

THE MYSTICISM OF PLATO

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PLATO, fontal as he is, did not issue out of the void. The ancient mystery cults, as well as Pindar, Pythagoras, Heraclitus, Socrates, and other thinkers, bedewed the mind that produced the *Phaedrus* and the *Symposium*.

Out of the pre-Platonic background of Greek thought there emerges, more and more originatively and creatively, the profound thinker "der dunkle Philosoph," Heraclitus of Ephesus.¹ Underneath the Heraclitan doctrine of perpetual flux lies the far profounder truth that within all this flow and change there is something rational, eternal, abiding,—the Logos. "This word is everlasting. It reaches down deep. It is the guide of all things."² Shadowy and indefinite as is this Heraclitean Logos, it is pregnant with spiritual meaning, and it is not surprising that early Christian writers coupled the name of Heraclitus with that of Socrates and Plato as Christians before Christ.³

In that strong, sincere, forthright soul, Socrates, protagonist of personality, there was not only an intuitive grasp of truth, but a fervor of spirit, and a sense of spiritual verities which greatly influenced Plato.

Plato discloses the mystical mind too clearly and constantly to be questioned; but the extraordinary wealth and scope of his mysticism have as yet hardly been recognized.⁴

Consider, first, *his attitude toward spiritual as contrasted with scientific truth*, as illustrated in the following illuminating speech of Socrates in the *Phaedrus*. It is called out by the question of Phae-

¹"The most original Greek thinker, next to Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle." E. Fieleiterer, *Philosophie der Heraklit*.

²*Fragments*, Bakewell, *Source Book*, p. 28.

³E. G. Justin Martyr and Eusebius.

⁴This does not mean that his mind was not also thoroughly *rational* as well as *nostical*.

drus to Socrates, as the two are walking together along the banks of the Ilissus, as to whether he believes the tale of Boreas carrying off Orithyia to be true. Socrates replies:

Why, I should do nothing strangely out of the way if I were to refuse to it credit, as the learned do; and go on in their rationalizing method to say that as the girl was playing with Pharmacea she was blown over the adjoining cliffs by a blast of the wind, Boreas; and that having met with death in this manner, she was fabled to have been carried off by the god Boreas—either from this place or, if you like from Mars hill, which according to another account, was the scene of her adventure. But for my part, Phaedrus, though I consider such explanations sufficiently pretty, yet I esteem them the peculiar province of a very subtle, painstaking, and by no means particularly enviable person, if for no other reason than that he will be called upon, as soon as he has finished this subject, to set us right as to the form of the Hippocentaurs, and again as to that of the Chimera, and then he will have pouring in upon him a like crowd of Gorgons and Pegasus, and such a wondrous host of portentous and impossible creatures that if he were to disbelieve them all, and, with a kind of vulgar acuteness, apply to each successively the test of probability, he would require no small amount of time and labour for his task. But I have no leisure for such studies—and the reason, my friend, is this: I cannot as yet obey the Delphic inscription which bids me know myself, and it seems to me ridiculous for one who is still destitute of this knowledge to busy himself with matters which in no wise concern him. I therefore leave these subjects alone, and acquiescing in the received opinion regarding them, I devote myself, as I just now said, to the study, not of fables, but of my own self, that I may see whether I am really a more complicated and a more furious monster than Typhon, or a creature of a gentler and a simpler sort, the born heir of a divine and tranquil nature.⁵

A perspicuous revelation this, touched by a subtle humor, of the working of a mind so concentrated upon the inner life of the self that it can hardly be patient with those who are occupied with lesser interests.

Plato's mysticism is evidenced by his *intuitionism*. Although his concern—as indicated in the above pungent speech—was chiefly ethical,⁶ it was not confined, as was that of Socrates, to the moral sphere. He was intent to know all that he could of ultimate truths.

⁵ Wrights translation. Everyman's library.

⁶ "The great question, he tells us in the Republic, is whether we shall be good or bad. To this all else is subordinate—art, literature, industry, and politics, everything in public and private life." George Rowland Dedson, *The Relation of Plato to our Age*, Harvard Theol. Review, VI, 1, 101.

Of this quest, the doctrine of ideas was the issue. Here, again, we find him mystical, first, in the method by which he arrives at the ideas, intuition, and second in that which he finds to be the central idea, the Good.

The truth-method of Plato is the Mystical one of *immediacy*. "While always insisting on exact argument and careful logical reasoning, he makes all reasoning depend finally on intellectual insight and vision which is immediate."⁷ At the end of all search and striving, of all argument and dialectic, the truth comes to us, "on a sudden," as does the perception of beauty. It is a gift, an impartation. Not only does truth come thus, but virtue itself. After the long and searching discussion of the nature of virtue in the *Meno*, the conclusion reached is as follows: "From this reasoning then, Meno, it appears to us that such as are possessed of virtue, have it as a divine *portion* or *allotment* to them."

In making the Good the Idea of ideas, Plato assumed the mystical as well as the ethical norm of values.⁸ For there is no final reason for making Goodness supreme except the mystical one that it is *good*. It must be granted, however, that Plato fell short of the completely personal conception of the Good,⁹ and thus failed of that intimately personal form of mysticism which is realized in Christianity alone.

The use of the myth by Plato is another indication of his mysticism. It shows his discontent with any merely abstract, intellectual, and impotent view of truth. He will have it infused with imagination and feeling. J. A. Stewart regards the purpose of Plato in the use of the myth to be the rousing of the "transcendental feeling" which all true poetry evokes. "It is in Transcendental Feeling, not in thought, that consciousness comes nearest to ultimate reality."¹⁰ Would it not be truer to Plato to say that it is in thought, or rather in contemplation, *animated by transcendental feeling*, that we come nearest to ultimate reality? For Plato's myths are symbolic and illustrative and as such shot through with vigorous thought.

⁷ A. D. Lindsay, *Introduction to Five Dialogues of Plato bearing on Poetic Inspiration*, Everyman's Library, p. ix.

⁸ "The doctrine of man's relationship to the divine is perhaps the most fundamental of Plato's doctrines." James Adam: *The Vitality of Platonism*, p. 131.

⁹ For a discussion of Plato's conception of personality see Mortineau, *Types of Ethical Theory*, I, p. 87. Teichmüller wrote of Plato's sense of personality: "Das Individuum und die individuelle Seele ist nicht im self standige Princip sondern nur ein Resultat der Mischung aus Idee und dem Princep des Worden's." Rhodé's *Psyche*, p. 278, Note.

¹⁰ Plato's Myths, p. 44.

The reader of Plato cannot but be struck by the calm serenity of the atmosphere of the dialogues. But was Plato's idealism so detached and serene as it seems? It may well be that there were struggles behind it and within it which are lost to us as we stand with him on the cloudless heights. Did he not denominate philosophy a "meditation on Death"?—a phrase which may well mean, as A. H. Lloyd has interpreted it, "just his cry of victory, his triumph over the despair, deeply evident to him, of Greek civilization."¹¹ So also with that lingering upon reminiscence, or "pre-existence," so consonant with mysticism, by means of which he summoned the soul to behold its own eternal birthright and home, "when it travelled in the company of the gods, and, looking high over what we now call real, lifted up its head into the region of eternal essence." This is his tribute to the reality of the spirit, rather than some echo from far-off India that had found its way into his thought.

Most mystical of Plato's attitudes is his *loyal devotion to love*, "the cherisher of all that is good, the abolisher of all evil; our most excellent pilot, defence, savior and guardian . . . the ornament and governor of all things human and divine; the best, the loveliest; in whose footsteps every one ought to follow, celebrating him excellently in song, and bearing each his part in that divinest harmony which Love sings to all things which live and are, soothing the troubled minds of gods and men."¹²

Where will one find a purer and more moving piece of mysticism than the passage in the *Phaedrus*, in which Socrates, duly admonished by his daemon (another touch of mysticism), makes his amends for the insult to love of which he and Phaedrus have been guilty, followed by the eloquent ascription to love? In this hymn occurs also that tribute to *inspiration* (madness) which seems so alien to Plato's customary mood but which he saves so skillfully from misinterpretation by distinguishing true from false inspiration: "We owe our greatest blessings to madness, if only it be granted by Heaven's bounty."

It remains only to point to the fact that Plato, too, had his ladder of love, not quite the same as that of Christian mysticism, but not unallied to it:

'Tis when a man ascendeth from these beautiful things by the Right Way of Love, and beginneth to have sight of that Eternal Beauty—'tis then, methinks, that he toucheth the goal. For this is the right way to go into the mysteries

¹¹ A. H. Lloyd, *Plato's Philosophy a Meditation on Death*, Harvard Theological Review, July, 1908, p. 337.

¹² *Symposium*.

of Eros, or to be led by another—beginning from the beautiful things here, to mount up alway into the Eternal beauty, using these things as the steps of a ladder . . . till at last, being come into that which is the Doctrine of the Eternal Beauty and naught else beside, he apprehendeth what Beauty Itself is.

In his comments upon the *Phaedrus* Jowett well says :

No one can truly appreciate the dialogues of Plato, especially the *Phaedrus*, *Symposium*, and parts of the *Republic*, who has not a sympathy with Mysticism . . . By Mysticism we mean not the extravagance of an erring fancy, but the concentration of reason in feeling, the enthusiastic love of the good, the true, the one, the sense of the infinity of knowledge and of the marvel of the human faculties.