.

All through the dialogue the conversation is subjected to all manner of turns and interruptions. And at the start of book V we are faced with what is perhaps the major turn in the whole dialogue: Eros, present throughout, now moves to the foreground and brings history and change with it. It's no surprise that the introduction of *Eros* into the discussion of the 'City in Speech'—the introduction of the family, the role of women, private property and so on—should change the dialectical nature of the dialogue. It is here that we begin to see the limitations of the purely mathematical vision of justice, city and soul that has been presented up until this point. And we may also begin to consider the place that the 'City in Speech'[86] has within the larger scheme of the *Republic* as a whole—the technical or arithmetical dialectic begins to show itself as an important element within a larger conception of dialectic as a comprehensive philosophical activity.

Generally speaking, the Platonic dialectic seems to be understood as a discursive

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85 For Plato, even the lowly act of counting represents an intellectual move from the world of becoming into the realm of being.

86 For an excellent and concise discussion of the arithmetical nature of the 'City in Speech' see Chapter 1 in Roochnick 2003.

practice in which the arguments of an interlocutor(s) are scrutinized for paradoxes and faulty logic until a true definition or the Form of the subject can be understood. However, this conception may be a bit too technical to provide us with a complete picture of things—especially in light of what I have just discussed in the last section. As we have seen, for Plato, mathematics shows us that the imperfect and changing world of becoming is 'shot through' with a perfection that allows for intelligibility; and the dialectic strives to move us up the line of being and knowing towards knowledge of this perfection: From the realm of becoming (image/imagination⇒ empirical perception/belief/trust) to that of being (mathematics/thought⇒forms/intellection). But as the dialectic approaches the unity of Forms—'The Good' itself—language begins to break down and the journey for truth becomes an increasingly subjective affair for the philosopher. This can be demonstrated, at least partially, when one considers the act of aesthetic evaluation. Any two people may consider and discuss the beauty of a work of art; and they may agree or disagree on what makes a work of art more or less beautiful. But the inter-subjective act of discussing beauty evokes, by the Platonic view at least, the Form of Beauty, which must be 'presenced' in some way or another in the minds of the discussants. And if the discussion is a good one—if the right kinds of critical questions are posed and investigated—both interlocutors will finally be forced to confront and examine their own relationship with Beauty itself. In doing so they will increase their understanding of Beauty and therefore be able to offer truer or more coherent opinions about it. Furthermore, the deeper self-understanding that this process brings about will allow one to take greater intellectual, emotional and spiritual pleasure in the manifold worldly instantiations of Beauty encountered in day-to-day life.

So for Plato, dialectical activity leads to a more comprehensive understanding of those things that lead to a truly good life. At this point we might think back on the *Protagoras* and the *Gorgias* and recall the way in which the discussion of virtue seemed to reveal or presence a connection to goodness and justice in the minds of the interlocutors (and, by extension, the reader). We may also recall that, by the end of both dialogues it seemed very uncertain whether or not the interlocutors would be willing to engage in the next step—namely, the difficult and often painful process of self

examination. For the philosopher, however, dialectical activity and the revelations it brings, difficult and painful though they may be, is in the long term the source of the greatest, truest and most enduring pleasure. And indeed, in the *Republic* we discover that the philosopher is in fact the most erotic creature of all.

For Plato, *Eros* is the force that drives the dialectic and philosophy itself. The philosopher *qua* philosopher desires knowledge—above all else knowledge of the Good––and will suffer all kinds of pain in order to attain it. This becomes increasingly evident in the last books of the *Republic* that are, above all else, poetic and psychological. Here the mathematical city fails under the force of *Eros* and history, and the argument must be revised. As Roochnick puts it, "philosophy is essentially erotic, and this erotic energy would be choked by the tight regulations of books 2-4." (Roochnick 2003, p. 69) Socrates now invokes the muse; and the ideas that have been presented thus far are advanced and seen in a new light—they are humanized and considered with regards to the transient realm of *becoming*. The Divided Line is politicized by the Allegory of the Cave; the mathematical tripartite image of the human soul/city is traded for the mythic image of the hydra, the lion and the human. The unjust regimes are shown as conjoined, historical and psychological entities in their own right; and the *Myth of Er* encapsulates the key themes of the dialogue in *muthos*. Indeed, here Plato turns from his non-temporal philosophical idealism to an approach that is more historic and literary—he produces now a flowing narrative in order to, among other things, account for the psychological development (or degradation, change) of each of the regime/soul types.[87]

Now the thing that becomes curious about the *Republic* is not simply how the themes and concepts introduced into the dialogue evolve—although this is certainly quite brilliant—but also how they refer back to earlier parts of the dialogue and hidden historic and literary references contained within it. Themes are transformed and re-contextualized as the dialogue progresses; they are advanced and reinterpreted in order to best suit the issues at hand. Plato shows again and again that the dialectic must respond to the *kairos,* or the special qualities of the moment. Indeed, the theme of journey and turning around is ever present in the *Republic*. And although the desire of the philosopher is to know the

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87 See Roochnick 2003, p.96-107.

pure Form of the Good, he must 'return to the cave'—or the Piraeus as the case may be. Once he has known the Good the philosopher must 'turn around' and bring this experience to bear on the everyday matters of human life: love, politics, friendship and so on. The true master of dialectic, it seems, must be able to navigate up and down the chain of knowing and being. True knowledge must be 'brought down' from the pure world of being and applied to the irrational and contingent world of becoming in the form of myth, poetry, true opinion, and, above all else, dialogue. And because our world is always in flux it would seem that the particulars of our relationship to truth are in a constant state of change, this must be a recurring process. Platonic dialectic, then, seeks to span the entire range of being and knowing: from the pure and unchanging rational realm of mathematics, and the qualitative and revelatory realm of the Forms, to the irrational and changing world of belief and image. This is the intellectual *process* that Plato calls philosophy. For Plato, it is just this ability to engage in the dialectic that allows the philosopher to know the abstract non-historic realm of the Forms and mathematics as well as to engage in psychology and poetry in the empirical and historical world of *becoming*.

Platonic dialogue embraces *both* the reality of Truth and the contingencies and flux of day-to-day existence. It is the dialectic that allows the philosopher to come to know the world in the broadest and truest sense possible, and to organize himself intellectually, spiritually and erotically within that world. The dialectic then is not only a technical or 'meta-mathematical' method of inquiry, it is also poetic and psychological—it includes and accounts for the rational, irrational, and extra-rational elements of *being* and *becoming*. Indeed, there is a strong sense in which Plato's dialectic attempts to create an isthmus of communication between the extremes of *being* and *becoming*—between the seemingly irreconcilable ontological positions of Heraclitus and Parmenides and the dualistic elements of the Presocratic framework. Thus I suggest that the mathematical or technical approach to Plato's dialectic is not incorrect, but rather incomplete when taken on its own. The very act of dialectical contemplation, Plato believes, can improve the life we live in the changing empirical realm of *becoming*; it is the activity one engages in if one lives the examined life. And so, perhaps, the dialectic might be better understood, in

a general sense at least, as an existential stance; and dialogues like the *Republic* can be seen as a pedagogical tools that attempt to teach us to think dialectically and ethically for ourselves. Perhaps this is why Plato seems to be so deliberately obscure in his own descriptions of the dialectic and the Good it seeks—he seems to want us to come to our own understanding of it. Just as Socrates baits his young interlocutors to think independently, so Plato seems to ask the same of us. This is why purely analytical interpretations of the *Republic* fall short—Plato seems to be demanding that we turn around and engage in the dialectic for ourselves in order to deal with the fundamental ethical problems he poses.

The 'City in Speech' presented in the *Republic* is Socrates' attempt to forge a dialectical steppingstone towards the Form of Justice. But once realized through the 'meta-mathematical' dialectical process of Books II-V, we find that the mathematical city cannot be manifested in the world of becoming—nor would we want it to be. Rather, it can only serve as a part of a process through which our intellect might begin to attempt to represent and take part in the Form of Justice from our place in the world of *becoming*. It seems, however, that some modern thinkers—those who insist that philosophy must be a purely technical discipline—tend to throw out the non–arithmetical aspects of the *Republic*. Some critics seem to ignore Books VIII-X almost completely, which leaves them with only the meta-mathematical model of the 'City in Speech' and the 'philosophical books' to consider. By throwing off the non-rational aspects of the dialogue, these critics are left with a dialectically incomplete view of the text: by rejecting the mythological, erotic and psychological elements of the *Republic* as being perhaps too unscientific, they are forced to regard the work as a static document and as a result, they miss the entire point of the dialogue. One might say they are guilty of succumbing to the intellectual gravity that Socrates himself warns us of. Indeed, the key role self-examination plays in the dialogues seems difficult to recognise in a culture like ours that prizes some notion of scientific, technical or 'objective' knowledge over the 'merely subjective'.

In the *muthos* of the *Timaeus*, Plato claims that through realigning the motions of our souls with those of the universe at large we may achieve our goal of living virtuously

and happily—it is Plato's grand hymn to the Universe. The *Republic* is Plato's call to the city and the individual to strive towards a higher ideal. He claims that through education and self-reflection we may better organize our collective and individual desires, and that in doing so we may achieve knowledge of justice and perhaps even catch a glimpse of The Good. For Plato, a good education begins with learning how to ask the difficult and sometimes painful questions about our selves and our society; it involves a self-active and inter-subjective process of dialectical thought that obliges the individual to engage with existence authentically and autonomously. And indeed, this is precisely what dialogues like the *Republic* prompt us to do.

Power, Knowledge, Justice

Plato sets all of his dialogues with great care—everything in the *Republic* is significant, nothing is wasted. And like all of the dialogues, the first scene of the *Republic* is of great importance. In this opening scene Plato subtly introduces many of the principal themes that will be developed later in the dialogue through sustained dialectical inquiry. First, however, he invites and engages the imagination by what appears to be pleasant and playful storytelling.

Socrates opens the dialogue with the phrase, "I went *down* to the Piraeus yesterday…" and quite literally sets the discourse in motion. An up and down analogy permeates the *Republic* and, broadly speaking, the whole dialogue can be seen as one long voyage up from the city towards the Good and back down again. There is a great deal of movement up and down, not only in terms of the dialogue as a whole, but also with regards to the characters themselves.

Scholars suggest that the dialogue is set during the peace of Nicias (circa 420) in the Piraeus, the port of Athens. Located some distance from the city centre, the Piraeus is at once a part of the city and separate from it. It is significant that the dialogue is located in the Piraeus because the most violent and bloody opposition to the Tyranny of the Thirty took place here. The historical Polemarchus died in the Piraeus fighting the tyranny; and in the *Republic* his character represents the archetype of the democratic man. With the introduction of Polemarchus, the Platonic isomorphism between city and

man is introduced and a major issue has been suggested concerning the value of democracy. Understood in context, Plato seems to be inviting us to ask if democracy is worth giving one's life for.

Socrates goes down to the Piraeus with the young Glaucon to attend a festival in honour of a new goddess. Like every seaport, the Piraeus is a cosmopolitan environment––a place of cultural diversity and innovation. In setting the dialogue Plato has already addressed two themes that are very relevant to modern life. Indeed, the concepts of democracy and diversity—or multiculturalism—have taken on almost religious proportions in modern Western political discourse. But they are terms that have become increasingly vague in their definition and problematic in their application. Still, the words democracy and diversity are clung to as tenets central to liberal society and critique is often met with a defensive wall of blind disapprobation.

The Piraeus was the centre of diversity and democratic life in 5th century Athens and Socrates the philosopher has gone *down* to its level. On their way back *up* to the city, Socrates and Glaucon are met by Polemarchus and his friends. They playfully coerce Socrates into accompanying them back to Cephalus' house for dinner—"prove stronger than us or come with us," they command. Socrates doesn't seem interested by the 'invitation'—he wants to go home—and it is Glaucon, not Socrates, that makes the decision to stay.[88] A vote is taken and it is decided that they will spend the evening in the Piraeus. This is the first of many 'dialectical turns' and interruptions that take place in the *Republic*. Like the philosopher who must return to the cave, so too does the dialogue demand that we too 'turn around', stop, or take a step back in order to re-examine where we've been and raise new questions—the dialectical process, it seems, is as recursive as it is progressive.

The appearance of this group of anonymous young men who collapse into a voting democracy should not be overlooked (328b-331d). Although Polemarchus' efforts to get Socrates to come with him are not literally forceful, the concept of force as a central political entity makes its entrance here. Questions arise: Is it incumbent upon a regime to exert force on the polis? Is law simply the application of force over the

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88 This might be seen as implying that in an inferior state, inferior men make the decisions.

citizens? Must citizens be threatened with punishment in order for a city to function effectively? How much force is too much? How does a city deal with a forceful, energetic youth like Polemarchus himself? And perhaps more importantly, this first encounter also introduces the distinction between knowledge and power, a basic theme of the dialogue. Indeed, the one philosopher—the man with real political knowledge—becomes the subject of the many as they try to drag him off. The interaction between force and persuasion is introduced when Socrates asks if the group can't be persuaded to let him go. The response comes: "How can you persuade us if we won't listen?" And this introduces yet another theme, namely, the influence the philosopher might or might not have on the non-philosophical *demos*.

Plato, it seems, does not view the word 'democracy' as synonymous with freedom and justice; nor does he understand the concept of democracy as some kind of good in itself, as we often do in the modern era. Rather, he sees it as a power structure that is subject to corruption and decay—a political regime that should be subject to critique like any other. As the opening scene of the *Republic* implies, Plato views democracy as a potentially coercive regime where the voice of the many may dictate the fate of the few; where justice and good are not necessarily realised through reason and knowledge, but rather are instrumental terms used within a political regime where morality can quickly become an obligation of force. Socrates will address this instrumental view of justice shortly in his discussion with Thrasymachus; and towards the end of this chapter we will consider Socrates rather curious relationship to democracy in more detail. In the meantime, however, we should be considering the possible criteria for justice: Must justice be understood as that which best serves the regime in power? Must knowledge and philosophy be the servants of politics? Or can justice and knowledge be held to a higher and more objective standard? At this early point in the dialogue it seems that the best possible scenario for the philosopher is compromise mixed with acquiescence—a kind of social contract.

Socrates' first real interlocutor in the *Republic* is Cephalus, the elderly father of Polemarchus. Cephalus seems to be a very friendly fellow indeed—he greets Socrates warmly and tells him how happy he is to see him and so on. Socrates responds to this

apparent kindness with a rather rude question that Cephalus, to his credit, seems to take in stride. Socrates asks, in effect, "Cephalus, what's it like to be old?" Perhaps Plato is trying to give us some insight in to Socrates' character. More likely this is a comment on the nature of philosophical inquiry in general. Clearly, Plato and Socrates see philosophy as an endeavour that contests conventional views of things; that isn't afraid to ask questions that challenge custom and manners; and that doesn't shy away from being uncomfortable or polemical. And indeed, by asking this question Socrates manages to draw out the first thread of his inquiry.

Cephalus responds to Socrates by saying that getting old isn't so bad because he's no longer preoccupied by his sexual drives and desires. As a young man, Eros drove Cephalus to distraction; but now he enjoys the calm of old age and feels that he can live his life honestly. This short exchange between Cephalus and Socrates is symbolically important because it introduces yet another main theme—the organisation of desire. The desire for sex, power, knowledge, and honour play a large role in Socrates' critique of the actual city and the regimes imposed on it, but it will also distinguish the various sorts of souls in the ideal city and the various degenerate regimes. And, most importantly of all, *Eros* will be the driving force behind the entire dialogue of the *Republic* and the philosopher himself.

Cephalus is a superstitious, ignorant and erotic man, but now that age is stripping him of desire he can begin, if only superficially, to engage in intellectual activity—he even claims he's beginning to enjoy speeches in his old age. In all, Cephalus feels content because he is rich enough to pay his debts and perform the appropriate sacrifices to the gods; he doesn't fear the afterlife because he's wealthy enough to pay retribution for his past transgressions. The definition of justice that Socrates imposes on Cephalus' remarks is the following: justice involves telling the truth, keeping promises and the repayment of debts. Surely poor Cephalus had no idea that he would be asked to supply a definition of justice and must be further shocked when Socrates quickly refutes it.

Socrates refutes this conception of justice by using the example of the borrowed weapon. As Socrates makes clear, it is *not* just to return a borrowed weapon to a friend that has gone mad, regardless of the fact that this breaks both the rule of keeping

promises and repaying debts—the owner of the weapon might, in his madness, kill the borrower. Socrates uses Cephalus' inherent selfishness in his refutation; he drives home the fact that Cephalus' sense of justice and morality is tied to simple self-interest rather than larger social or utilitarian concerns.[89] While Cephalus is certainly a hospitable and agreeable old fellow, he certainly cannot be understood as a just or moral man in any kind of philosophical sense. Tired and a little confused Cephalus takes his leave; this kind of discourse is clearly not to his taste and he goes off to perform sacrifices.[90] And go he must, for the fog of ancient ancestral piety and superstition that Cephalus represents must be dispersed before Socrates can embark on a proper dialectical inquiry into the definition of justice. This is where the *Republic* properly begins and it is here that we are squarely faced with the Socratic question, "What is justice?"

(331d–336a) Polemarchus takes his father's place and revises the definition of justice by appealing to the authority of Simonides. He posits that it is just to give to everyone what is due—a clear reversal of Cephalus' selfishness. Larger social concerns are beginning to make an entrance here; justice begins to be considered not merely as a self-serving concept, but rather as something that has to do with social relationships. However, Polemarchus' argument is refuted by Socrates when he points out that negative due, like retribution or vengeance, does not increase the virtue or goodness of the one who receives it. If we wish to understand justice as having something to do with virtue, excellence, or goodness in general, how can harming enemies be just? For Plato the just man is dedicated to the idea of collective improvement. This proto-utilitarian view understands the just man as a truly social animal that strives for the good of everyone (unlike Socrates' ironic technical hedonism in the *Protagoras*). And indeed, Socrates works for the benefit of all his interlocutors, even those like Thrasymachus, who initially position themselves as antagonists. For Plato, the good that all mankind owes each other, both friends and enemies alike, is education; and although Polemarchus' argument is

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89 If Cephalus was a more aggressive and intelligent character his selfishness might even be tyrannical, as with Thrasymachus.
90 Another theme is raised here concerning the type of person that can become a philosopher. What kinds of people have the intellectual energy—the Eros—to tackle Socrates' what-is-it question? Cephalus is surely not one of them; Glaucon, on the other hand, clearly is.

refuted, the social element on which his position rests is retained, and a connection between justice and intentionality begins to emerge.

Just as Plato has to get rid of the blind appeals to old religion represented by Cephalus, so he must also remove similar blind appeals to authority and encourage clear rational thought in order to create the conditions that allow for inquiry, education and a truly social concept of justice. Before any kind of real dialectical discourse is possible, he must clear out the old tyrannical or self-serving ideas of justice as revenge and punishment, and strive towards a new ideal of justice as recognition of the good that is manifested through positive action directed towards others, including enemies. In doing so Socrates manages to get Polemarchus to begin to think independently (an activity he clearly seems to enjoy) and thus to improve himself. Polemarchus is being educated, he's moving *up*.

Although Socrates succeeds in converting Polemarchus, he now faces another more ferocious opponent—the sophist Thrasymachus now makes his entrance (336b–354b). Likened to an attacking beast, he is the anti social individual and the archetype of the tyrannical man. Thrasymachus takes the position that desire itself is a good thing and that the more it can be gratified, the better or more just one becomes. In a sense, Thrasymachus speaks for the status quo when he conflates the ideas of justice and legality: the reality that Thrasymachus sees around him consists of differing regimes creating laws to suit their needs; and, as a result, his view of justice is more like a description of a state of affairs rather than a true philosophical position. For Thrasymachus, justice *is* the advantage of the stronger and therefore is a relative concept. For him (like Callicles) the political world is a subset of the physical world and is not subject to moral laws; political justice is relative to the desires of the regime in power and can therefore take on different forms depending on the regime. As I have considered, this is a concept of justice that works instrumentally for the stronger—for Thrasymachus, there is no such thing as an absolute or universal conception of justice (with the exception of the very vague and general concept I have outlined above where justice is the advantage of the stronger). Furthermore, Thrasymachus seems to answer the Socratic question in a way that denies the necessary presupposition of asking a question in the first

place, namely, the possibility of a true answer. If there is no objective justice: if the only way any value can become established is through a transient and relative system of belief; and if each type of justice gets its power from rhetoric (by convincing people to believe through force or persuasion) then the very act of asking what it is becomes absurd. And even if one could furnish a response from this position it would simply be synonymous with power.

Socrates attacks Thrasymachus' position in his usual way, by asking questions. Is it just to obey all laws? Thrasymachus responds that it is indeed: If justice is the advantage of the stronger then it would be just to obey every law because the law is made by the stronger. But Socrates points out that rulers or regimes sometimes make mistakes. What if a ruler makes a law that disadvantages the ruler? Thrasymachus has been caught in a contradiction. He has claimed that justice is the advantage of the stronger and that it is just to obey all laws; but he has also agreed that rulers are fallible and may make mistakes that are detrimental to them. Can justice work towards both the advantage and disadvantage of the ruler? Following the terms by which Thrasymachus has laid out his definition it surely cannot.

Clitophon now jumps in uninvited and modifies Thrasymachus' argument, positing that justice is what the stronger *believes* to be in his advantage—a subtle but important change. Positing that justice is what the ruler believes eliminates the contradiction, but shows Clitophon to be even more extreme in his relativism than Thrasymachus—his logic is that of pure tyranny. Even Thrasymachus cannot accept this extreme position. After all, he is a teacher and thus believes in knowledge—he must retain some connection to the concept of truth and negation. Clitophon's position, taken to its logical conclusion, effectively denies the possibility of knowledge. The kind of extreme relativism that Clitophon represents cannot be refuted because the position he takes ultimately denies the possibility of all meaning—language breaks down and discourse becomes impossible. Thrasymachus seems to recognize this and rejects any further help from Clitophon. In the end, Clitophon's position is so extreme that it leads to total solipsism and nihilism. It is simply not interesting and he is silenced for the rest of the dialogue.

In response to Socrates, Thrasymachus moves from his earlier descriptive position to one that is normative—how the ruler or regime ought to be. He now posits the proper ruler as a craftsman or artist (as someone with real knowledge) who applies his craft to his own advantage. But, as Socrates points out, all craftsmen/artists *qua* craftsmen/artists are directed to the betterment of the object of their craft not themselves. Indeed, this is why they are paid—they do not receive compensation directly from the application of their craft. A doctor directs his skill towards the health of his patient, the pilot to the security of his ship and so on. One cannot have it both ways. For Plato, true justice cannot work backwards towards the ruler. Rather, it must always work towards its object, which in the case of politics is the state. Frustrated, Thrasymachus changes his position again. He now claims that injustice is superior to justice—that it is freer, more masterful. Socrates manages to silence Thrasymachus by demonstrating that proper *techné* is interested only in the domain to which it applies; and that the true artist, craftsman or technician would only want to depose those who don't understand the craft—whether it be medicine, music, or politics. But although Thrasymachus has been silenced, he has not been definitively refuted. Some of the arguments used against him were dubious; Socrates himself admits that he still hasn't defined justice; and by challenging the very value of justice, Thrasymachus has, in a sense, restarted the dialogue. The task itself has been redefined and Socrates must now defend the value or the 'goodness' of justice.

But Socrates claims he wants to go home. A great deal has been left undone—the essential question still hasn't been answered and Socrates has beaten Thrasymachus with inferior arguments. Of course all of this is a ploy on Socrates' part to excite the critical faculties of Glaucon and Adeimantus. As representatives of the noble youth of Athens it is their education and ultimately the future of the city that is at stake (357a–367e).

Soul and the 'City in Speech'

If Socrates' strategy was to defeat Thraysmachus with inferior arguments in order to bait Glaucon and Adeimantus, Book II shows how successful his plan was. The sophists have been silenced; superstition and the old religion have quietly departed; self-serving, tyrannical, empirical and instrumental conceptions of justice have been all but refuted;

and blind appeals to authority have been shown the light. The way has been cleared for dialectic and the preceding themes can now be radicalised by the two youths—it is they who will be the key interlocutors with Plato for the rest of the dialogue. Dialectically speaking, the dialogue has moved up from the realm of images and belief and is entering the realm of thought. Up until now the conversation has been largely rhetorical but now the stage has been set for an important epistemological move.

Glaucon takes the lead. He asks Socrates, "Do you really want to persuade us or just seem to persuade us?" Plato here introduces the old distinction: between seeming to be (*becoming*) and *being*. Seeming and being correspond to words and definitions. Sophists like Thrasymachus thrive on ambiguity, they don't define terms. Socrates, however, moves from words to definitions, from symbols to meanings that are held together by logic or *logos* (an account or reason). Socrates has set up the challenge for himself: he has to be able to defend justice even in its most unattractive form.

Glaucon pressures Socrates to prove that justice is good as an end in itself and starts by categorizing three types of good. Glaucon points out that there are things that are good for their own sake—like simple pleasures that bring with them no corresponding pain—; things that are not good in themselves but that may bring good consequences, like money; and finally, a third kind of good that is both good in itself and as an end, like good health. The question is, into which of these categories do we place justice? Glaucon suggests that most people will place it in the second category—as something which brings with it good consequences. He uses the myth of Gyges[91] to illustrate the point that people don't really want to be just; and he suggests that if people have a way to be unjust and get away with it they will do just that. But because the negative aspects of being the victim tend outweigh the pleasure of being the perpetrator—there will always be those who gain the upper hand and the vast majority will live as victims—a social contract is created that limits injustice, even though that is what we all really want. Thus where Thrasymachus says that justice is the advantage of the stronger, Glaucon claims that

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91 The earth opens up, Gyges goes down and sees a bronze horse—this is, perhaps, a dig at Homer; bronze also indicates emotion or appetite. Gyges also moves from a state of naiveté to a morally inferior state and comes back up worse: this is symbolic of bad education that subverts the moral and political order. Invisibility brought on by the ring= subtracting the body to look at the soul. If the telling of the myth were to continue the horrible fate that awaits Gyges would show that he's not really getting away with anything.

justice is the advantage of the weaker. He posits justice as a convention that limits freedom in exchange for security—it's the best we can do when by nature we are unjust. By this view, justice is not a good in itself, but rather it is something with relatively good consequences. The now familiar distinction is drawn here between political law and natural law (*nomos* and *phusis*). This is a distinction that Socrates wants to collapse.

Adeimantus adds a quasi-Machiavellian dimension to Glaucon's position on justice. He posits that justice is not good intrinsically, but only instrumentally for what it gets you. The really cunning individual, he claims, can cultivate the appearance of justice in order to get away with injustice. And if he can generate enough wealth through this deceit, the Gods can be bought, the proper holy rites can be performed, and he can get away with injustice in the after life as well.[92] And inversely, what about the just man who is taken to be unjust? What of the case of the good man, who is punished, beaten, and even killed but who does not deserve it? Isn't a life of injustice, then, better than one of justice? Socrates' task is to show that justice is good independent of all other attributes— that it is good even if it gets what it doesn't deserve.[93] But Socrates claims that attempting to do this on the level of the individual is too difficult. In order to understand the virtue of the man, Socrates suggests expanding the concept of justice to the level of the city; a magnification of the soul to the level of the city will allow us, claims Socrates, to examine justice and determine whether or not it is intrinsically good. Glaucon and Adeimantus agree to this line of inquiry. They construct the basic city—the city of utmost necessity—based upon basic needs and the division of labour required to meet those needs. One man, one job is established as the ideal so that each person will be able to pursue one craft to perfection. But while this city will be just, it will not have any luxuries or 'higher' cultivation; there will be no leisure time left over for this city to develop a culture—high art, fine food, perfumes, and so on. Glaucon, who has a heroic temperament, a disposition that could be dangerous if he goes into political life without true knowledge of justice, claims that people need more than this in order to be happy. Indeed, this city will only satisfy the most fundamental needs and comforts. For Glaucon, this is a city fit only for pigs. It is agreed that in order to satisfy higher desires the city

92 This calls back to Cephalus.
93 This gestures back to the trial and death of Socrates.

will need special foods, trade, commerce, theatre, concubines, music and poetry. And of course, this city will also need doctors because luxuries and excess can make people sick, not just physically but spiritually too—if the city is like the man, disorder in the soul means disorder in the city. Socrates takes up the conversation positing that this 'feverish' city will also need a political infrastructure and a political 'doctor' to care for the soul of the city (372e–376c).

In order to support this luxury, borders will have to be extended—there will be war as well. How, then, is this city to be protected? Socrates suggests that the city is to be ruled by noble warriors. But how do we ensure that these spirited people do not become tyrannical, like Thrasymachus? Even the most virtuous and spirited of souls can become the worst sort of person without a proper education. Here Socrates' employs a rather humorous metaphor by describing the guardians of the city as philosophical dogs. What is between the shepherd and the flock? The dog. But the dog cannot eat the sheep. Indeed, good and well-trained dogs like and protect what they know but they are suspicious and antagonistic towards that which is foreign to them. Likewise, the guardians of the city must know their own kind and be antagonistic towards others; but they must also be antagonistic to change as well. The 'City in Speech' must be immune to the forces of history (becoming); indeed, once the 'City in Speech' is achieved any change is deterioration.

(376c–383c) The guardians will have gymnastics for the body, but they must also be educated in the muses in order to soften the hardness of their watchdog nature and make them harmonious souls. For Plato, however, the educational models provided by Homer and Hesiod are often immoral—neither the wrath of Achilles nor the lies of Odysseus are good ethical models to for the youth of the 'city in speech' to emulate. Plato clearly thinks that the people of Athens have received a bad education from their interpretation of Homer and he has a new ideal that he wants to set above the Homeric hero: the Socratic hero is one of knowledge rather than slaughter. Thus the warrior elite will be subordinated to the philosopher king; force, spirit, virtue and honour will be at the service of knowledge and wisdom—Socrates, it seems, is to be the new Achilles. According to Socrates, the guardians cannot learn form Homer and Hesiod or they risk

becoming tyrannical, thus the old poets must be censored. And in turn, there will be censorship of all art and music by the guardians.

This brings us to another seemingly anti-modern move by Plato: the "Myth of Metals" or the "Noble Lie." How can a lie be noble to someone like Socrates who always looks for the truth? Here utility supersedes all other concerns. How is the fundamental structure of society to be kept intact? How are the people that are trained to work in the three strata of society—basic workers, the guardians, and the rulers—to be kept in their proper positions? The noble lie tells the polis that they are all born in the earth and that in the process of their creation gold, silver or bronze was inserted into their physical and spiritual constitution—thus, every one should be satisfied with their lot (412b–416d). Clearly, Plato does not think that every one is endowed with equal ability to access knowledge; just as he does not believe that by giving the citizens a good education they will necessarily be able to vote for good governments. Plato saw the elite and educated of the reinstated Athenian democracy kill Socrates; he saw the first democracy lose the war and he saw Athens fall into civil war as a result. For Plato, democracy is intrinsically unstable—modern, Enlightenment values have little resonance with him and a Popperian notion of an open society, for Plato, would be tantamount to civic suicide.

While these measures may seem oppressive (and in modern times it is difficult to see them in any other way) it must be remembered that the application of censorship, deception and social stratification are, for Plato, instruments of the greater good, not methods of subjugation applied by one group over another. He wants the modes of culture in his ideal city to be representative of the Form of Justice, not the soul sick Athens of the past. Again, Plato is battling history and he doesn't want the art of the old culture to infect the new one he is trying to create. At this point we should consider too that the meaning of art for the Greeks was, in many ways, quite different from our modern conception of it. Homer and Hesiod were not only the main sources of education in 4th and 5th century Athens, but were also the main source of religion as well. And music was not mere entertainment; rather it was a mysterious and powerful force that could profoundly influence the hearts and minds of men. For the Greeks, art was not some kind of distraction or the luxury commodity it is today. Rather, it drove and defined

the culture; it created the shared mythology that made social cohesion possible—civilization itself depended on it. In this light, and keeping in mind what happened to Athens during the Peloponnesian war, the idea of building a society around tales of violence, revenge and glory seems very self destructive indeed. Plato sees the old literature as anti-social and largely rejects the educational model Athens has derived from it.

Socrates' 'City in Speech' must also avoid the factionalism produced by large disparities in wealth. And as a result, his ruling class is to be an ascetic elite. While they won't fast and starve, the members of this elite will not own private property, they will not have their own families, and they will not be permitted to touch gold and silver. They will live on subsistence wages and will extract only the smallest amount of surplus value possible—the maximum will go back to the workers. From the point of view of economics this is probably the *least* oppressive regime possible. For Plato, the whole point of the 'City in Speech' is not to promote the good of some elite sub set of society; rather, it is the good of the whole that matters. Like an efficient organic unity, each social element must perform its function—its *telos* or purpose—as it corresponds to its place in the soul and the city. This is how the city best participates in the form of justice. The bronze strata will take care of the basic human needs and in turn will be protected by the guardians—the bronze part of the soul is need, appetite, food and sex; and its appropriate virtue is moderation and control. The silver part of the soul is its energy and spirit; and the guardians, in a sense, bring in the best elements of the Spartan regime: community of property, community housing and, above all, the virtue of courage. And the gold element—the ruling class—has true political knowledge. This is the reasoning part of the soul whose virtue is wisdom. For Plato, this very organisation of soul is the provisional definition of justice: a 'meta-mathematical' triangulation of virtues—moderation, spirit, and wisdom—in perfect harmony with each other. And as I'll consider shortly, this triangulation demonstrates a just arrangement of *Eros*, which permeates each part of this proposed tripartite structure—desire for food, sex and material possessions are controlled by desire for honour and virtue, which is, in turn, sublimated by desire for knowledge and wisdom. So the three parts of the soul correspond to the three parts of the city—city and

soul are isomorphic. Justice is, it seems, a combination of the wise the courageous and the moderate; it is made possible by their harmonious interaction. And these three city/soul elements are presented to us in the forms of the three interlocutors: Adeimantus is a very moderate and austere man, and is the ideal of the bronze parts of the soul; Glaucon has the courage, and spiritedness of the guardian and embodies the silver; and Socrates has the reason and wisdom of the gold class.

At the beginning of Book V Socrates claims to have accomplished his task and begins to discuss the various types of unjust regimes. But Polemarchus whispers something to Adeimantus who steps in to arrest Socrates for the second time—a clear recapitulation of the first scene. They now want Socrates to clarify his position on women, the abolition of private property and the family (449a–473c). Up until this point in the dialogue, *Eros* has not been properly addressed. Although desire certainly played a role in the discussion with Cephalus and Thrasymachus, Book II saw it severely hemmed in by the quasi-arithmetical nature of the 'City in Speech'. Socrates' interlocutors sense that there is something incomplete in this tidy, dry and all together mathematical image of state and justice. As was the case following the encounter with Thrasymachus in Book I, the interlocutor's desire for knowledge demands that Socrates continue to push upwards rather than return too quickly to the realm of worldly political matters—later in the dialogue Socrates will discuss the tendency to give in to 'intellectual gravity', or the temptation to turn back too quickly to the empirical realm or that of irrational belief once one has achieved only mathematical or technical knowledge.

There are 'three waves' to the discourse that Socrates gives at the end of Book V, each one more powerful than the one that precedes it. He begins by positing that men and women should get the same education and perform the same functions in the city. Socrates is not, finally, interested in the body but rather the soul and mind; and therefore we can reasonably assume that there will be philosopher Queens in the city as well as Kings. He then continues with the second wave by claiming that the family will be abolished; the guardians will create false lots so that eugenic coupling may occur between the best specimens in the population. In order to attain ideal civic unity, Plato wants to break down the distinction between public good and private good and create a

familial relationship across the city as a whole. In modern liberal society there is a constant unresolved tension between public and private; and although Socrates' solution may not be satisfactory, he does identify this conflict as a basic political problem. In his city the tragic Sophoclean struggle between Antigone and Creon would not be imaginable. Finally, Socrates posits the 'third wave', claiming that a just city is *only* possible with a philosopher as king (473c-487a). Now Glaucon admits that in the light of what he's learned, his earlier comments about justice were foolish. But he questions if this philosopher king is really feasible. Is this kind of a city even possible? Who would allow such radical and revolutionary changes?

Indeed, there is a resistance by the natural and historical world towards the ideal offered by the 'City in Speech'; and Socrates himself admits that such a city could not exist in the empirical world. But according to Socrates, the fact that the good regime cannot be realised may not be a simple indication that there is something wrong with his model, but rather that there is something flawed with the world. Socrates is not suggesting that the city in words he creates with Glaucon and Adeimantus is one in which he want to live. After all, Socrates already has a city in mind that he seems happy with. The 'healthy city' or the 'city of utmost necessity' would suit him just fine. He has no need of the excessive luxuries and power that other men crave. Indeed, it may be a mistake to consider the 'City in Speech' as Plato's attempt to depict the true form of the city; politics and the business of men are a part of the world of becoming and are eternally apart from the world of being. Perhaps, Plato's city is intended to be a *'likely account'* or a *'true opinion'* of what a hypothetical city would be like if it were constructed according to a 'meta-mathematical' Form of justice. But because the desires of man are irrational or 'feverish', and because access to knowledge is not equally distributed among the polis, Socrates is forced to make radical adjustments to accommodate the irrational, desirous and excessive aspects of mankind's nature. All this is necessary so that his feverish city may most effectively participate in the Form of justice—indeed Intellect must yield to Necessity. However, even with the concessions Plato knows that the historical nature of the realm of becoming will not allow such a city to exist in the empirical/historic realm. Later passages like 'the failure of the marriage of

numbers,' 'the ship of state,' and the 'expulsion from the city' see the *Republic* take on a tone that seems darkly ironic. Not only is Socrates' city impossible, so too it seems is any true realization of justice in the political world. But if the 'City in Speech' is simply a thought experiment created by Socrates whose sole purpose is to incite us to consider a political structure that is impossible to realise, then it seems that we have come a very long way for nothing. What is the use of knowing the form of justice if it cannot be implemented in the real world? What good is mathematical certainty if *Eros* is constantly working to undermine it? Fortunately, Plato is not yet finished.

This seemingly impossible final wave has washed us out of the realm of quasi-arithmetic political ideals and into the domain of pure philosophy. In doing so it has provided a dialectical turning point where *Eros*—though present all along as a driving force—now becomes fully engaged in the discussion. And just as the transition from Book I to Book II moved the dialogue up from the world of image and belief to the realm of mathematics, so too the discussion now turns upwards again, towards the realm of philosophy. Until the beginning of book V the construction of the 'City in Speech' enjoyed a relatively unfettered progression; but now, with the introduction of *Eros*, it begins to crumble. Because there is no escaping desire, history and the contingencies of existence, the dialectical process now obliges Socrates to consider the most desirable object of the most perfect erotic activity—respectively, these are knowledge of the Good and philosophy itself.

The Philosopher and the Structure of Reality

In Books VI and VII Plato presents his ontological and epistemological doctrines. Book VI of the *Republic* extends the discussion of why reality does not permit Plato's ideal state to be made manifest in the natural world. Aside from the undesirable reforms that would be required and the intrinsically corrupt nature of human political activity itself, it is now made explicit that, for Plato, the world of space and time is incomplete or flawed. Like the mystics, Plato seems to understand the world of the senses as the veil of Maya— it is illusory, imperfect, uncertain and subject to change. Here for the first time in the

Republic, Socrates discusses the extended realty in which true justice, pure beauty, and truth itself exist out side space and time in the realm of the Forms.

The Divided Line explains the universe on the levels of knowing and being. On the bottom are images—shadows, reflections, and all of the arts. Just as images are not as real as the object that they are images of, so reflections, shadows and creations of images are less real then the objects of sense perception. Plato thinks that when we absorb these images—when we look at a reflection, a shadow, a piece of art, or when we hear poetry––a definite mental activity occurs that corresponds to a state of the soul (knowledge corresponds to a state of being). We imagine the object represented by the painting or the shadow. But this is lowest rung on the ontological/epistemological ladder—this realm of imagination and image is the least real. Moving up are the objects of sense and the empirical world. But this world is also unreliable. For Plato, the empirical world—without philosophy—is one of blind belief; in this sense he agrees with Heraclitus that it is changing, in flux, always *becoming*. Plato, however, is looking for certainty, and he finds it in the realm of soul, mind, and pure thought. As we considered earlier, mathematics moves the mind from mere opinion and belief towards true knowledge and certainty—to the realm of *being* and the Forms. However, mathematics in itself will not do us much good in the erotic world of power and politics. Just as *Eros* destroys the mathematics of the Marriage of Numbers in the 'City in Speech'—and with it and the symmetry of the bronze/silver/gold tripartite and Platonic eugenics—so it may destroy the city and the individual if it cannot be organised effectively.

If this is the case, what end does the philosopher pursue that makes him so special? What kind of knowledge does he possess that sets him apart from the sophists? Socrates claims that the philosopher knows the form of the Good—the true, changeless and timeless form in which all virtue participates. The philosopher engages in the dialectic, the rigorous conversational process that moves, step by step, up from the world of change, flux and becoming and allows him to know eternal realm of true knowledge—first the world of mathematics, then the Forms. But once the philosopher reaches the realm of true knowledge he must continue, reaching upward beyond the point where even

the dialectic takes him in order to know the form of the Good. For Plato and Socrates, it is this that the philosopher desires above all else.

To help us understand this Plato politicizes the Divided line with the Allegory of the Cave. Here the philosopher liberates himself from the shadowy world of images in the cave and begins the arduous journey up through the empirical domain. Finally he comes to understand that it is the sun that allows for the visible world to exist and that this world is vastly more real than the images projected onto the cave wall. Indeed, the sun is the simile for the form of 'The Good'. As we have already considered, Plato is trying to reform all of Greek literature, education and religion: he wants to rework Homer and Hesiod within the context of a new creed of dialectical form worship; and he is happy to conjure up the appropriate mythology, not only for those who are not capable of engaging in dialectical reason, but also because Plato seems to see poetry and myth as an essential part of human communication.

Like the sun, The Good makes reality knowable and being possible; it breaks down relativistic notions of truth and knowledge. But because the form of The Good is fundamentally inexpressible, Plato does not go beyond the sun simile in his explanation of it. Just as we can only glimpse the sun empirically, we can only glimpse The Good dialectically—language cannot fully contain it, but we can sense it both physically and intellectually; and it seems that the final leap from the dialectic to knowledge of The Good can only be made by individual revelation. This is perhaps the high point of the *Republic* and, arguably, the high point of all Platonic philosophy. Indeed, Plato makes it clear that the dialectical journey is incredibly hard—even painful—and therefore requires the greatest amount of *Eros* in perfect organisation.

Socrates proves to the satisfaction of Glaucon and Adeimantus that not until philosophers are kings will a truly just city be possible—desire, spirit and virtue must function in harmony with knowledge, moderation and wisdom. But he has also demonstrated the incompatibility of the 'City in Speech' with the empirical world—because it is impossibly arithmetical, technical and non-historic, and because no regime would want a philosopher to run it. When the philosopher in the Allegory of the Cave comes back into the realm of shadows after experiencing the revelation of The Good

embodied by the sun, he is mocked because he can't find his way around in the darkness even though he is the only man that understands true being. Indeed, philosophers are often thought of as being a corrupting influence on the youth and the religion of the city––in terms of a ruler, most Greeks would prefer to think of Agamemnon. And even if it were agreed that Socrates' just regime should be attempted, how would the philosopher himself be persuaded to come in to the city? It is ironic indeed that the philosopher is the one citizen in the 'just city' that must perform more that one job: the king/philosopher in the ideal city is forced out of necessity to engage in a kind of injustice. Thus Socrates argues finally that the real corrupter of justice is the city itself. Socrates does not deny that the philosopher is a potentially subversive influence on the youth of the city with regards to civic laws and conventional religious piety. However, Socrates claims that in terms of the higher ideals of piety, justice, wisdom and moderation, it is not the philosopher that is the corruptive force but rather Athens, the city, or indeed, civilization itself. For him, the city generates change and innovations; it organizes itself unjustly in order to serve excessive desires; and in doing so it creates all kinds of scepticism, immorality and confusion. Here, perhaps, we may begin to think of Plato as a kind of primitivist who, with the "City in Speech" demonstrates to us the difficulty of attempting to find justice in a regime founded on injustice or fundamentally excessive desires. Indeed, in Socrates' first regime, the one Glaucon calls the city fit "only for pigs," we find a quasi-primitive environment that exists purely in accord with Necessity. This is a city of moderation in which natural justice is allowed free reign, not in the sense of might makes right or survival of the fittest, but rather in a manner by which the needs of the individual and community are enmeshed—a commune of simple and just men and women. On the other hand, the 'feverish city' exceeds Necessity and requires all sorts of artifice and repression in order to replicate the just balance of the first regime.

Furthermore, Plato seems to imply that if the sophists had not been corrupted by the city they might have been potential philosophers. Plato sees them as great souls with bad educations who pander to the status quo and the disorganised *Eros* of the city. But while the philosopher is also a creature of *Eros*, his desire is for knowledge and the Good, not power, fame and unlimited material possessions. Socrates begins the descent from the

realm of the Forms, philosophy and the Good with a psychological discussion of the corrupt regimes. The neglect of education leads to the love of honour rather than knowledge, resulting in a timocratic regime. This, according to Socrates, will lead to a disorganisation of *Eros*, resulting in an oligarchy—where a few men try to accumulate a great many pleasures and property. Pleasure and material possessions will replace honour. This in turn leads to a democracy that will pursue unnecessary desires *en masse*; and finally the tyranny, where the desires of the regime always outstrip the capacity to satisfy them. This final state is certainly the most wretched; the soul is in its most confused and unorganised condition. Each of these degenerate regimes corresponds to a distinct moral state in the individual and Plato clearly represents them in the character of the interlocutors in the dialogue: Glaucon, who is brave and concerned with honour and virtue, is the timocrat; Adeimatus' concern with property shows him to be the oligarch; and as we've seen, Polemarchus and Thrasymachus are the democrat and tyrant respectively. But all of these characters are morally improved as they engage in the dialectic with Socrates. Indeed, Plato shows us how, through an active dialectic education, one might climb up the ladder of knowledge and being and thus achieve a higher moral state—move closer to The Good. He warns against the temptation of turning back to the realm of becoming once we have attained only mathematical knowledge. In order for *techné* to have true meaning and value it must serve true knowledge and goodness, not simply satisfy momentary desires and needs. And so the philosopher must push on to the Forms and the revelation of the Good before he can begin to understand and make true claims with regard to the world of *becoming*.

In the final books of the *Republic* Socrates returns to his critique of the poets and makes a final plea for the value of a good education and the heroic nature of self-knowledge. And while this new model that Socrates puts forward prefers true knowledge, it will include poetic images and myth where they are needed—just as the Allegory of the Cave is based on the Divided line, so these images and stories will be based on true dialectical knowledge. And indeed, Plato finishes the *Republic* with the myth of Er. In the afterlife, Er sees the Homeric heroes deciding their destinies in bestial and sub-human ways. Out of pride, ignorance and blind desire for glory they choose to be reincarnated as

animals that symbolise glory—eagles, lions and the like. However, Odysseus, the smartest of the heroes, and the one who has seen and understood the most of what the world has to offer, decides that he will be reincarnated as a simple, anonymous and just citizen. It is Odysseus who manages, like the philosopher, to keep his eye on moderation, goodness and authenticity despite the intense pains and incredible pleasures he experiences. It is, finally, his desire for authenticity and truth that allows him to overcome his many trials and temptations and to return home in a way that is distinct from many of his Greek comrades. In Plato's final statement involving this mythical process of reincarnation, he ultimately seems to claim that the fate of our souls depends on how wisely we make the choices in our lives; and that in order to make the right choices we must have true understanding of our spiritual and psychological selves and a clear vision of what kinds of creatures we are and aspire to become—we must "know ourselves." Our desires must be in accordance with knowledge of the Good and thus we must lead the dialectical or contemplative life.

Summing up the last ten books of the *Republic* in this final statement, Plato seems to put the responsibility on the individual for his or her own spiritual and mental wellbeing. For Plato the realm of mind, soul, and thought *is* reality; and the individual that forgoes an education that seeks to develop understanding of this reality gets what he or she deserves: an erotically confused, inauthentic and almost sub-human existence that can never truly know beauty, truth, and justice or participate in the Good. Looking back to the beginning of Book II we may consider that the initial goal was to define the just man. And while the projection of this search onto the schema of a city may finally hold many ethical problems for the reader, we should perhaps reflect on what kind of model it holds with regard to the initial question—that is, as it concerns the individual. Indeed, there is every reason to think that it may be beneficial for the individual to be critical (or self censoring) of the kind of art and music he or she consumes; what could be wrong with training our selves physically, intellectually, and emotionally so that we may better endure or repel those things that may do us harm? Why shouldn't we cast out those elements of ourselves that are dangerous and excessive, and strive for self-sufficiency and self-knowledge? And so despite its problems as a viable political model (and Plato's

possible ironic stance notwithstanding) the "City in Speech" may be of great use to us after all in terms of how we govern our own souls—"perhaps a pattern is laid up for the man who wants to see an found a city within himself…." (592b)

While the *Republic* ends on a decidedly existential note, it may also be of considerable interest to us in the 21st century to consider the Platonic stance with regards to our notions of democracy and modern culture in general. Although Plato's view of democracy is complicated, he does not hold the clear anti-democratic position that many accuse him of. As Plato points out, democracy allows for freedom of speech (*parrhésia*: 557b5), license to do as one wishes (*exousia*: 557b5), *eros polymorphous* (561a), privacy (557b9) and diversity (557c4-9). (Cf. Roochnik 2003, p.81-83) Indeed, Plato states quite explicitly that it may well be the freedom and privacy inherent in a democracy that allows philosophy and the free discourse it requires to exist in the first place: "Thanks to its license, [democracy] contains all species of regimes, and it is probably necessary for the man who wishes to organise a city as we are doing, to go to a city under a democracy…." (557d)

So while I am not suggesting that Plato is himself a democrat or that he can be seen in anyway as praising the democracy, we should at least consider that—given the physical impossibility of the 'City in Speech'—Plato may be pointing out that the democracy may be the best we can do. Far from advocating some kind of totalitarian state as Russell and Popper suggest, Plato may be asking us to recognise the fragility of the democracy, to maintain a critical attitude towards it, and to consider how we as citizens might strengthen the democracy by improving ourselves. And I should point out here that I am certainly not the first to question the totalitarian reading of the *Republic*—scholars such as Strauss, Bloom, Levinson, Roochnik and Barrow have each, in their own way, argued against the position of Russell and Popper.

We live in a world of change, of corruption and generation, but for Plato the fact that the material and political world is flux and relative should not obscure the search for stable ethical truths on which we may base an authentic and *eudaimonic* existence. And it is precisely because part of our existence is contained by this contingent part of reality that

we must constantly re-evaluate our relationship to The Good, Justice, Beauty, and Truth. Indeed, as we have seen, mathematical or technical models may assist us in understanding the world, but they are linear in their development, non-historic, and value neutral. However, knowledge of value and goodness (the meaning of things) is an ongoing, recursive, or circular process that binds and directs the quantitative technical 'bits' of knowledge, and gives our experiences of the world, ourselves, and society ethical meaning. Thus while the various instantiations of the Forms may change from time to time, from culture to culture, and from person to person, they are, for Plato, the universal binding forces of reality—they are what we all desire in our purest state; and it is the goal of philosophy to 'bracket out' those elements that may obscure this pure experience in order to acknowledge the fundamentally qualitative way in which we experience meaning in the world and the revelation of goodness that comes with it. This is why Plato reminds us that we must be wary of the distractions of easy pleasures and the novelties and ethically empty knowledge of *techné*, and focus on honest interrogation of our ideas, beliefs and desires through self-reflection and sustained dialogue with others.

The Examined Life

In the 21st century we have a very complex relationship to our media. From our comfortable position in the bourgeois West, we watch our screens, read our books, and play our music and video games all day long if we wish. The media has become a background against which we live our lives and the power it wields over us is enormous. Increasingly we live in an image world of our own creation over which we have less and less control—connected virtually perhaps, but estranged more and more from each other and from the natural world. The media and the consumer economy that underpins it dictate *Eros* in the 21st century. And if we find the censorship in Socrates' 'City in Speech' troubling, we need only look at our contemporary situation in order to find a situation that is far more disturbing. We allow our children access to images of violence and criminality the likes of which Plato could not have imagined; we promote the virtues of consumerism, usury and wealth over knowledge; and we often engage in and accept

lies almost unconsciously. Indeed, we seem to be willing to go along with injustices in the world as long as they serve our interests and are kept at a distance from us physically and psychologically. Or, perhaps, we accept them because we feel powerless against the bureaucracy they serve. Content to blur the distinction between reality and empty fiction, we often veil reality with a layer of rhetoric and sink into the comfortable distraction of our media and consumerism. And, almost subconsciously, we fall into the general cynical malaise that permeates so much of Western society and politics.

Does our education system provide our children with the critical tools necessary to maintain some semblance of intellectual autonomy, immersed as they are in the folly of the 21st century corporate technocracy? We certainly *seem* free to corrupt our youth and to destroy our economy; to use the rest of the world as a means; and to manipulate our language to serve our purposes. This much we have proven to ourselves. But is this really freedom? Is this justice? Or is this the irrational state that accompanies the pursuit of power and wealth without true ethical knowledge? Is the increasingly irrational and instrumental nature of our language too firmly established in the psyche to allow for a concept of society that is based on rational critique rather than the feverish desire for power and material possessions? Is the irrational power of our own *Eros* too strong for us to tame? Are politics, civilization and language corrupt and corrupting by their nature? And, if this is the case, where are we left?

As we journey through the *Republic*, the model city that Socrates provides becomes increasingly troubling for two reasons. First, Plato forces us to confront the hypocrisy inherent in our own system through the very problems—even disgust—we may have with his; he pushes us to scrape away the feeble psychological veneer protecting our words and ideas to expose the irrational murk beneath. Secondly, and perhaps most troubling of all, once this veneer has been lifted there seems to be nothing there to replace it. Thrasymachus and Clitophon represent a kind of epistemological and ethical confusion that is just as problematic for the 21st century as it was for 4th and 5th century Athens. Clearly, the changes brought about by science, multiculturalism, colonisation and globalisation have put increasing stress on the modernist meta-narratives that previously underpinned universal notions of truth and legitimacy. But the fact that

so-called relativistic terms and theories, like 'postmodernism',[94] are employed to describe the epistemological and cultural problems facing the world today does not pose a major problem in itself. A great difficulty does arise, however, when political or moral thinking confuses—as Thrasymachus does—a state of affairs with a conception of normalcy. Indeed, Postmodernism as a fashionable philosophical or cultural position (and there's a clear contradiction here) so often neglects to make this distinction and falls into intellectual apathy. Unfortunately, the really valuable postmodernist thinkers—those that are searching for new ways of understanding truth and discourse—are often misinterpreted, misquoted, or read selectively. Constructive notions of pragmatic pluralism are jettisoned; discussions about the moral value of art are dismissed as naïve; and philosophy and the social sciences engage in meaningless debates and finger pointing about relativism. And this rather academic confusion is symptomatic of a more general confusion that begins to hold sway over the culture at large.

At a time when personal authenticity and responsibility are perhaps most needed, many simply acquiesce in the vague images conjured up by the vocabulary of instrumental reason. In the bourgeois west, postmodernism mixes and clashes with the irrational psychology of consumerism and economic growth, as well as Enlightenment notions of democracy and individual freedom. In this confused environment politics and morals become directed towards the perceived right of a group of ideas that seem to serve our interests and accord with our language. In this way reason is easily usurped by the irrational desire manufactured by the consumer economy and the global power game; and the good often becomes that which best serves the status quo, even if it is only empty rhetoric.

While the confusion inherent in Thrasymachus' position drives these concerns home, the appearance of Clitophon adds a disturbing element when considered in the context of contemporary geo-politics. In the world today we see many forms of his kind of tyrannical morality—the conflict between Palestine and Israel is a case in point. Here, justice, morality and right are held captive by the tyranny of dogmatic religious idealism.

94 This term is notoriously difficult to pin down. It is associated, perhaps most problematically, with ideas of moral and epistemic relativism and the absence of Truth. At it s worst, postmodernism is an bourgeois armchair concept (nourished by academic and arts grants) that rarely ventures into the real world in order to experience the real common needs and necessities shared by all peoples and cultures.

The belief that the small fundamentalist minorities on both sides of the conflict have towards the rightness of their respective positions has effectively prevented the reasonable majority from engaging in rational discourse. Dialogue becomes impossible and the principle mode of communication becomes violent conflict. Definitions of terms, no matter how temporary they may be, are discarded if they are even agreed upon in the first place; words lose meaning—they become instrumental to the desire created by self-serving ideological rhetoric. This is all to say that in reality the Clitophonic demon cannot be simply silenced as it is in the *Republic*. The sophistic rhetoric that gives this destructive force refuge at home also clouds the judgement of the media and political powers. And as our increasingly ill defined and faith driven notions of economics, democracy and freedom begin to reveal themselves as forces of colonialism in a new guise—as the west pushes its ideology out in to the world while its economic and moral foundations begin to crumble at home—it does seem difficult to refrain from asking if this isn't Athens all over again?

In considering Plato's discussion of the unjust regimes it is difficult not to recognise aspects of our own society in each of them—the democracy, as Plato suggests, is the regime that contains all other regimes (557d). And indeed, we may also recognise aspects of our own psychological nature in them as well. There is certainly a bit of the timocrat, the oligarch, and the tyrant in all of us. But as Plato points out, the democracy allows for freedom of speech and the license to travel; it allows for differing opinions, and for its citizens to engage in diverse political and erotic activity, or to abstain from it. The democracy even allows for views that are critical of it. In all, Plato seems to be positing that it is the democracy alone that allows for the diversity of experience that is necessary for philosophy and dialectic to thrive. As we have considered, while the 'City in Speech' may be a terrifying concept for the democrat, it is but a dialectical stage in the *Republic*. It is the result of a thought experiment undertaken by characters *in* the *Republic* and therefore cannot be seen as Plato's last word. It is part of a free conversation that takes place at the private residence of a rich metic and is itself driven by the diverse desires of the interlocutors and the contingent demands of the moment. Thus considered, it seems impossible that the *Republic* could have been conceived under the regime of the

'City in Speech'. As I suggested above, the democracy, far from being perfect, may just be the best we can do in the world of *becoming*—especially if we desire to engage in the kind of activity that Socrates and his friends do. But we must beware: the democracy is fragile, unstable and subject to the desires of the *demos*, and Plato warns us of the fall into tyranny and confusion.

The philosopher is *both* the being that contemplates the dry truth of the heavenly spheres and the Forms and, like Odysseus and Socrates, is the one who is curious of and fluent in the ways of the world and is primed to engage with it. The philosopher is the analyst, existentialist, poet, psychologist, political scientist and mystic—he or she is the one that desires to know. In a modern context, where the nature of Western political and economic life is in a rapid state of change, the ability of the individual citizen to question the validity of the terms used by political leaders as well as to understand the often-irrational machinations of the consumer economy is of great value. Perhaps more important, however, is the individual's ability to know himself—to understand her own desires, to know where they may be excessive, and to work towards true knowledge of the world around her. A critical dialectical engagement with culture, society and self seems just as vital today as it did to Plato in the 4th century B.C.

As Plato suggests, we should be wary of turning around too easily and too early. We should be careful to resist the pull of intellectual gravity and remember to look up from our images, beliefs and *techné* from time to time to see if we can't find something that may help us in knowing the process of existence with greater depth. Our assumptions and words need to be examined on an ongoing basis and across the range of experience. Otherwise, we risk falling into that 'irrational murk' I mentioned above—our freedom and personal authenticity, our intellectual autonomy, and our very humanity can be stripped from us more quickly and subtly than we imagine. To guard against this our understanding of the world requires constant maintenance and self-criticism: the true democracy is a reflection of the *demos,* if the people and the culture are intellectually and erotically corrupt, so too is the regime. In our time of seemingly endless distractions and diverse and unnecessary desires the task of wading through the artifice in search of truth and understanding may seem more difficult than ever. And indeed, intellectual

complacency has never been easier (or more relentlessly encouraged) than it is today. But if there is anything that the *Republic* strives to show us, it's that we can create the intellectual 'stepping stones' or 'spring boards'—or Forms if one prefers—provisional though they may be, out of even the most irrational situations. But this is possible only if we are willing to continually ask and honestly pursue the most difficult and important questions that concern self, society and the nature of existence.

While Plato offers us a great deal to consider with regards to the pursuit of abstract understanding of virtue and goodness in a personal and political context, he tells us very little about how we might begin to understand the natural world that exists outside the walls of the city. Plato is not immediately concerned with the world of plants, animals or the material things that make up the world; and as a result of this, he does not discuss the relationship between humans and the creatures and things that constitute the ecosystem directly (the abstract cosmic/myth theory of the *Timaeus* is the closest he comes to this end). However, Plato's thought is revised and developed by Aristotle in order to return Greek philosophy to the study of nature in a way that imbues a strong formal and ethical dimension into the empirical and materialistic investigations into Being initiated by the Presocratics. Aristotle brings the concern with form, meaning, purpose, and goodness down from the relatively abstract realm in which Plato tends to work, and places it squarely within the domain of direct human experience of nature. And while Aristotle could scarcely have imagined the estrangement from the natural world our modern techno-culture would produce, his view of nature offers us a perspective on the world that may be useful to us in terms of rethinking the relationship between our culture, conventions and beliefs (*nomos*) and, as we call it, the natural world (*phusis*). Indeed, the early 20th century saw the beginning of a great critique of the modern humanist and technological agenda, and many thinkers returned to the Greeks in order to seek out alternative ways of viewing the world. In the next chapter I will look at Aristotle's perspective on nature and goodness; and consider some of the modern thinkers associated with phenomenology who have, in one way or another, adopted and developed the Greek

way of looking at the world in order to reassert the value of direct human experience and to examine our ethical relationship to the natural world.

4

The Ethical Experience of Nature: Aristotle and the Roots of Ecological Phenomenology

[Phenomenology] is also a philosophy for which the world is always "already there", before reflection, like an inalienable presence, and in which every effort is made to rediscover a naïve contact with the world…. It is the attempt at a direct description of our experience such as it is … it is in ourselves that we will find the unity of phenomenology and its true sense. (Merleau-Ponty 1945, p.1-2)

With the publication of Edmund Husserl's last book, *The Crisis of the European Sciences*, an early chapter was added to a growing critique of the modern conception of science and philosophy. While Husserl clearly recognized the outstanding achievements brought about by the Scientific Revolution, he identified what he considered to be a serious problem regarding the way in which the scientific age had come to view the world in the late 19th century. Husserl claimed that the social sciences had become "blinded by the prosperity" produced by the positive sciences and that this had led to a world view that was increasingly determined by technological progress. Husserl saw this as an "indifferent turning away from the questions which are decisive for a genuine humanity." (Husserl, *Crisis* p.6-10) In *The Crisis*, Husserl draws attention to the modern

disconnect between our knowledge of how things work and what they mean; he explores the reasons for the exclusion of human questions in modern science; and, finally, seeks to reestablish the human element with the development of a new science, phenomenology, which takes human experience as its basis.

Husserl's phenomenology became influential in the 20th century, most notably in the work of Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. And the writings of all three of these thinkers formed the philosophical core for the work of more recent thinkers such as Arne Naess, Michael Zimmerman, Ezrahim Kohak and Neil Evernden. In response to the growing divide they saw between human culture and the natural world—now manifest most clearly in the environmental crisis we face—these ecologically minded thinkers extended phenomenology towards the contemplation of nature and our relationship to it. But many centuries before Husserl, Heidegger, and the beginnings of modern eco-phenomenology proper, there was, of course, Aristotle who put forward what was perhaps the first comprehensive phenomenological view of nature.

There is a very real sense in which Husserl and the thinkers that followed him sought to reintroduce a way of seeing the world that Aristotle and the Greek philosophers embraced many centuries before—one that was lost, or at least rejected and repressed in the scientific age. Indeed, the very conception of science and philosophy that Husserl critiques in *The Crisis* emerges from the same world-view that claims that the modern scientific project could not get started until the authority of Aristotle was overturned.[95] But as I will discuss shortly, this "authority of Aristotle" was based on a kind of Christianized Aristotelianism that Aristotle himself would most certainly have rejected almost completely. Just as Aristotle's view of nature embraces a distinctly natural human perspective, so too the primary goal of phenomenology is to reveal the world as it is given to consciousness—distinct from any cultural, scientific, historic, or psychological assumptions we may have formed of it. Put more simply, phenomenology strives to know the world as it is perceived by the "naked eye" and as it is experienced by the open mind. And while there is indeed much in Aristotle's account of nature that invites criticism, it is nonetheless a wonderful example of the kind of meaningful view of the world it is

95 Roochnick brings out the Husserlian concerns and their relevance to Greek philosophy beautifully. This chapter takes some of his basic observations as its starting point. See Roochnick 2004 p. 4-5.

possible to arrive at from precisely this first person perspective.

Therefore, in this last chapter I would like to examine Aristotle's view of nature and consider the relevance it may have for us in the 21st century. First I will look at the teleological account of nature that Aristotle presents in his *Physics*. Here I will examine how Aristotle's method differs from the modern inquiry into natural phenomena—especially with regard to its affirmation of human experience—and consider how Aristotle's view of the world may help us to understand natural beings, ourselves included, as intrinsically purposeful entities. Then, in light of the concept of *eudaimonia* found in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, I will suggest that we may be able to propose a simple but strong argument for natural purpose as a universal ethical truth.

To conclude this chapter, I will briefly consider the more recent philosophical discourse that attempts to reassert subjective human experience as a valid ontological and epistemological position—my main concern here will be with the thought of Husserl and Heidegger—; and I will consider how this phenomenological perspective bears on recent philosophical positions, like those of Kohak, Evenden and Naess, that seek to understand nature in ethical terms. All along I hope to make it clear that while the phenomenological perspective, both ancient and modern, cannot replace our contemporary techno-scientific culture, it may allow us to rediscover a fundamental and altogether natural way of seeing the world that has been largely ignored or otherwise rejected in the modern age. I will further suggest that this perspective may be able to become integrated with our current techno-scientific view of the world; and that it may allow us, finally, to recognize the natural ethos that many of us are searching for so desperately.

In order to confront the environmental crisis we face we are going to have to look as deeply into ourselves as we do into the world that surrounds us and gives us life. As Evernden points out, we must begin "with the recognition that the source of the environmental crisis lies not without but within, not in industrial effluent but in assumptions so casually held as to be virtually invisible." (Evernden 1993) Indeed, much of our understanding of nature, culture and who we are comes from the ideas handed down to us from the grand narratives of modern culture where science and technological progress reign supreme (and where personal experience is often denounced as 'merely

subjective'). But this perspective is showing itself to be increasingly inapposite to the flourishing of life on our planet; we can no longer live solely through the constructs of our own artifice. As a culture and as individuals, we are being called upon to assume a new phenomenological responsibility—one that re-embraces the most natural and primordial way in which we know the world. Above all I hope to show here that if our goal is to discover an ethical sense of nature, then both the ancient writings of Aristotle and the modern insights of phenomenology are particularly well suited to the task.

Theoria: *Aristotle's 'Seeing' of Nature*

> *All men by nature desire to know. An indication of this is the delight we take in our senses; for even apart from their usefulness they are loved for themselves; and above all others the sense of sight…. science and art come to men through experience.* (Aristotle, *Metaphysics I.* 1, 980a-981a)

Aristotle's interests were famously diverse. He wrote extensive works on logic, ethics, physics, metaphysics, biology, astronomy, meteorology, mathematics, psychology, zoology, rhetoric, aesthetics, and politics; he and his students collected and studied manuscripts, maps, zoological samples, botanical samples, and political constitutions. The influence of Aristotle and his Lyceum on the Western world is enormous and his ideas greatly influenced the development of the European university and Western civilization itself. But as far-reaching as Aristotle's influence on Western intellectual history is, it is also important to consider his relationship to the tradition of Greek philosophy and science that came before him. Aristotle's work is often considered to be the dialectical peak of the great tradition of Hellenic and Hellenistic investigations into the natural world that began with Thales. This is to say that Aristotle's work is in no way a departure from those great thinkers that preceded him, but rather it represents a great gathering and rethinking of the whole tradition of Greek thought.

Indeed, Aristotle engages in the centuries long dialogue that is Greek philosophy on a level that is unmatched both in terms of its depth and comprehensiveness. However, while its not unusual for us to think of the Ancient Greeks in terms of their great

influence on the Western philosophical tradition, their contribution to our scientific tradition is often given too little credit in the modern world. Part of the reason for this has to do with a certain prejudice surrounding the belief that Greek science had to be overturned so that the modern scientific project could get underway—I'm referring to the "authority of Aristotle" I mentioned earlier. But while the Christianized version of Aristotelian thought would indeed have a kind of suffocating effect on scholarship that the thinkers of the 17th century successfully challenged, Aristotle's actual conception of science was far more vibrant and rigorous than the absolute and unchanging version of it that was imposed by the Church. One phrase that shows up again and again in Aristotle's scientific writings speaks to this, namely, *hôs epi to polu*, which can be translated as "for the most part," "by and large," or, "in general" (*Phys II*. 8, 198b34).

Aristotle understands that when it comes to the facts of the world as they are perceived, the best one can do is to try to work out a systematic understanding of things and attempt to subsume them under general laws; but he also recognizes that there will always be exceptions. For Aristotle, knowledge of a given subject can only be achieved insomuch as the subject will allow; and indeed, some subjects will allow far greater scientific precision than others. Thus the best we can say—in Aristotelian terms at least—is that, with regards to subject *X, Y* is the case either always or for the most part (*hôs epi to polu*). And if a better or more accurate account of the subject can be arrived at from another perspective, then so much the better for science and philosophy.

Aristotle recognizes that proper scientific inquiry must be subject to corrigibility. And indeed, Aristotle himself is often wrong, but he is wrong provably. He understands that scientific statements are not pronouncements, but rather statements of fact that are always subject to further inquiry and refinement by some other account.[97] However, the interpretation of Aristotelian thought that would become so central to the teachings of the Church could not allow for the possibility of this kind of corrigibility—such an acknowledgement would have undermined the eternal and unchanging image of the cosmos that was instrumental in supporting the absolute authority of the Church. As a result, Aristotelian thought was reduced to a set of unchanging precepts; and it was this

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97 In a sense, this view prefigures Karl Popper's insistence that the scientific value of a given statement is largely determined by its falsifiability.

static Christian interpretation of Aristotle's works that 17th century thinkers like Galileo successfully overturned, not Aristotle's thought proper.

As we considered above, Aristotle's view of nature relies heavily on the evident appearances and/or facts of perception (the *phainomena*)[97]—it is not made to fit some preordained religious, political, or economic view of how the world should be. And so, while there is a great deal more that could be said about Aristotle's relationship to Western science in general, for our purposes it will be enough to keep in mind that he is, above all else, a 'theoretical philosopher' in the Classical Greek sense of the term—*theoria* literally means "looking at." In the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle writes that of all the senses available to us, human beings prefer sight. The reason, he claims, is that it is sight above all else that gives us knowledge of things. However, for Aristotle, "sight" is not only an empirical source of knowledge, it also signifies a process of understanding purpose, meaning and value—an Aristotelian theoretical treatise is a report on what is 'seen' both physically and in terms of human insight. In this way Aristotle's entire body of work can be thought of as an attempt to "see" the world as it really is—from the plants, animals, and human society that surround us, to the starry heavens above. For Aristotle, the way things appear is, *hôs epi to polu*, a fundamental clue to the way things really are.

Unlike the Platonic dialectic that continually seeks to refine the question, Aristotle's *theoria* searches for answers. Like Plato, however, Aristotle fiercely opposes sophistic relativism; he has great confidence in the human ability to know the world in an objective sense. Thus, when Aristotle writes, "all human beings *by nature* desire to know," he is placing inquiry, knowledge and reason themselves well within the realm of nature as objective and altogether natural human characteristics. Furthermore, for Aristotle, it is not enough to know the material causes of things; one must also strive to know the purpose and meaning towards and because of which they tend to move—an

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97 The term "*phainomena*" is problematic for scholars of Aristotle. As Nussbaum points out, in the *Eudemian Ethics* these phainomena are "both the 'witnesses' and 'paradigms' that we are to use in philosophical inquiry." Thus Aristotle's idea of examining phainomena entails something rather different than a hard 'theory-free' Baconian data collection, It is a broad notion that may take on differing forms and interpretations—like experience itself—and it extends to what we say and believe about things (*doxa*). See *Eudemian Ethics* I2I6b26. Cf. Nussbaum 2001, Ch.8.

epistemic consideration from which modern science clearly tends to retreat. Indeed, there is a strong ethical dimension to Aristotle's *theoria* that can only be fully appreciated through the first hand experience of nature as a series of interrelated and intrinsically meaningful *phainomena*.

So while it is indisputable that modern science is able to observe and make highly accurate claims about the physical world in a way that Aristotle could scarcely have imagined, there is a very strong sense in which Aristotle has a far better grasp on what it means to be a human being who exists in nature and who sees the world through the "naked eye." Indeed, for Aristotle, the very point of studying nature was not merely to understand how things worked or what they were made out of, but rather to grasp the purpose of things, or their *telos*. And he had great confidence that the natural world was knowable in this way because he believed that the human mind was capable of perceiving and understanding beauty and form (not only in an aesthetic sense, but as part of an innate moral faculty as well).

Form and the Principle of Movement

As we have just considered, Aristotle embraces empirical experience as the primary source of knowledge. But what is it about Aristotle's view of nature that makes it so distinct from the modern view? What did he see in nature that we seem to miss? In order to distinguish Aristotle's view of nature from the modern perspective we can, curiously enough, begin with the thinkers that came before him.

In the *Physics*, Aristotle continues the Hellenic tradition of inquiry into the physical world. But while Aristotle appreciates the groundbreaking efforts of his predecessors, he believes that they put too much emphasis on material elements, such as water (Thales) or air (Anaximenes) (*Phys II*. 2, 194a19–21). For many Presocratic thinkers, blind matter is the basic ingredient of nature—the nature of an animal is seen as consisting of flesh, bone and water. And as we have seen, when Democritus expresses the brilliant insight that nature is composed entirely of atoms moving in a void, the difference between the objects of perception becomes purely quantitative in its most fundamental

sense.[98] This view of nature is remarkably close to that of modern physics and is not entirely rejected by Aristotle. It is, however, seen by him as being incomplete. Aristotle's general view, *hylomorphism*, is a doctrine in which both matter (*hylê*) and form (*morphê*) play an essential role in the composition of the natural world.

As a student of Plato, Aristotle's claim that form must play a fundamental part in the constitution of nature should not come as a surprise. But where the Platonic conception of form generally has to do with an ideal conception of virtues that transcends particular or worldly instances (the "Form of Beauty" or the "Idea of the Good" for example) Aristotelian form concerns the diverse ways in which matter is informed; it deals with the things of the world. Aristotle sees the world as fundamentally comprised of heterogeneous forms, not simply homogenous matter; he observes nature dividing into diverse entities that relate to each other through the purpose inherent in their respective forms. Indeed, there is a very strong sense in which, for Aristotle, the form *is* the individual being—this is true not only in terms of shape but with regards to purpose and meaning as well. For Aristotle, it is through the perception, or, more accurately, the 'seeing' (*theoria*) of form that nature is knowable in a way that transcends matter and mechanics, and arrives at purpose.

Aristotle also sharply criticizes the Eleatics for their departure from *phainomena*. For Aristotle, thinkers like Parmenides became to wrapped up in logical argument and failed to return to experience—the strangeness of their conclusions should have been an indication that there was something wrong with them: "… although these opinions appear to follow logically in a dialectical discussion, yet to believe them seems next door to madness when one considers the facts. For indeed no lunatic seems to be so far out of his senses to suppose that fire and ice are one." (*On Generation and Corruption I.* 8, 325a–20). Aristotle also exposes serious flaws in the thought of Empedocles, the Pythagoreans, and the Atomists with regard to generation and corruption, the possibility of motion, and the division of some notion of the Whole or the One.[99]

Aristotle's formal/teleological view of nature may be difficult for moderns to grasp, imbued as we are with a largely material and non-teleological notion of nature that

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98 See Nussbaum's illuminating 'dialogue' between Democritus and Aristotle in Nussbaum 1978, p.59-99.
99 See On *Generation and Corruption* Book I, Chapter 8.

resonates more closely with the thought of the early Greek materialists. How then does Aristotle see the relationship between matter, form and purpose as manifest in the world? A good place to begin to understand Aristotle's point of view is to consider the distinction he makes between those things that exist by nature and those things that exist for other or artificial reasons (*Phys II.* 1, 192b8–9). Aristotle sees a natural being as that which has "within itself a principle [*archê*] of motion and rest." (*Phys II.* 1, 192b15) Aristotle observes that natural beings come into existence and move towards their form—from a state of potentiality towards a state of actuality—by way of an innate principle of change. An unnatural being, by contrast, carries no such principle of change or movement within it. For example, a table, a bed, or a house has its principle of motion and being outside of itself—a human being(s) moved these objects into existence and gave them the attributes that make them what they are, both in the physical and abstract sense. These are works of artifice rather than nature. (*Phys II.* 1, 192b23–27)

As we have considered, the modern or ancient materialist would argue that the nature of the table, the house, or the tree lies in the material out of which it is made—wood in this case—and that as a result they are all fundamentally the same. By this light, any notions of form, purpose, or meaning, as real as they may seem to the "naked eye", are merely epiphenomenal—basic reality is homogeneous matter devoid of meaning. And as seen through an object of *techné* (a microscope for instance) this idea is confirmed: the table, the house, the tree, and indeed everything is all made of the same 'stuff'—molecules, atoms, and, finally, fields of force. On the level of direct experience, however, the view is quite different. The things of the world can only be experienced in any meaningful way inasmuch as they relate to each other as informed and value laden states of matter. Wood is only potentially a table, a house or some other work of *techné*; it is material that has been stripped from the form of a natural being and reduced to potentiality. For Aristotle, the wood has no innate nature in and of itself—it can only have meaning in terms of its potential[100] to be assembled into an object of *techné*, or perhaps by virtue of the fact that it once participated in the self-actualizing form of a natural being (a tree). Thus, for Aristotle, the form of an object of experience is

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100 "… for wood is potentially a box and is the matter of a box." (*Met* IX. 7, 1049a22 – 24)

intimately associated with its meaning, whether it be artificial or natural. However, although the objects of artifice have form, they cannot properly be understood as having a nature; it is human desire and need that gives them purpose, and therefore they are meaningful only instrumentally and temporarily. Natural beings, on the other hand, are intrinsically and, in a sense, eternally meaningful—they are ends unto themselves.[101]

As we began to consider above, Aristotle's conception of potentiality and actuality is parallel to his view of matter and form (*hylomorphism*). And movement, as defined by Aristotle, is the actualization of potentiality, or the movement of matter towards form: actuality/form is more fundamental in nature than potentiality/matter and therefore natural beings contain within them a principle of movement towards their specific actuality/form—"the form is the nature more than the matter is" says Aristotle (*Phys II.* 2, 193b10).[102] Thus we see the egg become a tadpole, and the tadpole become a frog; we observe the seed become a sapling, and the sapling become a tree—each has within it its own principle or *archê* and each moves seamlessly towards its actuality, purpose, or *telos*. On the other hand, the purpose, form and coming into being of artificial objects is not self actualizing. The form of artifice is wholly dependent on human need, desire, and *techné*, without which its actuality and meaning disappear, and the object reverts to pure potentiality as matter. Trees beget trees, but tables do not beget tables.[103] Once again, experience is fundamental for Aristotle. His basic account of nature and artifice is neither metaphoric nor intellectual; rather, it is a direct description of the phenomena as they are experienced. One does not need to prove that nature exists; it is, as Aristotle says, "evident." And indeed, one does not have to be as relentlessly observant as Aristotle is in order to experience natural beings behaving purposefully in the world—one only has to look and see.

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101 This insight gets a complicated new twist in the modern era with the introduction of genetic modification, in vitro fertilization and so on.

102 Clearly, Aristotle sees matter as being natural—it takes on forms, disperses and forms again. It is however, only an aspect of the nature of things.

103 In the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle takes up an analysis of "beings qua being." This is to say he undertakes, generally speaking, the task of answering the question: in so much as a thing can be said to exist, to what degree does it exist? For Aristotle, trees and wooden tables do exist in different degrees in the sense that the existence of a table is parasitic on the existence of a tree—the existence of tables is predicated on the existence of trees but the existence of trees has nothing to do with tables.

Activity, Purpose, Soul

We have just been looking at the way in which Aristotle sees beings move from potentiality in matter towards actuality as form; and how form itself allows us to experience the world—it is only through the perception of forms that move into and out of being that we can talk about or experience the world in any meaningful way. We also began to consider how Aristotle describes the experience of natural form as intrinsically purposeful—natural beings bear the principle (*archê*) of their own movement and meaning within them, they have a nature, while the form of artifice is necessarily instrumental and externally determined. In order to gain a deeper understanding of how this process of potentiality/actuality relates to form, purpose and meaning in terms of the behavior of natural beings, we must now take a look at Aristotle's intertwined conceptions of cause and soul.

In order to understand a natural being Aristotle claims we must begin with four fundamental questions that relate to its cause or *telos* (*Phys II*. 7, 198a25–28). The responses to these questions create an image of the principle or *archê* by which a specific natural being moves from potentiality into actuality, and therefore leads us to understand its purpose. If we are to understand the form of a natural being, according to Aristotle, we must first ask, "Of what is the being constituted, or what is its *material* cause? Then we must ask, "What moves it, or what is its *efficient* cause? Next we must ask, "What is it, or what is its *formal* cause? And finally we are to ask, "What is its purpose, its *final* cause or *telos*? [104] It is with this emphasis on formal and final cause that Aristotle breaks with both the modern and ancient materialist view. As we considered above, Aristotle shares the concept of material and efficient cause with the Presocratics and modern physics; and the concept of formal cause is inherited from Plato and developed by Aristotle. The idea of a final cause, however, is distinctly Aristotelian and it is here that he breaks with modern science which tends to retreat from teleological questions. Additionally, Aristotle's teleological view not only asserts that all natural entities—not just humans—are

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104 "[T]he last three often coincide—for the what-it-is and the that for the sake of which are one, while that from which the primary motion comes is the same in them in species: for man generates man, and so too generally in the case of things which cause movement being themselves moved." (*Phys II*. 7, 198a25–28)

intrinsically purposeful, but also claims that all living beings have souls (*psuché*). The fact that Aristotle extends this to plants may sound strange, but if we remember that in his view form and matter equate with actuality and potentiality, his conception of soul becomes clear.

The best way to understand Aristotle's conception of soul is, not surprisingly, to observe a growing, organic, living being. In a living being all of the matter that constitutes it is organized into parts that work towards the actualization of its form. For example, we may consider what Aristotle calls the "nutritive soul." Before it is eaten, food is actually different from the body, but potentially the same; after is it eaten, the food becomes actually the same as the body. Thus the activity of nutrition is precisely this causal process of the actually different but potentially the same becoming actually the same. It is this process, not some sort of separate entity, that Aristotle calls the nutritive soul. Indeed, one might consider this conception of soul as encompassing both the cause (*aitia*) *and* the principle (*archê*) of a living body (*aitia kai archê*)(*De Anima II. 4, 415b8*).

Indeed, by being nourished, the being grows. And although it may get materially bigger, it always maintains a form. As we have considered, form is what the being is *both* potentially and actually. And because it has a form or a formal cause, the growing being also has a purpose, a *telos*, or a final cause. The purpose of the being is to become healthy and mature; to attain its form as fully as possible; and to strive towards its *arête* or excellence. It is not only in its nature to do this, this process *is* its nature and, therefore, its purpose and meaning as well. For Aristotle, the soul of the being is, in a strong sense, the very activity the being engages in as it continually realizes and maintains the four causes as a life process. And, of course, this process is entirely related to the fundamental relationship of matter and form.

So, Aristotle's view of a natural being can be understood as the self-actualizing relationship of matter and form as it moves towards purpose. This process is directed by the unique principle of movement contained within the being. For Aristotle, this intertwined process *is* the soul of the being and is indicative of the kind of excellence particular to that being. And he is convinced that all of this is knowable to the human

mind through the experience of nature as it presents itself to perception.

The Flourishing Life: Orexis *and* Eudaimonia

We have just been considering Aristotle's conception of soul as the life process of a being that is alive, active and potentially flourishing. Aristotle claims, "If an eye were an animal, sight would be its soul" (*De Anima* 412b11–22). And indeed, when a being is alive its matter is organized in a specific way and all of its parts are purposefully active—a living eye sees, whereas a dead eye is only an eye in name. And of course, Aristotle's conception of soul is not limited to the nutritive variety we examined above—he views the processes of perception and reason in much the same manner. As we have seen, Aristotle claims all living beings have a nature (a self determined function, or *telos*) that defines their potentialities in terms of their particular *arête* or excellence. In the last section we discussed how, for Aristotle, the movement or activity of the nutritive soul works causally towards the health, maturity, and ultimately, the excellence and purpose of the being whose function is primarily nutritive. And in terms of the activity and proper functioning of the souls of beings whose highest purpose is to engage in perception and reason—animals and humans respectively—the perceptive and rational souls play fundamental and defining roles as well (*De Anima II.* 3–6). When a being perceives something, the experience of the phenomenon becomes, in a sense, part of the being—perception moves the animal and contributes to its form. And likewise, the rational soul, special to humans, directs our purpose and function.[105] But is there still a more fundamental and universal excellence or *telos* towards and because of which the 'souls' of all beings move? Can we draw a proper connection between the view of nature we have been examining and a human sense of ethical value or 'goodness' in general?

As we have begun to consider, much of Greek thought looks for ethical understanding not just from the philosopher's chair, but also through direct experience of the world. Socrates plays the proto-sociologist/psychologist and searches the market place in order to interrogate his contemporaries about justice, love and goodness. And

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105 For Aristotle, all living creatures have the capacity for nutrition, some add to this the capacity for perception and desire, while humans possess all capacities including nous, or abstract rational thought (*Anima* II. 3, 414b32–33).

Aristotle too takes up this approach in his own unique way—he examines ethics through the eyes of a biologist and anthropologist. Just as Aristotle observes the activity of beings in nature in order to discern the excellence and purpose of a given creature, so too in examining ethics he looks for the particular kinds of activities, character traits and structures of life that lead to excellence in the individual or community. He launches an enormous comparative study of individuals, societies, and social groups in order to attain direct insight into the goal and purpose of human life. In the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle claims that those human beings who can understand their function and fully actualize their nature are capable of reaching *eudaimonia* (happiness or, the flourishing life). Aristotle sees this as a the of work of the soul—or, more accurately, the "activity [of the soul] according to virtue"—and he claims that *eudaimonia* is the final good; human beings desire a good and flourishing life as an end in itself (*NE* 10. 6-7). For Aristotle, human *eudaimonia* finally depends on the functioning of the rational soul, while animals and plants depend on the perceptive and nutritive souls respectively in order to fully reach their purpose. However, although the term *eudaimonia* does refer specifically to humans and the rational pursuit of the 'good life'—it would be presumptuous to say that animals or plants experience happiness just as humans do—it seems to me that the view we have just been discussing makes it very difficult to avoid the conclusion that the proper activity, final purpose and soul of nature is the heterogeneous flourishing of all life.[106]

I am aware that the conclusion I have made here could be seen as a departure in terms of Aristotle's ethical writings. However, I suggest that what I offer here need not be understood solely as a metaphor for the distinctly human type of flourishing Aristotle calls *eudaimonia*; rather, it can be arrived at through a direct affirmation of what is most

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106 This comment may seem problematic, especially in light of Aristotle's idea that the form, purpose and soul of natural beings are contained within the individual beings themselves—they are not associated with some external or universal entity. In terms of Aristotle's thought proper I am perhaps treading on rather shaky ground. A consideration of this comment in terms of Aristotle's notion of a hierarchical cosmos may prove helpful, but also raise new problems—I refer the reader to Aristotle's *Politics I* where he refers to the universe, nature or the organic cosmos as the best "thing" there is "because in every composite thing, where a plurality of parts, whether continuous or discrete, is combined to make a single common whole, there is always found a ruling and a subject factor, and this characteristic of living things is present in them as an outcome of the whole of nature" (*Politics I*. 1254b). I hope the advanced reader will allow me some latitude here in order to make my point.

natural in human experience, and of what connects us most profoundly and ethically with nature—purpose, love, the desire for goodness, a flourishing state of being and all that this entails. Indeed, in the larger scheme of Aristotle's writings an enmeshment of the natural and moral orders can be discerned. Nussbaum outlines this beautifully by demonstrating the remarkable way in which Aristotle manages to break down the barrier between the two common, and seemingly irreconcilable, accounts of animal movement he encountered.[107] On one hand, we have the purely physiological account that is associated with the purely materialistic conception of Being I touched on at the beginning of Chapter 1 (the nature of water etc.). On the other hand we have, as both Nussbaum and Aristotle see it, the highly rationalizing position taken by Plato. Returning again to the *Phaedo*, Plato does not object to the materialistic/mechanical/physiological account of *how* he came to be sitting in prison (the one involving bones, sinews and so on). He does, however, reject the claim that this type of account can explain the cause, the *aitia*, of *why* he is sitting in prison. Plato then sets out to examine cause in terms of intellect and rational deliberation—the examined life. Aristotle sees something problematic here: for him, the highly rationalizing approach of Plato tends to isolate humans from the very real forces of nature, desire, and belief,[108] while, on the other hand, the purely materialist or physiological approach ignores everything but material and efficient causes. He is confronted, as Nussbaum puts it, "on the one hand, by a model of explanation whose *aitia* is so 'common' that it assimilates all intentional actions both to one another and to other cases of response to an external physical stimulus; on the other, with a model that is not 'common' enough to do justice to our beliefs about what we share with 'the other animals', and about what links together different elements in our own behavior." (Nussbaum 2001, p.273) For Aristotle the reconciliation of these views is found in the universal need for all natural beings to reach out (*orexis*) to the world in order to fulfill their formal and final causes in the best way possible; and this may involve, in varying degrees and combinations, the activity of the nutritive, perceptive and rational souls, as well as desire and emotion. Aristotle claims, "if the soul is tripartite, there will be *orexis* in each part"; and "Intellect does not impart movement without *orexis*...." (*Anima* 3. 9)

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107 See Nussbaum 2001, Ch.9.
108 In the last chapter I went some way, I hope, in softening this view.

Again, Nussbaum sums it up well, "we all [(natural beings)] reach out, being incomplete, for things in the world. That is the way our movements are caused." (Nussbaum 2001, p.289)

For Aristotle, there is a very strong sense in which our ethics begins with this reaching out to the world, which is informed most fundamentally by the direct appearances of things (*phainomena*). Indeed, as Nussbaum examines in some detail,[109] our ethical selves are formed from birth by this reaching out with our senses, our souls and our minds to the world (nature, things, our parents and siblings, our society, other societies) in order to feel, intuit, and rationally understand our needs, potential, desires, and reasons. Ethics, by this light, cannot be simply extracted from the non-rational categories of existence that give rise to it—it must be understood in the context of those enmeshed 'external' and 'internal' forces that cause the being to move and change. On the most practical level then, ethics is a qualitative 'taking' of the world as we find it and a meditation on how we may best move (function or be active, physically, emotionally, rationally, politically, etc.) in this world towards *eudaimonia.*

Furthermore, and more generally, Aristotle seems to point to the organic cosmos or nature as a whole as the best 'thing' there is. Kohak puts this well when he writes, "That continuity of the vital and moral order becomes explicit in Aristotle, as, for instance, in the familiar Book I of his *Politics*. Here Aristotle explicitly equates the moral order with the natural order. The moral order is distinctive only inasmuch as humans, unlike their fellow animals, must grasp the order of the cosmos through an operation of intellect and choose to honour it as an act of will. While for beings endowed with instinct the operation of the law of nature is automatic, vital…" (Kohak 1984, p.9) And indeed, this conclusion resonates closely with the work of those thinkers, like Kohak, who are involved with modern ecological phenomenology and deep ecology, both of which I will consider in the following section.

So I suggest that if we can open ourselves to experience nature as a system of interrelated purposeful beings (of which we are a part) that reach out towards *arête*, each according to its form and intrinsic principle of movement; and if we can recognize that

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109 Ibid Ch.9 part V

the final good for any living being lies in the potential for that being to attain a flourishing life—to reach its potential as fully as possible—then the contemplation of nature necessarily becomes an ethical experience because the beings of the world must be recognized as intrinsically meaningful each in their own distinct way. And because the nature of existence and experience is necessarily shared, this natural ethos should apply not only with regard to individual purpose, but in terms of a common *telos* as well. If we do indeed experience nature striving towards its fullest and most flourishing state of soul—in Aristotelian terms: rational, moderate, and virtuous *eudaimonia* in humans, perception and activity in animals, and nutrition in plants—; and if we see this flourishing as the *telos*, the "that for the sake of which", or the final good, then the very transformation of matter that we take for granted in the modern world—building houses, tables, television sets, driving cars etc.—takes on a whole new meaning in the sense that it may deprive natural beings of their form, purpose and soul, and, ultimately, reduce goodness.

As this ethical view of nature is derived from an experience of the world that recognizes the basic and universal elements required for a beings to achieve their potential—cultural and psychological assumptions, as well as purely cognitive theorizing play little or no role here—it would seem to be largely resistant to relativistic or completely rationalizing positions. On this more fundamental level of experience, complicated utilitarian and rationally dependent ethical theories—as well as Aristotle's own virtue ethics for that matter—need not apply. Indeed, this view derives its truth from the immediate 'seeing' of the world, not as an object of conscious thought as such, but rather as an undeniable, innocent and altogether ethical experience of existence—one that naturally perceives purpose in nature and senses the flourishing of life as innately good. I suggest that in denying this experience we deny what is most natural in ourselves and, by consequence, what is most human.

Whether or not we agree with every aspect of Aristotle's account of nature—and there is, of course, a great deal to criticize—his perspective should, if nothing else, inspire the recognition that as individuals we do have the natural capacity to know, or, indeed, sense the world in a unique way. Through Aristotle's example we may well begin

to look at the world that surrounds us differently—to see the things of nature, or indeed, those things *with* a nature, as proper subjects rather than objects.[110] We need only open ourselves up to experience nature as it is; to trust the truth of natural sight, in order to acknowledge the fact that we are part of a greater and wholly inter-subjective experience of being; and that we do indeed have the capacity to sense the natural ethos—it is the purpose of ecological phenomenology to help us recognize just this potential.

For us moderns, however, all of this may be more easily said than done. Over the centuries we have systematically rejected this most naturally human view of the world, and we have given truth and meaning over to science and technology almost exclusively; *Eros* has become directed by the products they produce. This has skewed the practice of philosophy, history, economics, and modern cultural activity in general, towards the brilliance of human artifice and the ideology of progress—the proper development and understanding of human *orexis* seems to be in a state of crisis. The atrocious events of the 20th century—the two World Wars, the Holocaust, Hiroshima and Nagasaki among many others—have increasingly pushed us to question the modern humanist/rationalist view of the world and to recognize the dangers inherent in our technological culture. The technological achievements of the 20th Century have also allowed us to look back on our planet from outer space—a perspective that has had profound metaphysical and existential implications with which we have not yet come to terms. And now in the 21st century, we face unprecedented environmental and economic challenges. Although our mode of existence seems completely at odds with the changes we need to make, we can no longer hide from the uncertainty of our condition in consumerism—we must, finally, face our problems head on. Clearly, this is going to involve a complete reworking of almost every aspect of our culture and, perhaps most fundamentally, a new understanding of nature and what it means to be human. While phenomenology itself cannot provide direct solutions to the problems we face, it can offer us a method by which we may begin to see the relationship between the world and ourselves in a more primordial and authentic sense. Indeed, this perspective may offer a starting point from which we might begin to rework our ethical sense of the relationship between science, technology,

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110 See Evernden, Ch 4, 'A Biology of Subjects.'

humanity, and nature—one that begins with the individual's direct experience of the world. In the concluding section I will briefly examine modern attempts to return to or to re-embrace the way of seeing the world that seemed so natural for Aristotle in the 4th century B.C.; and I will consider how this phenomenological view might begin to be integrated with our current understanding of the individual as a political animal, as well as with our technological culture in order to open us up to a more authentic view of ourselves and a deeper understanding of Being itself.

The Ethical Experience of Nature

As we have considered, the modern scientific and philosophical view is very critical of Aristotle[111] as it rejects the possibility that human perception is capable of knowing the true causes of things—any purposes that humans think they see in nature are merely psychological projections or superstitious fabrications.[112] For modern science, all things in nature proceed from necessity; and the goal of scientific inquiry is to discover the universal laws that determine this necessity. However, as Husserl points out in *The Crisis*, the scientific age has paid a price for rejecting the purposeful experience of nature that comes from the kind of naturally human point of view that Aristotle embraces. Mired in technology, we have lost sight of the natural sense of the world. Truth has become simply a product of the correlation of events to predictions (or the rendering of logically balanced statements that resist contradiction). As a result, ethical understanding too comes to be determined by language and *techné*; we take it as given that it is human reason that must impose meaning onto the world. But the idea that the human mind might be, as a part of nature itself, perfectly suited to 'see' the meaning of things as nature gives it to experience is not a view that the scientific age accepts as valid.[113]

The modern scientific view of the world is gained through the microscope, the

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111 One should keep in mind that Aristotle was not ignorant of the kinds of criticism that modern science levels against him. After all, his work responds to the rationalizing Eleatic and Platonic approach as well as to the materialism of Democritus and Empedocles, which, in terms of basic principles, is not so distant from modern science.

112 See Spinoza, B., *Ethics*, Appendix to Part I

113 "Humans must suspend lived experience to produce the "scientific world view" of physics. Our direct awareness of nature as the meaningful context of our lives, by contrast presents itself spontaneously, without a subject's effort. If anything it requires the opposite: to suspend effort, to let be and listen, letting nature speak." (Kohak, p.6)

telescope, the abstraction of mathematics and the algorithmic power of the computer. And thanks to the technology provided by scientific discovery, the things of the world can be manipulated as if they were merely the passive objects of the human will. For modern science, nature is homogenous in its most basic state—understood as blind matter acting in accordance with knowable laws, it is purposeless and therefore not a proper subject for ethics. And indeed, teleological conceptions of nature, such as Aristotle's, were scoffed at in the Scientific Age. After all, an approach to the study of nature that strives to see the inherent purpose in it is necessarily at odds with a program that seeks to transform it. Aristotle's proper view of the physical world is almost completely useless to any kind of technological program as it strives to see nature as it is, not as is it might be used to serve human purposes—*theoria* seeks knowledge for its own sake, as a human virtue that leads to *eudaimonia*, and not instrumentally for the sake of progress or technology.

While the modern view of the world has allowed us to create what can only be described as technological miracles, it has also estranged us from nature and, many would argue, from an authentic and purposeful experience of life itself. It has imposed a cultural model that allows us to use nature and science instrumentally towards increasingly irrational ends. Nature, as well as the creatures and objects—or, as we call them, resources[114]—found within it, are viewed as being purposeful only insomuch as they serve our desires. According to our subject/object techno-culture as it descends from Bacon and Descartes, nature, once 'understood' by the laws we 'discover' and impose upon it, becomes an object that human reason molds with the tools of technology. By this view, mind and world are ontologically distinct entities and nature becomes an object of human consciousness rather than its condition. And as the modern cultural aesthetic is one of progress, science often turns away from the task of seeing and knowing goodness, and is conflated with and led by technology and the creed of progress and economic growth. The natural world provides fuel for the machine: the forests are vast stores of material with which we make the products that drive our economy—that is the purpose we give them. Or, conversely, they become objects that stand in the way of agriculture,

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114 By describing something as a resource we seem to have cause to protect it. But all we really have is a license to exploit it." Evernden, p.23

herding, or transportation infrastructures and must be removed—they are relatively purposeful or purposeless only in relation to our needs and desires. Animals too, finally, are simply machines and/or sources of meat.[115] And what of ourselves? What is our *telos* in the modern age? Is our final purpose as individuals simply to serve as the digestive tract of the economic machine? Or are we more than simply the all-important worker/consumers?

In the 21st century, we find ourselves faced with a crisis that is as metaphysical as it is physical, as ethical as it is existential. We find ourselves struggling with our relationship to nature and, by consequence, ourselves. We have come to dismiss the most fundamental way in which we know the world—today, the acceptable source of knowledge comes not from our own senses and experience but rather through the lens of science and technology. We accept as fact that truth, meaning and goodness are not in nature but rather in the artifice we produce. We have adopted the position that purpose is an attribute that is given by human reason rather than something that lies in the experience of nature. And we have lacerated ourselves from natural meaning by creating an artificial existence whose purpose is increasingly unclear, and whose ramifications may be potentially disastrous for all life on earth. Our 'reaching out' (*orexis*) to the world is increasingly checked at every turn by artifice and advertising and as a result we tend to construct our ethics around culture and economy rather than through those natural and universal elements that permeate Being.

In the first half of the 20th century, thinkers like Husserl and Heidegger were already concerned about the problems inherent in a highly technological society. In different ways they both tried to reconnect with an authentic, natural experience of the world through an examination of human consciousness. Husserl's phenomenology is the study of the essential structures of experience and subjectivity, and as such it provides the first real method for existential investigation in to the self and human consciousness. Husserl attempted to correct what he saw as fundamental problems and misunderstandings in the philosophical legacy of Descartes—the essentially dualist conception of world and mind for instance—but he remains committed to the Cartesian

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115 See Evernden, p.77

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prospect that human conscious is essentially intentional. That is he believes that consciousness is always and necessarily about something.

Heidegger develops the phenomenological idea by finally breaking with Husserl and the entire Cartesian project. Although Heidegger does not reject the concept of intentionality, he does not see it as the most fundamental aspect of human experience.[116] He posits that our most primordial experience is not intentional at all—it is, rather, a unified experience of being in the world. Like Aristotle, Heidegger attempts to understand the nature of being as such, but in doing so he discovers that focusing on intentionality gives us only part of the picture. As a result, Heidegger does not talk about consciousness, subjectivity, objects or intentionality, nor does he use the term "human being."[117] Instead he employs the wonderful word "*Dasein*" which literally means "being there," both in terms of place and time. He does this because he thinks that from the "innocence"[118] of the first-person perspective—that is, the view of the world from the fundamental and most natural vantage point of "sheer presence"—the question of what we are in the world remains to be determined. For Heidegger, it is this state we must contemplate if we are to discover our primordial selves.

If Heidegger speaks of consciousness at all it is never directly and only has to do with the fundamental way in which it opens us up to being as such for query. But where most philosophers would agree that we are essentially questioning creatures—remember Aristotle's claim that "all human beings by nature desire to know"—Heidegger refuses to discuss this in terms of subjectivity or intentionality.[119] Indeed, there is a strong sense in which the kind of ontological questioning that Heidegger posits as primordially human is

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116 For Heidegger, it is only when we begin to deliberate on the particulars of an object with which we are engaged that they properly become objects or things at all. He discusses the levels of conscious engagement with the world most famously with the terms "ready-to-hand" and "present-to-hand." See Blattner p. 50-6, 64.

117 Heidegger's project in *Being and Time* is to describe the essence of being—that is, as stripped from notions of material causes and frameworks. As result, the normal terms we use for things and objects cannot be used lest they defeat his purpose. Indeed, one could say he is extending Aristotle's conception of form as an essential part of being as such.

118 "Perhaps we may think of phenomenology as a kind of deliberate naivety through which it is possible to encounter a world unencumbered with presuppositions. It is a formal resistance to the kind of reality-censorship of Galileo when he declared size and shape to be real, smell and colour unreal." Evernden p.57

119 Otherwise he would be forced to return to a dualistic Cartesian position, as this would impose an observer who, most fundamentally, questions the things of the world as objects.

not directed towards the world or Being, but arises because of it. Heidegger shows that the conception of the detached self that examines the world is incomplete—the subject is, before anything else, *in* the world. This explains why the Cartesian *cogito ergo sum* is such a misleading paradigm of self-identity. For Heidegger, this split between mind, body and world is disastrous, not only because it leads to the assumption that self-knowledge is immediate and transparent, but also because it allows us to adopt the false view of the world as a resource—this perspective betrays our own nature and, in the process, the true nature of our relationship to the world. For Heidegger and Husserl, we become diminished beings when we engage in competition and consumerism, or when as a culture we allow ourselves to become blinded by the glare of technology. This kind of activity removes us from authentic engagement with others and the world.

There is indeed a strong ecological aspect to the thought of Heidegger and recent decades have seen thinkers like Zimmerman, Naess, Evernden, and Kohak employ aspects of his way of looking at the world—as well as the developments made by thinkers associated with him—in order to reconnect philosophical thought with the human experience of nature. In an attempt to rediscover our most innocent, embedded and primordial experience of the natural world, this phenomenological view seeks to lay bare the fundamental experience of nature by 'bracketing out' economic, social, historic and scientific evaluations of it. However, ecological phenomenology, and the deep ecology that is so closely associated with it, strives to offer more than just a way of opening up to a 'pure' experience of nature. It goes further and claims to offer a necessary response to the modern obsession with technology and the reductively quantitative accounts of the natural world that enable the very instrumental view of nature I was bemoaning above.

The position of ecological phenomenology and deep ecology resonates profoundly with the views of Aristotle, and especially with the ethical *telos* of the flourishing life I was discussing earlier. But it also owes a great debt to Heidegger's conception of "care"—this sense of nature as pure presence; or the primordial concern for Being as such that transcends the notion of the world as a collection of neutral matter or

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things and sees it as something we "live though."[120] Generally speaking, ecological phenomenology sees the wellbeing and flourishing of all life on Earth as a universal good; it views the beings of the world as intrinsically purposeful—the true value of natural beings is independent from human intention—; it sees the heterogeneity of natural forms, including geographical formations such as mountains and bodies of water, as contributing to the overall value of nature; and claims that any human activity that works against the innate purpose of natural forms, or the overall flourishing of life, violates a fundamental natural ethos. Finally, it calls for the introduction of new policies that take this natural ethos into account within the sphere of human social, economic, philosophical and scientific discourse. Indeed, this position asks us to "see" the world in a way that is both new and primordial at the same time. It asks us to distinguish human artifice and assumptions from natural purpose so that, finally, we might rediscover our own relationship with the natural world and come to see ourselves not as the center of creation, or "in-nature," but rather as an enmeshed part of it.

In the context of our modern culture, the recognition of this view necessarily involves an uncovering of the true meaning of human being—a reaffirmation of our own nature as meaningful beings through the recognition of our own natural experience as a primal and fundamental truth. But this does not presuppose the abolition or dismantling of science and technology—such a suggestion would be as ridiculous as it is impossible––but rather a re-thinking and clarification of its meaning and purpose. Indeed, *techné*, reason, and artifice are a part of what it means to be human—pointing to Heidegger, Kohak writes, "Technology… is not only a convenience but also an authentic human possibility." He continues, " [Mankind] is an artificer not by accident but essentially…. If the products of human *techné* become philosophically and experientially problematic it is, I would submit, because we come to think of them as autonomous of the purpose

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120 "Here, however, 'Nature' is not to be understood as that which is just present-at-hand, nor as the power of Nature. The wood is a forest of timber, the mountain a quarry of rock; the river is water-power, the wind is wind 'in the sails.' As the 'environment' is discovered, the 'Nature' thus discovered is encountered too. If its kind of Being is as ready-to-hand is disregarded, this 'Nature' itself can be discovered and defined simply in its pure presence-at-hand. But when this happens, the Nature which 'stirs and strives', which assails us and enthrals us as landscape, remains hidden. The botanist's plants are not the flowers of the hedgerow; the 'source' which the geographer establishes for a river is not the 'springhead in the dale.'" Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 100. cf. Evernden p.66.

which led to their production and give them meaning" (Kohak, p. 23-24). This speaks to why the phenomenological bracketing introduced by Husserl works so well in an ecological context. It offers a means by which the true meaning of human artifice can be affirmed by giving it an experiential grounding; it allows us to transcend our psychological notions of artifice and begin to see it as a part of our capabilities as natural beings (as part of the way we 'reach out to the world') rather than, falsely, as an end in itself. Naess expresses this insight in a more explicitly practical terms, "The implementation of ecologically responsible policies requires in this century an exponential growth of technical skill and invention—but in new directions, directions which today are not consistently and liberally supported by the research policy organs of our nation states." (Naess 1973) The practical question of how we might begin to direct human potential and capability (*techné*, reason etc.) towards the ecologically aware action and 'policies' remains open. However, Naess' 1973 paper, "The Shallow and the Deep, Long Range Ecology Movements"[121] offers a useful starting point. Naess begins by defining the difference between: I) The Shallow Ecology movement, which simply fights against pollution and resource depletion—the central objective being "the health and affluence of people in the developed countries"—; and II) The Deep Ecology movement that,

(1) *Rejects the "man-in-environment image in favour of the relational, total-field image"*[122]

(2) *Asserts a principle of "Biospherical egalitarianism"* that promotes a "deep-seated respect, or even veneration, for ways and forms of life… equal right to live and blossom is an intuitively clear and obvious value axiom. Its restriction to humans is an anthropocentrism with detrimental effects upon the life quality of humans themselves…."

(3) *Promotes an awareness of "diversity and of symbiosis"* in the recognition

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121 Originally published in *Inquiry* (Oslo), 16 (1973).

122 Naess expands this: "Organisms as knots in the biospherical net or field of intrinsic relations. An intrinsic relation between two things A and B is such that the relation belongs to the definitions of basic constitutions of A and B, so that without the relation, A and B are no longer the same things. The total-field dissolves not on the man-in-environment concept, but every compact thing-in-milieu concept- except when talking at a superficial or preliminary level of communication."

that: "Diversity enhances the potentialities of survival, the chances of new modes of life, the richness of forms. And the so-called struggle for life, and survival of the fittest, should be interpreted in the sense of the ability to coexist and cooperate in complex relationships, rather than the ability to kill, exploit, and suppress. "Live and let live" is a more powerful ecological principle than "Either you or me." The latter tends to reduce the multiplicity of kinds of forms of life, and also to create destruction within the communities of the same species. Ecologically inspired attitudes therefore favour diversity of human ways of life, of cultures, of occupations, of economies. They support the fight against economic and cultural, as much as military, invasion and domination, and they are opposed to the annihilation of seals and whales as much as to that of human tribes and cultures."

(4) *Embraces an Anti-class posture* consistent "with wide and widening classless diversity."

(5) *Fights against pollution and resource depletion*, but is wary of projects that may reduce pollution but increase "evils of other kinds."

(6) *Embraces complexity, not complication*—"Organisms, ways of life, and interactions in the biosphere in general, exhibit complexity of such an astoundingly high level as to colour the general outlook of ecologists. Such complexity makes thinking in terms of vast systems inevitable. It also makes for a keen, steady perception of the profound human ignorance of bio-spherical relationships and therefore of the effect of disturbances."

(7) *Promotes local autonomy and decentralization*—"The vulnerability of a form of life is roughly proportional to the weight of influences from afar, from outside the local region in which that form has obtained an ecological equilibrium. This lends support to our efforts to strengthen local self-government and material and mental self-sufficiency. But these efforts presuppose an impetus towards decentralization. Pollution problems, including those of thermal pollution and recirculation of materials, also lead us in this direction, because increased local autonomy, if we are able to keep other factors constant, reduces energy consumption."

Naess goes on to recognise that many of the "formulations" made in his seven point "survey" are intentionally vague and that they must be subject to the conditions and contingent needs of the situation at hand, which vary from place to place and that must be carefully examined. Naess' seven formulations begin with insights into the value of nature that resonate with those of Aristotle: "…an ecosophy, however, is more like a system of the kind constructed by Aristotle…." And indeed, in face of the now dire environmental crisis, the work of thinkers like Naess seems more crucial than ever. Many modern thinkers struggle to find convincing ways to make nature a 'player' in the arena of public policy. However, I suggest that before these models can be effectively transposed into the realm of human political structures they must be founded on a more fundamental ethical sense of nature that resonates as true on an individual level. Without a firm grounding in an ethos based on a personal understanding of nature as meaningful in and of itself, these noble but often metaphoric and anthropomorphic notions of natural rights may be discarded or manipulated according to political whims—in a democratic society, the values reflected in these policies must reflect the true beliefs of the *demos* in order to be effective. Ecological phenomenology and Deep Ecology strives to open us up to experience precisely this true ethical sense of nature on an individual level so that we may begin to integrate a personal experience of natural purpose into our social and political lives. In our complicated technological society, legitimacy and notions of rights and justice so often seem to come to us by way of a 'top down' political/scientific hierarchy. Information and its diffusion have become increasingly specialized and the individual tends to feel increasingly powerless in face of the complexity he or she faces. This results in a passive attitude towards knowledge, ethics and political engagement, as well as a turning away from the value of individual human experience. Phenomenology attempts to respond to this by placing the responsibility for seeing the ethical sense of things back on the individual as part of an active process of engagement with the world. Just as Aristotle places philosophical inquiry and political engagement high on the list of those natural activities of the human soul that lead to the excellence of the rational animal, so phenomenology places responsibility in the hands of the individual to

determine his or her own authenticity and ethical outlook—that is, to take responsibility for his or her own experience of the world.

For Heidegger, authenticity revolves around the individual's "throwness" into the world, and the integrity, originality and honesty with which the individual creates his own authentic subjectivity from the starting point of "sheer presence", only to reintegrate it back into society. For Heidegger, it is precisely by way of subjective authenticity that we most effectively participate in society—those who rely solely on the perceived opinions of others or the cultural narrative of society in order to construct their ethical understanding of the world are doomed to an inauthentic existence. But while phenomenology concerns itself with an examination of subjective experience, it also affirms that this experience is necessarily predicated on the existence of others. Indeed, phenomenology reveals the existential responsibility to examine and question our experience (of nature, culture, society, and others) directly, but this responsibility also requires us to share these experiences openly and passionately with our children, our community, and our government. Merleau-Ponty expresses this insight beautifully: "My own field of thought and action is made up of imperfect meanings, badly defined and interrupted. They are completed over there, in the others who hold the key to them because they see sides of things that I do not see, as well as, one might say, my social back. Likewise, I am the only one capable of tallying the balance sheets of their lives, for their meanings are also incomplete and are openings onto something that I alone am able to see. I do not have to search very far for the others: I find them in my experience, lodged in the hollows that show what they see and what I fail to see. Our experiences thus have lateral relationships of truth: all together, each possessing what is secret to the other, in our combined functioning we form a totality which moves toward enlightenment and completion.... We are never locked in ourselves." (Merleau-Ponty 1955) And in terms of our relationship to the environment, Kohak suggests that an 'ecological ethic' may be discovered through the "radical opening of our life and thought to the world of others, human, animate, inanimate, in the integrity of its otherness and the meaningfulness of its being." Thus Ecological phenomenology seeks an ethical perspective that is based on the active and reciprocal nature of inter-subjective experience: In every aspect of our

becoming we have the phenomenological responsibility to consider the *eudaimonia* of the Other and the All in terms of the ethical implications of our individual actions.

Phenomenology returns to the original question of philosophy as it was first raised by the Greeks, namely, "what is Being?" Just as Aristotle's *theoria* encourages us to look beyond the gates of the city in order to better know the forms and purposes of natural beings; and just as Plato prompts us to engage in the kinds of intellectual activity that will allow us to reveal and experience the good that resides within us; so too phenomenology offers us a philosophical perspective that may aid us in clearing away the *noise* of culture, civilization and technology so that we might experience the meaning of nature, society and ourselves in a more direct way—not simply as blind matter, but rather as an interrelated and changing system of intrinsically purposeful beings and things all striving towards the universal goodness of the flourishing life. And perhaps it is the innocent contemplation of this experience that is the basic purpose of the natural human, the most fundamental activity of the soul of the rational animal, the philosopher, *Dasein*, or the being that contemplates Being.

Conclusion

Beginning with Thales and the Milesians, Greek philosophy advances the potential of the human mind to understand Being as it is given to experience. But it also seeks, with Parmenides and the Eleatics, to know Being through the abstract realm of pure thought. Plato and Aristotle add to this an ethical faculty that attempts to unify or resolve the many contradictions and problems found in the thought of their predecessors—one that attempts to know the world in a way that embraces the fundamental qualitative nature of human experience. And as I have been suggesting all along, with out such an ethical inquiry into ourselves and the world in which we live our relationship to existence is devoid of meaning and our actions and thoughts may be easily manipulated by unexamined desires and blind notions of progress.

In the course of the previous chapters I have, from time to time, directly and indirectly played with what seem to be parallels between the culture of ancient Athens and our own in the modern West. As a result I am surely guilty of many counts of over simplification, if not downright anachronism. Be that as it may, I hope the reader will agree that there may be, at the very least, general comparisons to be made here that reveal fundamental problems associated with progress and civilization. Like the Presocratics and the Greek Enlightenment, the project of modern science and technology represents the natural capability and drive for human beings to examine and understand the world in which we live. It is, in its essence, a philosophical undertaking—one through which we may gain knowledge of our place in existence and thereby come closer to realizing our potential as creatures who "by nature desire to know." However, the capabilities that scientific knowledge imbues us with often dangerously outstrips our ability to understand the meaning and long term implications of our actions; and it often instils in us an exaggerated sense of control over the natural world and our own destinies. Indeed, the humanist/rationalist project (both ancient and modern) seems to begin with the optimistic and well-intentioned recognition that the human mind may be capable of some kind of

objective understanding of reality. However, by devaluing the qualitative aspects of human experience this project has the dangerous tendency to reduce the natural to something artificial—and, perhaps ironically, human potential into something disturbingly anti-human. When the humble search for knowledge and understanding transforms into an overweening self-confidence the unfortunate consequence is a distancing of the human mind from what it was initially trying to come closer to in the first place. While the social, and indeed, physical evidence for this phenomenon is surely far more apparent in our own day, the Greeks in the 5th century did nurture their own obsession with the possibilities of *techné* and progress. And as we have seen, this seems to have played a role in the separation of human laws and conventions from some notion of nature, as well as the ethical atomising of the individual from his community—often leading to a bitter retreat into moral apathy and/or a self-serving and instrumental attitude towards the world. In both ancient and modern contexts, a dangerous confusion begins to hold sway with regards to the nature of human being and our relationship to existence.

In the absence of an ongoing personal ethical critique of our experiences, actions and possibilities we allow our desires and our relationship to the world to be wholly dictated by the artifice of civilization and culture—in this way we allow ourselves to become artificial beings; we hear only the voice of our own rhetoric and we reach out to a world formed by images of our own creation rather than the necessity of nature. I have attempted to demonstrate here how Plato and Aristotle offer the modern reader a way to reconnect with his or her own ethical experience of the world in order to find some clarity, humanity, and goodness within the feverish complexity of civilized life. Where Plato is concerned with self-examination, the interrogation of belief and opinion, and the revelation of virtue in the soul, Aristotle offers us an example of the kind of understanding of nature we may arrive at through the most basic means nature herself has endowed us with. They both want us to search for meaning and purpose in the world; and both demand that we 'see' and think for ourselves. Indeed, they are both phenomenologists in the sense that they strive to open the mind up to the examination of existence from the perspective of the first person.

While Plato does not discuss the direct experience of the things and creatures of

nature, he is clearly concerned with the problems inherent in the *nomos/phusis* distinction. He asserts that through a rigorous and ongoing examination of self we may better align our souls with the cosmic order of nature and thereby live our lives, create our stories and beliefs, and write our laws in accordance with Necessity, Justice, Beauty, and The Good. Indeed, Plato's de-emphasis of the materialistic conception of *phusis* advanced by the Presocratics does not imply (as some assume) a total rejection of nature. Rather, he recognizes the vitality of the Cosmos by drawing out the soul, form, virtue and intelligence that makes knowable the existence we experience in constant motion around us. In doing so he asks us to recognize and exercise our capacity to understand the moral meaning of Being and thus close the gap between Human and Cosmos. Aristotle brings these insights in to the realm of direct experience. He offers us a view of the world that prompts us to consider the *becoming* with which our consciousness is enmeshed as part of an ongoing, heterogeneous and universal formal process that seeks the flourishing life (*eudaimonia*) as an end in itself.

The account of Plato and Aristotle I have offered here is incomplete and almost entirely positive. There is, of course, much to criticize and much more to discuss—a great deal of ink has been and continues to be spilled in this area. However, rather than engage directly in the academic discussion of Greek philosophy, I have sought here to draw out and speculate on practical aspects in the thought of Plato and Aristotle that may aid us in our pursuit of self-knowledge and meaning in the 21st century. While there are a great many unresolved questions that scholars continue to struggle with in the writings of Plato and Aristotle, and while many of their ideas remain subjects of controversy, there is, in my view at least, an overriding clarity and positive nature to their thought—above all, they offer us a clear vision of human potential and what it means to live a good life. Indeed, they show us the importance of the examined life, personally, politically and, by extension, perhaps even ecologically: Without self-reflective, critical, ethical and responsibly active citizens, the democracy becomes an instrument of the greedy and tyrannical; and without some recognition of the value and meaning that permeates the things and creatures that constitute the world we separate ourselves from Being at our own peril.

I hope that my investigations and speculations here have given the reader pause to reflect on these issues and that he or she may be inspired to investigate these thinkers further. Although we are separated from Thales, Heraclitus, Parmenides, Democritus, Protagoras, Socrates, Plato and Aristotle by more than two thousand years, Ancient Greek thought continues to provide a great well of living ideas. And the culture of Ancient Greece itself, both in its triumphs and failures, calls out to us over the millennia––and in a great many ways it remains with us to this day. It continues to be in our interest to examine our beginnings as political, scientific and philosophical beings; and to consider those early critiques of civilization and self that emerged so close to the source. Immersed as we are in the folly of the modern techno-culture, we are indeed fortunate that we may continue to draw profound and entirely useful revelations into the nature and meaning of existence through an active engagement with the great dialectic of *being* and *becoming* that is Ancient Greek philosophy.

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