The Ontology of Plato's *Phaedrus*

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Plato's *Phaedrus* has found many admirers over the centuries among philosophers and poets alike.[1] And yet some readers have found fault with the dialogue for one reason or another. Some ancient critics disapproved of its style. Some modern philosophers dismissed it as lightweight because of its overabundance of myths. One long-standing question concerns the unity of the dialogue, for while the first half presents three speeches about love, the second half reads quite differently, pursuing a rather technical discussion about rhetoric. Perhaps the most serious philosophical issue for the reader of the *Phaedrus* is the claim that the work is in conflict with itself over fundamental issues in metaphysics. Recently, this view has been published by Nehamas and Woodruff in the introduction to their new translation of the dialogue,[2] a text that is sure to be widely disseminated. According to this view, there is a great gulf between the early- and middle-period philosophy of Plato, and the thought of later dialogues such as the *Sophist* and the *Statesman.* Nehamas and Woodruff maintain that the philosophy of the *Sophist* and other later works "is obviously not the same as the theory of Forms we find in Plato's middle works, especially the *Phaedo* and the *Republic*" (Introduction, xlii). The later works knit the ideas together, but, they say, the middle dialogues isolate them from each other (xliii). And they are firm in placing Socrates's so-called Great Speech, running from *Phaedrus* 244 to 257, with the middle-period dialogues (xliii). The divisions practiced in the later works are at odds, they say, with the indivisibility central to the ideas of the middle works and the Great Speech (ibid). In the middle period, including the Great Speech of the *Phaedrus,* the ideas are paradigms, or supreme exemplifications of themselves; in the later dialectic, this is not so (xlii f.). In their view, Plato came to abandon the theory of ideas after his middle period: "Plato no longer accepted the theory of Forms as it is presented in the Great Speech"—that is to say, not even as he was writing it in the text of his *Phaedrus*! (xlii). What then are we to make of the Great Speech? "We can

1. In this article I draw upon my longer study, *Plato's* Phaedrus*: The Philosophy of Love* (West Lafayette: Purdue UP, 1998).

2. Plato, *Phaedrus,* tran. with Introduction and Notes by Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1995).

Dionysius, Vol. XIV, 1998, pp. 9–28.

now read Socrates' Great Speech as Plato's *farewell* [my italics] to the theory of forms it describes" (xlv). For the central fact is that the "later" dialectic is introduced in the second half of the *Phaedrus.*

This is by no means a new theory: an older German scholar, Julius Stenzel, pioneered this interpretation. In his view, the "middle-period" doctrine of ideas had led Plato into a number of intellectual conundrums. Do these ideas exist separately, by themselves? How are the particular instances of a virtue related to the idea of the virtue? He argued that these conundrums, which could not be solved within the framework of the early theory of ideas, were solved in the dialectic of collection and division.[3] And as Socrates, too, was associated in Plato's mind with those transcendent ideals of virtue he had once explored, the figure of Socrates tends to disappear when Plato undertakes to offer a new, non-Socratic philosophy. According to Stenzel, the method of collection and division does *not* operate upon transcendent Ideals like Justice, but takes its start always from the pragmatic domain, seeking to formulate concepts that encompass individual entities, objects of study that are evident phenomena, things like love, madness, anglers, statesmen, and so on. These concepts are not, like the old *ideai*, recollected from a previous life, that is, in Stenzel's neo-Kantian formulation, they are not *a priori* as the Socratic Ideals had been. This reading of the text enables Stenzel to see the late Platonic dialectic as paving the way for a more empirical method of science, with far more place granted to observation, which will show up in the later Academy and in Aristotle's biological works. This is the view that also appears, I think, in the work done by G.E.L. Owen, though his own philosophical approach was not neo-Kantian, but influenced by English logical researches of the 1940s and 1950s. He sharply separates the middle dialogues (including, for him, the *Timaeus*) from the "sophisticated metaphysic of the ... profoundly important late dialogues."[4]

But this reading leads to a curious interpretation of the *Phaedrus.*[5] In the new dialectic, there can be no place for reminiscence, and so it disappears after the *Phaedrus*, just as the figure of Socrates tends to be eclipsed after the *Phaedrus.* But it was the great speech of the *Phaedrus* that contained the most exuberant statement of the reminiscence-theme in all of Plato! Socrates is made here to introduce a new doctrine, the late dialectic, just after his great speech that proclaimed everything that the new doctrine will avoid! Thus the question of the unity of the *Phaedrus,* its internal consistency or

3. J. Stenzel, *Plato's Method of Dialectic*, trans. D.J. Allan (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940), 44.

4. "The Place of the *Timaeus* in Plato's Dialogues," in R.E. Allen, ed. *Studies in Plato's Metaphysics*, 338.

5. Stenzel, 150.

inconsistency, is directly connected to the overall relationship of Plato's late philosophy to the early philosophy. *If there is an early and a late philosophy, they are both contained in the Phaedrus!*

My intent in this paper is to comment on the ontological doctrine of the Great Speech, 244 ff. I shall not concentrate on the dialectic of collection and division in the later pages of the dialogue. But I might offer a few comments, in a prefatory way, to show the feasibility of a reading that reconciles the later pages with the Great Speech.

(a) The account offered by the Great Speech of our supernal vision is *not* contradicted at any point in the later pages on rhetoric and dialectic. Indeed, in my study cited in Footnote 1 above I have shown that the study of the soul that must be made by the successful rhetorician and dialectician (treated in *Phaedrus* 270 b–272 b) actually invokes the psychology of the Great Speech. The main passages in the later pages of the *Phaedrus* that treat dialectic (265 a–266 c, 269 b–272 b, 276 e–277 c) are descriptions of the philosopher's daily encounter with various interlocutors and various themes and situations. *But* there is a secret, hidden and higher condition for this practice of dialectic—the soul's primordial vision, as outlined for us in the Great Speech.

(b) There are, in the later pages of the dialogue, 257 ff., copious references to justice, truth, beauty and temperance, the very ideas that had been the focus of the soul's supernal vision as narrated in the Great Speech.[6] The most dramatic reference, probably, is the one found in Socrates' concluding prayer to the god Pan, which invokes Beauty and Temperance together, the very conjunction that had once seen by the soul as narrated in the Great Speech: "Dear Pan and all the other gods of this place, grant that I may be beautiful within ... and as for gold, let me have just as much as a temperate person might carry with him ..." (279 b–c). Those who would divide the *Phaedrus* in the middle might not be ready to hear echoing in these references to truth, beauty, temperance and knowledge the doctrine of the eternal ideas. But that is to beg the question! Why would we *not* suppose that these things that the dialectician needs to know in his daily practice are the ideas once seen by the soul? *Anamnesis* remains the condition for dialectic, and very likely a prayer is precisely that act of the mind that recalls in the midst of daily practice the things that it once learned on high.

So the Great Speech, far from being undermined by the later treatment of dialectic, is precisely the exploration of the grounds for the practice of dialectic (and, for that matter, of rhetoric too). Now the question that arises from this reading of the *Phaedrus* is whether an account of the primor-

6. On knowledge of good and bad—260 c; on truth—260 d, 262 a, 262 c, 273 d, 277 b, 278 c; on the just and unjust—261 c, 263 a.

dial vision absolutely had to be stated in the lexicon of myth. Is there some reason why it could not have been conducted in dialectical fashion? Perhaps because it's exploring the very ground of the possibility of dialectic? Perhaps the ultimate conditions for dialectic are treatable only in mythical form? In this way, it seems that the question of the mythical discourse of the Great Speech is connected to the question of the philosophical unity of the *Phaedrus*. We shall return to this question after we have made some study of the Great Speech itself, where I hope to make a case that the true nature of the soul and its eternal homeland might be accessible to dialectical thinking after all.

THE IDEAS

Socrates maintained in the *Meno* and *Phaedo* that we had to have an acquaintance with ideas in an earlier existence. But there Plato had never ventured to put into words a description of the primordial, pre-natal encounter that the soul had with the ideas. This is detailed for us in the central pages of the *Phaedrus*. The *Phaedrus* differs from the *Phaedo* in that its focus is less on the ultimate fate of the soul, and more on the life of the soul in advance of incarnation. At 249 b–c, restated 249 e 4, Plato will state a general condition for becoming human: the soul must have seen truth, *aleheia*, because a human soul must be able to grasp things according to the *eidos*. The journey of the soul in and beyond the cosmos, in the company of the god and a select group of companions, proves to be the condition for the possibility of characteristically human awareness. Stated mythically, it is a pre-natal vision, a story of how being and truth are infused into our souls, a pre-natal encounter of the soul with being, truth, justice and the like. So the *Phaedrus* offers a general account of the soul and of all that belongs together with the soul in its primordial, pre-incarnational state, the domain of its original being. In this, it is offering a general ontological theory, a theory that must be clamped together with psychology, for the soul is not something that can be isolated from its true milieu. We may consult the *Phaedo* and *Republic* first of all to give the appropriate direction to our exposition. It *is* true that the *Phaedrus* does not employ the terms *idea* and *eidos* as liberally as the *Phaedo* and *Republic* did, but, when it treats the beautiful, the temperate and the just, its inquiry is certainly continuous with theirs.

If we begin from the *Phaedo*, 72 e–77 b, we find Socrates' argument that all knowledge is achieved through recollection, and his case is that we can recognize two sticks as being equal only because we have a prior acquaintance with equality (74 a). The very same point that is illustrated by this case, he says (75 c–d), will also hold for what is greater and less, for the beautiful, the just, the pious, and, as he also says here, "all the rest of them." No other members of the array appear in this particular passage. But later

pages of the *Phaedo*, 99 d–107 b, devoted to a critique of the mechanical explanation of events, expand on our list by including the good, and the even and odd. Given the whole thrust of this later argument, it might be permissible to include the soul, and life and death, in this array, and perhaps fire, and the hot and cold too. The *Phaedo* uses the terms *idea* and *eidos* to refer to all this array in general terms: it is at 102 b and 103 e, for the first time in the *Phaedo*, that Socrates speaks of them as *eidos*, and at 105 d as *idea*.

But while the *Phaedo* postulated *anamnesis*, it offered no images for the pre-natal soul or for its encounter with that which it would later recollect—it only postulated some sort of experience. In the *Phaedrus*, this is brought before us as flying, feeding and seeing. The divine madness of love is realized in Plato's imagination as flying, soaring. Why is it that the human soul is open to this possibility of madness? It is because the love-experience restores to us, below the conscious level, the memory of primal scenes from the soul's ancient past. Love sets the soul to take flight, thus resuming its original heavenly activity. There are two kinds of soul—divine and mortal—and their flight in formation through the heavens gives a more graphic realization of that affinity of our soul with the gods that the *Phaedo* 81 a had expressed; their primordial kinship is shown. We must note that a strenuous activity of flight was needed before the mortal soul descended into a body—justice and temperance and the other ideas cannot merely "imprint" a soul in a passive state. Moreover, throughout the description in the *Phaedrus*, there are references to the soul feeding upon the ideas—a metaphor for living creatures that will recur later in the *Phaedrus*' account of the wings of the soul, even here on earth, throbbing and bursting with new growth. The exercise of flight, and nutrition, are the accompaniment to the pre-natal experience of seeing—the latter is no mere unsituated or passive imprinting but an active acquisition. Seeing is the principal experience recounted in the myth, and that is because Plato is leading up to an explanation for experiences of seeing that the incarnate soul has in this lifetime, the awakening of *eros* through the seeing of beauty, and likewise the cognitive recognition of truth here on earth. Plato's device is to prepare an account of embodied seeing by postulating a condition for it: a supernal seeing. In the reactions of love and knowledge here on earth, there is an awakening recollection of another seeing.

ON TRUTH. *PHAEDRUS* 247 C.

The *Phaedrus* does not rely mainly on the terms *idea* and *eidos*—there is a different tapestry of terms that requires an attentive study. We read at 247 c 3, "No poet here on earth has ever sung of that place above the

heavens, and none will ever do so fittingly. Yet we ourselves must dare to speak about it truly, because our very theme is truth." The soul had a primordial experience of seeing, and that which it saw has several names in the *Phaedrus*, first of all, truth, *aletheia*. Speaking as a philosopher, Socrates is saying that he wants to go further than any poet has ever done, and his warrant for doing so is that philosophy assumes an obligation to speak the truth, to "speak truly." He says it is especially important that the words we are to utter about the place above the heavens be true. This cannot refer back to 246 a 4–5 in which Socrates apologized for failing to state what the soul is and resorting to an image for it; far from renouncing imagery at this point, he becomes ever more emphatic in its use. The meaning rather is that we have to be bold and not faint-hearted, not stop short of the complete truth, a maxim, I think, to justify the use of any and all modes of discourse, myth, rhetoric and dialectic. The lines we quoted give the reason why philosophy has to take special pains in this case to speak the truth: it is because the present theme is truth. In fact the term *aletheia* recurs so frequently (c 8, d 4, 248 b 6, c 3–4, 249 b 6, d 5) that it should be the primary name we use for Socrates' theme throughout these pages.

Peri aletheias legonta, "speaking about truth," as we undertake it, means exploring that which sets a standard for all discourse, that by which it is measured. Everyone in some way aspires to truth, even in mythical and rhetorical discourse, and what we are now about to do is to identify, within the present thought and speech, that which is to guide all other thought and speech. The present inference is that, if this philosophy were not true itself, measured by the true measure, its claim to be a guide, a revealer of the measure, would be ludicrous.

"Truth" serves in this passage as a collective term or general term for all that which the soul saw above the heavens, including the things that become specified a bit further on: justice itself, moderation and so on. Truth is not one member of this group but the general character of the group. It would not be correct to translate *aletheia* here as "the truth." What the soul has seen is not some true doctrine, but rather that which makes for the possibility of any and all true doctrines even if there should be an infinity of them.

We have encountered this principle of truth already in the *Republic*, especially in 509 d–511 e, the Divided Line, and 514 a–519 d, the parable of the Cave. In both those passages, Plato's special focus was on degrees of truth—in the Divided Line, Socrates speaks of different degrees of truth as degrees of clarity, *sapheneia*, 509 d 9, 511 e 3; in the Cave the degrees of truth (515 c 2, 515 d 7, 516 a 3, 517 c 1–5) are correlated to different kinds and degrees of light and shadow. What is implied by both accounts, although

not stated in so many words, is the discovery of a pure truth at the climax of the ascent of the soul (517 c 1–5 makes the idea of the good, the last thing to be seen, the source and cause of all lesser kinds of truth). It is especially the *Phaedrus* that focusses on the soul's vision of truth pure and unalloyed.

At Phaedrus 249 b 5–c 6, we read: "For [a soul] that has never seen truth will not enter into this [human] frame. For it is by way of an *eidos* that human beings comprehend something that is said, something that comes out of many perceptions and is gathered into one through reasoning ...." Here Plato is tracing human reason itself, that which achieves knowledge by way of the idea or form, *eidos*, back to the recollection of truth, to the recollection of "those things that at one time our soul saw as it journeyed with a god." Plato would be correcting a common view that human knowledge arises from merely terrestrial experience or from the mere learning of language. He is reinforcing his commitment to the doctrine of reminiscence. There have been different ways of construing and translating this passage,[7] but on any of the interpretations, we cannot miss the primordial exposure to truth, and to that which truly is, as contrasted with the exposure to what most people call reality. Moreover, Plato is establishing a very specific connection between the constitution of the human being and the practice of philosophy. Having seen truth makes us human. But remaining close in memory to truth makes us philosophers (249 c 5–6). The philosophical life is just a further increment to what it is to be human. And in both ways we have an affinity to the gods, for they too enjoy a vision of the ideas. That was already implicit in the *Euthyphro*, in fact, where Socrates argued that the gods discerned and loved the pious, *to hosion*. But the *Phaedrus* alone proposes the audacious idea that the gods owe their divinity to their beholding the ideas. That thought was introduced in 247 d, with the reference to nourishing, and it comes to be stated explicitly at 249 c 5–6.

BEING. *PHAEDRUS* 247 C.

We'll make our approach to the next *Phaedrus* text by way of the *Republic*, Book V, 474–480. Socrates, having proposed his programme for the rule of philosophers in his city, must now explain what makes a philosopher. It is someone who loves all wisdom and all knowledge. And at 476 e, Socrates establishes that the object of knowledge is that which is, *on*, rather than that which is not, *ouk on*. Concerning that which is not, there can be no knowledge at all—only ignorance—but there is an intermediate faculty between knowledge and ignorance, namely opinion, *doxa*, 477 b, and that suggests to Socrates that the object of opinion could be something mid-way between

7. See R. Hackforth, *Plato's* Phaedrus (Cambridge UP, 1952), 86; and G.J. de Vries, *A Commentary on the* Phaedrus *of Plato* (Amsterdam, 1969), *ad loc.*

that which is and that which is not, 477 b–478 e. He now identifies this as that which appears to be just or beautiful, all the many objects of our perception, at 479 a–c.

In this text, as in others in the *Republic*, Plato characteristically brings together two phenomena: relativity and mutation. Part of his point is that what we discern around us may depend upon where we ourselves are located, or who we are, or what other information we have brought to bear. Thus our opinion would be relativized to us; with equal justice a person situated differently could affirm the opposite. The other part of his point is that changes are always occurring in the things themselves: what is beautiful now is becoming ugly, and so on. Both *Cratylus* 439 a–440 e, the very conclusion and climax of the dialogue, and the lengthy study in *Theaetetus* 152 a–157 e bring Protagorean relativism together with the flux philosophy of Heraclitus. (See especially *Cratylus* 439 d–e and *Theaetetus* 152 d–e, 157 a–c.) Plato invokes the principle of *being* as his response to this circumstance, with terms like *to einai* and *ousia*.

We have to realize that Plato is not talking about what we call "existence." He was probing the contrast between some *x* that really was beautiful and some *y* that just seemed to be beautiful at the time or that happened to be so for a moment, only to lose its beauty soon enough. It is a contrast between an *x* that is *F* and a *y* that seems *F* but is not. For Plato, there is no bare or pure *being* but always *being-F*, or *being-G*, i.e., being wise, or being just. His terms for being are always tied to predicates of form or shape or definition, so that a thing that manifests being is one that is what it is—it has a nature *F* and it fulfills that nature fully.

In the *Republic*, too, just as in the *Phaedo*, these things receive the name of *idea* and *eidos*. When the *Republic* treats the just, the beautiful and the good as the objects of our love (474 d–475 c) and knowledge (475 c–e), it groups them all as *eide* (476 a 5) or *ideai* (479 a 1), marking them off from the variety of sights and sounds and things that may exhibit them (476 a–b). The *eide* and *ideai* are the objects of knowledge (476 d) and the things that are (476 e–477 b), while the latter, objects of mere opinion, have only a partial hold on being (478 d–479 b).

Now we turn to the *Phaedrus*, 247 c 6. The key statement opens thus: "Far beyond all that is coloured and all that has shape and all that you can touch, there is being that truly is. It is glimpsed only by the charioteer of the soul. And that is the place for the things that become known by the only kind of knowledge that is worthy of the name." A bit later, 247 d 3, Socrates says that the souls behold that which is, *to on*, and become nourished by it, and later still, 247 e 2, he describes it as that which has true being, *on ontos*. The substantive term *to on*, grammatically a gerund formed from the neuter

participle *on* and prefixed by the definite article *to*, means "that which is" (plural, *ta onta*). When it is modified at 247 e 2 by the adverb *ontos*, it signifies "what really is, what truly is," and this is a phrase that draws a contrast. We can see from 247 e 1 that the contrast is with the domain "that people today call the real, *onton*." However, while the gods and the discarnate souls are enjoying the display of *to on ontos*, the contrast between what they see and what most people see is not being drawn by them but by the narrator Socrates, speaking for Plato. It is the philosopher, not the divine or the discarnate soul, that compares the heavenly and the earthly experiences, for the gods and the discarnate souls do not take heed of what human beings experience on earth, though the fact that they do not make the comparison does not imply that they are unaware of the status of what they see. They recognize truth and true being without needing to draw a contrast with a lower order of things.

What the gods behold, the full array of what truly is, becomes further specified, as the passage goes on, 247 d 6–7, as "justice itself and temperance," and then "knowledge," and a number of others that will be named further down in the text. Most mortal beings here on earth, on the other hand, confront a very different array, including the objects of ordinary perception. The point that Socrates singles out for his focus is the conviction that mortal beings have that the things they interact with daily are *real*, that they have *being* (*onton*—247 e 1). And this gives us a lead for the further interrogation of this passage. On what grounds, we may ask, do most people rest their conviction that the things they have to do with in daily life *are* real? *Why* do they think that the objects they touch and see are real? What does that term, "real," mean to them? If we can clarify this everyday, ordinary conviction of reality, the next question concerns its grounds and conditions. Where do people derive their awareness of being? From what source or paradigm did the very concept of being spring? What is the source of that concept which most people find fulfilled by the everyday objects of perception and practical concern?

To go by the present *Phaedrus* text, the answer to this question is (a) that everyone who believes in the reality of the everyday environment has maintained some recollection of what truly is, enough to have the conviction that the proper object of the mind is the real, that which is. But (b) this person, in applying the recollection to everyday objects, is at fault in the belief that such things fulfill this criterion or standard, i.e., are truly real. That arises because of the interruption of the supernal contemplation. One might remember, though perhaps only dimly, the norm of true reality. But the continuity *within* the memory itself has been broken; there is no trace of a memory of the personal exercise of real knowledge. When the bond within

the memory itself is broken, the person just doesn't remember what it was like to have real knowledge.

Justice and temperance deserve the title *on ontos* —they are what they are—whereas the objects of our daily perception do not possess that status. They aren't declared a Zero, an outright nullity, but they lack the emphatic and veritable kind of being that justice and temperance have. The philosopher, Socrates, is able to draw that contrast because he is able to see a single common mark or character in all that supernal array (justice, etc.), and a common mark in the ordinary terrestrial array, the objects of our daily encounters. This is what he expresses with the emphatic words that we quoted above first of all, and which we turn to now, *ousia ontos ousa*, translated "being that truly is." The first statement of the point, 247 c 7, was put with formidable emphasis, *ousia ontos ousa*, that could sound to an untutored ear something like "the beingly being being." Now I hope to clarify that expression.

Being is like truth in that it is one of the collective characterizations of what these gods and mortal souls are seeing. It is not one particular item standing among the others, but the general character of everything they behold. Note first of all that the adverb *ontos* here does not modify the noun *ousia*, as if to say this were a true being. Rather, it modifies the participle *ousa*, so that whatever is *ontos ousa* is not only something that *is*—it *is* in a special way. It is a certain kind of being, or a way of being, that is exemplified by justice, temperance and other such objects of divine vision, namely, being what they are. The *ousia* that is modified by *ontos ousa* betokens that by which the *ontos onta* are what they are. It is the mode of being or way of being by which something is not just an entity, *to on*, but something that truly is, *ontos on*. These things are encompassed in a place, the super-celestial *topos*, that is defined by this *ousia* itself. What occupies this place is the array of entities or things that have in common this particular way of being. Socrates says that this *ousia ontos ousa* can only be seen by the charioteer. To possess such being, *ousia*, is to have no colour or shape or tangibility; thus, since we have eliminated what sight and touch are good at detecting, such things can be viewed, *theate* only by reason, *nous*, the charioteer of the flying soul. The unique way of access to what truly is is by virtue of the unique way in which it is. The charioteer who could raise his head—and it seems that not all the mortal ones could—was able thus to come into the abode where the things that truly are have their actual residence.

We are calling attention to the difference between the entity or entities, *to on* or *ta onta*, and the being that is proper to them, their *ousia*. Though Plato was aware of this difference, he did not call special attention to it, and it is only recently, through Martin Heidegger, that it has become discussed

in philosophy under the name of the ontological difference.[8] In saying that the *ousia* itself is *ontos ousa*, Plato does not mean to make it into one more existing entity side by side with justice and temperance. Rather, he is singling out the power that is found in all the beings that have this way of being—to be genuine and true beings. Just as the philosopher must differentiate the entities of the supernal order from the kind of being that they have, so too, in the terrestrial or visible order, it is necessary to differentiate the existing, visible entities (house, tree, etc.) from the being or the mode of being that pertains to them. In the *Republic*, especially in the Divided Line, Plato gave a lot of attention to the different modes of being found in the ordinary things of perception; mutation and relativity are two marks of such a way of being, as we have already discussed. The way of being of these sensible objects must be differentiated from the objects themselves, just as, on the supernal level, there is a difference between the *onta*, on the one hand, justice and the like, and the *ousia* that belongs to them and constitutes them, on the other hand. It is only because the philosopher grasps the character of the supernal *ousia* as distinct from the character of terrestrial being *qua* appearance that he can differentiate the two classes of entity, showing how the beings that truly are are distinct from what most people think of as real. To differentiate the supernal from the terrestrial entities is characteristic of the philosopher, not the gods and discarnate souls, but, though they do not contrast what is supernal with what is terrestrial, they are aware of the supernal ontological difference.

In view of this difference between *ousia* and *ta onta*, we can say that the *Phaedrus* has moved away from a doctrine characteristic of the *Republic*. At 509 b, Glaucon was trying to get from Socrates a statement about the highest object of human thought and human desire, the idea of the good. Though Socrates was unable to satisfy Glaucon's urgent demand, he did venture one thought that seemed to Glaucon audacious and amazing: if the good is the cause not only of knowledge but of being and genesis too, Socrates said, it followed that the good was beyond being, *epekeina tes ousias*, beyond it in age, dignity and power. But the *Phaedrus* has abandoned that doctrine. Here the things that truly are are beyond the heavens (and there was some anticipation of this in *Rep.* 508 c, 509 d, 517 b, where the ideas were located in an intelligible place, *noetos topos*, different from the visible heaven where the sun and stars are located), and their being, *ousia*, is the true kind of being, *ontos ousa*, the kind of being that guarantees that these things truly are, are *onta ontos*. To this extent, the *ousia ontos ousa* that constitutes the *onta ontos* as true, lies outside them or beyond them. But there is

8. See my article, "The Ontological Difference," *American Philosophical Quarterly* XXXIII (1996): 357–74.

nothing further that could lie beyond being; these beings and their being are already beyond in a place that no poets have ever sung or could ever sing. Those who, like Levinas,[9] have sought to build upon the doctrine of the "good beyond being" ought to re-think their position in view of Plato's more mature reconsideration of the doctrine. The consequence drawn by Levinas, that ethics rather than ontology ought to be reckoned as first philosophy, is, at any rate, not Plato's own final view. And in fact the Phaedrus does not refer at any point to the idea of the good, although of course, there is much about beauty, *to kalon.*

SUPER-INTENSITY. *PHAEDRUS* 247 D

Let us investigate further this way of being, the *ousia* that deserves to be called genuinely real, *ontos ousa.* In the *Phaedo,* equality was introduced at 74 a with the term *auto to ison,* equality itself or "the equal itself." Socrates uses a smilar construction: in the *Phaedo* 75 c–d for the just and the pious too, *auto to dikaion, auto to hosion.* The *Symposium* deals principally with Beauty, *to kalon.* At the climax of Diotima's address, the lover comes to see a wonderful beauty that always is and never changes, that is not just in some respect beautiful, or beautiful only to some people (211 a), that does not inhere in some face or body but is *self-sufficient and by itself and of one form and everlasting* (*auto kath' hauto meth' hautou monoeides aei on*—211 b). This is beauty itself (*auto to kalon*), unalloyed, pure, unmixed, divine (211 d–e). See also *Republic* 476 b 10, which I may quote: " ... those who can attain to beauty itself, *auto to kalon,* and see it as itself, *kath' hauto* ...."

Now I am interested in the line from the *Phaedrus* 247 d 5– 6: " ... As it [the soul or the god] soars through its cycle, it looks out upon justice itself, *auten dikaiosynen,* it looks out upon temperance, it looks out upon knowledge ...." This term *autos, auten,* is a pervasive term throughout Plato's discussions of truth and true being. What does it mean to see justice *itself*? This is the same sort of intensive pronoun that Edmund Husserl used to characterize the complete and fulfilled act of knowledge as distinct from merely adumbrative, relatively empty intentions.[10] If I hear a train whistle, I may posit a passing train, but if I go to the station to see the train, this is the optimal epistemic situation, and it is characterized phenomenologically as the fulfilled intention that "gives me the train *itself.*" Yet a perusal of Plato's text shows us that this cannot be the context for his term *autos.*

To confine our discussion for the moment to one case, justice itself, we see that in the present text it is not being contrasted with something like

9. Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being, or Beyond Essence,* trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981).

10. Edmund Husserl, *Logical Investigations* II, 2, Sec. 16–23 (German text, 64–84).

signs of justice or *evidence* for justice as the visually present train might be contrasted with a train whistle. If there is a contrast before Plato's mind at all here, it would be between justice itself and what he later (250 b 1–3) calls "the likenesses down here" on earth (*homoiomata*), of justice, moderation, etc. He might be thinking in that passage of the laws passed in civic assemblies or the judgments rendered in human courts. At *Republic* 517 d–e, for instance, where Socrates was explaining the parable of the Cave, he indicated that the philosopher who had seen justice itself (*auten dikaiosynen*) would not willingly enter into courtroom disputes that were guided only by "the shadows of justice." Plato's earthly "likenesses" and "shadows" of justice itself do not function for most people as indicators or signifiers of justice itself, as in Husserl's phenomenology; rather, the earthly likenesses of justice have usurped the place of justice itself.

There is another contrast in the present text that is of still greater importance than the contrast of justice itself and its likenesses. 247 b 6 makes reference to the "immortals," and 248 a 1 makes reference to gods, both indicating that they behold the things that are above the heavens and take delight in them. At 247 d 1–4, however, some mortal souls too imitate this divine contemplation, "as many of them as care to take the right nourishment," seeing what truly is and being content. There is a profound difference between the divine and the mortal experience, and the lines beginning at 248 a 1 show what profound conflicts and shortcomings there are in mortals' experience. But we must grant that mortals do share to some degree in the divine vision.[11] Though even at best a mortal soul sees truth, true being, justice itself, only imperfectly, there is no denying that many have seen something, and this is repeated often: 248 a 1–3: some non-divine souls can raise their charioteers' heads into the place above; 248 e 3–4: some non-divine souls having seen truth are able to remain on high for a further period; 248 d 2–3: the soul that has seen the most becomes incarnated in a future philosopher or lover; 249 d 5–7: having had some such vision is a condition for being incarnated in human form; 249 e 4–250 a 1: every human being must have seen *ta onta.* In fact, it is evident that the entire topic of recollection, that forms the mainspring of Socrates' account of love, depends on this hypothesis. There is a harsh and violent struggle that the mortal souls have had to endure up in the heavens (248 a–b), struggling with their rivals, injuries to all the parts of the soul but particularly to the wings, the most divine part, some of them in their eagerness to see true being blocked by others, never gaining a view of it.

11. Hackforth's footnote (*op. cit.*, 78) is too restrictive, claiming that 247 d–e as a whole refers only to the gods. But gods and mortals are both under discussion up to 247 e 4. Certainly e 4–6 concerns the gods alone, and that is what is confirmed at 248 a 1: "Such is the life of the gods."

This passage is contrasting the perfect vision enjoyed by the gods with the imperfect vision enjoyed even by the best of the mortal souls. Yet both have seen justice itself (247 d 5–6). We cannot suppose, then, that the pronoun "itself" functions here in a Husserlian way, to signify that which is apprehended from the most favourable standpoint, the optimal epistemic situation. The gods' situation is far superior to that of mortals, yet gods and mortals both have seen justice itself. Though mortal vision is partial and subject to chaotic interruptions, that which they have seen is equal to what the gods have seen. Though their seeing is partial, that which they see has no parts and no temporal phases. If you have seen justice itself at all; then you have seen all of it. Even if you were to imagine some "part" of it, such a "part" would be equal to the whole of it—what does not admit of parts or degrees is the infinite.

Earlier, I mentioned relativity and mutation as two marks of the things that fail to have true being. Here, I'll mention a third, that emphasizes their contrast with justice *itself.* Where true justice is self-contained, it is concentrated and intense, but its earthly likenesses are divided or dispersed. Justice appears only in part in this deed or that law, which will always need to be balanced off by some other deed or some other law that captures some other part of justice. The division between what is concentrated and what is dispersed becomes ever more central in Platonic ontology, and appears as the key category of the *Timaeus*, for the prototypes for creation are not only everlasting but contain in a concentrated unity everything that will appear *seriatim* in the creation. The different species of animal life, for instance, are all contained in the archetypal animal. Here is the context for Plato's theory of time. Where the true archetype has eternal being, the created things such as created animals are born, age and die, realizing *seriatim* the different stages of life that are all contained in concentrated unity in the eternal prototype. Indeed, time itself was created precisely in order that the different creatures will be able to imitate, in their different ways, different aspects that are all contained in the prototype. They are, as it were, moving images of the eternal, and for that reason the *Timaeus* calls time itself "the moving image of eternity" (37 c–d).

But if gods and mortals have seen exactly the same thing, how could we account for the superiority of the gods over mortals, and the superiority of their *seeing* over mortal *seeing*? The difference is not to be traced to the actual moment of seeing–justice itself is disclosed perfectly to anyone who can get any view of it at all: such is the super-intensity of everything that has true being. But the composition of the divine soul differs from that of the mortal, so that while the disclosure of justice itself was always perfect, our constitution, inferior to theirs, makes us the prey of other desires (the black

horse), jealous of position and place (struggle with others). In short, we lack simplicity and clarity in our relation to the truth, we lack purity of heart. When we are incarnate on earth, we seek to make judgments about the justice of deeds, laws, institutions and persons, and the judgments that we make reflect our own character and constitution. In the supernal world, where the basis for our judgments is found, there is no judgment but a seeing of justice itself, but we are nonetheless imperfect mortal beings.

Do we have any clear consciousness, ourselves, of our own imperfection? Does it show up in earthly life, as some aspect of our reminiscence of truth? That is Plato's theme as he moves closer to a description of the earthly experiences of love and knowledge, in the passage at *Phaedrus* 249 e 4–250 b 1.

> According to what was said, every human soul, by nature, has seen the things that are, or else it would not have entered into this creature. But it is not easy for every soul to be reminded of them by the things that are here—not for those who then saw what was there only briefly, or those who by some misfortune were cast down here and through keeping bad company have committed unjust deeds, quite forgetting the holy things that once they saw. Just a few remain who still retain a sufficient (*hikanos*) memory, those who, whenever they see here a likeness of what is above, are amazed and lose control of themselves, in a passion they cannot understand because their discernment is not sufficiently (*hikanos*) clear.

Socrates is describing the consciousness of the embodied human being here, calling attention to differences between two broad groups, those who are lovers and philosophers, and those who are not. The special stress of the passage is the imperfection that continues to haunt the philosophical life. We are stirred by beauty, and yet the memory awakened taunts us with its obscurity; just as it can grow more clear, it can also grow more urgent and passionate. There is the suggestion that we possess a "sufficient," *hikanos*, memory, and yet at the same time that it is not sufficient, *hikanos*—the sufficiency of it reaches just so far as to make us aware of its insufficiency. The Orphic-Platonic idea is that of a double fall. The first fall took place in heaven itself when we lost our wings. The second fall, in consequence of the first, is the descent to earth where we come to occupy a body. Where Plato describes the prompting of recollection, one of the key elements that is brought home to us is the reality of the first, celestial fall. But now this memory is not treated in narrative mythical style, as a sort of theological postulate! Now it is treated as a living experience of the incarnated consciousness. We have the memory that what we saw we saw only briefly, and only in part, and that we have suffered losses at the very origin of our being. This is the awareness that, while we have a reminiscence, there is more that is concealed from us. Justice and moderation were "above the heavens," the myth says, and they were seen and feasted on by the gods. While we have the

memory of a fragmentary witnessing of their joyful life, it was clear to us, and is clear to us, that we were just the followers and the observers of their plenitude, and that we fell away. We could not stay at heaven's rim. And it is especially the philosopher who preserves the consciousness of this failure that lay within the original condition. Our memory of seeing includes the memory of a not-seeing.

Now this is especially the consciousness that accompanies the life of the philosopher (and the lover)—the knowledge of our own ignorance, our own lack. The question can be raised whether that is also a part of the human consciousness as such, whether everyone maintains that sense of ignorance, lack and fault. How indeed would the philosopher ever become aware of his or her ignorance and fault if there were no trace of such an awareness in human life as such? The answer of the *Phaedrus* would seem to be that normal embodied experience is guided by the conviction that the things we encounter here are solid and real, a conviction whose roots I discussed a few pages ago. This complacent belief-system rests on a reminiscence of true being without any reminiscence of the *knowledge* of true being. But what can arise in everyday life is the encounter with beauty, an awakening of *eros*, that prompts a longing not only for the *idea* of beauty and the other *ideai*, but for the intimacy with it, the activity of flying, a longing to do something long forgotten, sharing in the soaring flight of the heavenly host. Where it is merely the object of the original knowledge that I remember, I proceed confident in my confinement to earthly experience. But where I recall the *experience* of original knowledge, I want to repeat it and I become discontented. This awakens me to the memory even of what I lost at the origin of all things, i.e., I remember the difference between gods and mortals, and I remember the *idea* of knowledge itself.

KNOWLEDGE OF KNOWLEDGE. *Phaedrus* 247 E.

To return to the *Phaedrus* 247 c, we can link its account of knowledge to what was said about truth and being: "and that is the place for the things that become known by the only kind of knowledge that is worthy of the name." A bit later, at 247 d 5–e 2: "as it soars through its cycle, [the soul] looks out upon justice itself, and it looks out upon temperance, and it looks out upon knowledge, but not the kind of knowledge that comes to be, that which, always varying in some way, stands within the domain of the variable. No, this is the knowledge that belongs together with that which has true being." We see here that knowledge itself is treated as one of the array, something that the soul sees: knowledge is standing there side by side with justice and temperance. The particular point of the reference is that this knowledge is *directed* to justice and temperance even as it stands in their

midst. On the other hand, belonging down with change, etc., there is the improperly-so-called knowledge. The journeying soul has *seen* genuine knowledge even as it has seen justice and temperance, and this is true of the gods as well. Their seeing is itself a knowing, for it is certainly genuine knowledge that the gods and souls attain. So knowledge sees itself, be that human or divine knowledge. Genuine knowledge is also knowledge of knowledge. Their seeing sees itself, it sees seeing. And Socrates contrasts the knowledge that is genuine, which is knowledge *of* the genuine, with that which people call knowledge, a changing "knowledge" devoted to what changes, and that lives in the midst of change. We shall build upon this particular point in a moment, for it will help us in understanding Plato's mythological discourse.

MYTHOLOGY

I made the claim at the start that the practice of dialectic depends upon our exposure to the ideas: it does not account for our awareness of them. Though we undertake dialectic under the normal conditions of everyday life—it is one form of discourse like rhetoric, one way in which we encounter one another through speech—the condition for our attaining truth through dialectic lies in our having been exposed to the ideas in advance of all experience and all dialectic. Now that we have reviewed the Great Speech, we are in a position to address a question about Platonic discourse. Could there be a *dialectical* treatment of the pre-conditions for dialectic? Was it inherently necessary for Socrates' account of the soul and its vision of the ideas to be mythical? For we must grant the mythical character of the Great Speech. In seeking to answer this question, we must bear in mind that Plato's writing is *never purely and simply mythical.* Plato is prepared to speak about the gods and the soul in a mythical fashion but also in a rhetorical and dialectical fashion. There is no rule that divides one mode of discourse from another in Plato's writing. *No normal mythical narrative, this Great Speech is in fact a mythical-rhetorical-dialectical address.* That gives the reader every right to ask about the meaning of these pages, to pursue the matter dialectically, to ask about the meaning of the story of the soul's circuit with the gods around the heavens before its incarnation, and the meaning of the soul's glimpse of the things beyond the heavens that truly are.

The most remarkable feature of the speech is not the presence in a mythical address of souls and gods—there were many mythical narrations prior to Plato that encompassed the soul and the gods. The unexpected here, given that it is a mythical narration, is the discussion of true being, the ideas of justice and of temperance, *auto to kalon*, truth itself—the central themes of philosophy. Only philosophical thinking can encompass themes like that, yet here they are couched in a mythical narration. Some scholars have even

supposed that, because Socrates treats the ideas here in a mythical discourse, there is something not quite respectable about them, from a philosophical point of view. But there is surely a better answer than that. It seems that Plato himself never attempted a non-mythical, dialectical treatment of the pre-empirical formation of the soul. On the other hand, if we look to later centuries of philosophy, we find different routes taken to validate a Platonic doctrine by dialectical means. There is the neo-Platonic doctrine of the procession of the soul from *nous*, the Leibnizian pre-formation of the monad, the Kantian *a priori*, the doctrine of the Absolute in Schelling and Hegel, and Heidegger's "pre-ontological understanding of being." These later variants are a part of the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of the *Phaedrus*, the history of its effectiveness; they illustrate the depth of its influence in Western thought, and they counteract any tendency in the reader to dismiss the mythical account as a mere fairy tale uninteresting to philosophers. They are all worthy interpretations of Plato.

According to the Speech, you recognize beauty and you respond to it with love; you recognize the equal and the just in your daily experience. The mythical narration recounted a composite soul in flight and seeing great things beyond the heavens, and specified it as a seeing that took place long before our current terrestrial seeing. The pre-condition for a current seeing, then, was an earlier seeing. But what is mythically described as an earlier seeing, occurring before current seeing, can also be grasped dialectically. The dialectical language tells us what the soul sees: justice itself, all that has true being. But it is not just the objects of vision that possessed true being and super-intensity—the supernal seeing had the same character. The "earlier" seeing narrated in the myth is, dialectically speaking, that seeing that alone corresponds to the super-intensity of the ideas, a seeing that is itself super-intense. Such a seeing is not experienced in bodily form here on earth, but is recollected in the course of our terrestrial seeing and knowing. Let us return to the knowledge of knowledge.

Notable in this account was that the supernal seen knowledge was the criterion for anything that is to count as knowledge. It is by reference to it that the shifting knowledge of that which shifts is defined as less than ideal. Socrates says (e 1–2) that the only branch of knowledge that can count as knowledge properly speaking, to *tes alethous epistemes genos*, will be knowledge concerning such being as this. What truly counts as knowledge, real knowledge, will be concerned with that which truly is, while it is shifting opinions, as in *Republic* 477–478, concerned with shifting things, that most people cling to. Here Socrates is postulating the idea of knowledge itself. Earthly experience is not adequate to that *idea*, and therefore the *idea* did not derive from such experience. It has been seen supernally, and it plays a

role in making earthly experience possible, just as truth and being do. We rely on this *idea* to dignify our experience even as the experience falls short of it.

Now I do not think we should substitute this interpretation for the mythical narration—instead of that, it expresses a point that is contained within the mythical doctrine of *anamnesis* and which is also operative in all the later variants of Platonism to which I referred. Normal seeing and knowing are or can be infused with the idea of super-intense seeing and knowing, the very perfection of seeing itself. Such an awareness does inhabit or can inhabit normal seeing and knowing, being present within normal knowing in the form of an idea or an *anamnesis*. This affords, I think, the objective self-interpretation, in dialectical form, of the Platonic myth, an identification of one of the pre-conditions for the doctrine stated here and for its subsequent interpretations and applications.

I'll conclude with an observation on the later works of Plato. I have sought to show that the theory of ideas is present in the *Phaedrus* as a doctrine of truth and true being. This is an aspect that should not be forgotten in the debates about the later Plato, and particularly the question whether Plato later on abandoned the theory of ideas. That opinion is perhaps even an orthodoxy now, and at the opening of the paper we quoted Nehamas and Woodruff who endorsed it. Partly it rests on setting the dialectic of collection and division against a doctrine of ideas and especially against a doctrine of recollection, debates we have explored here. The other grounding usually offered for this opinion is the critique of the theory of ideas offered in *Parmenides* 130 a–135 c, as if it had demolished the theory.[12]

But we can now, perhaps, acknowledge that the opening part of the *Parmenides* is hardly a refutation of the theory of ideas. The criticisms stated there fail to grant the teaching of the *Phaedrus* that the ideas do not merely have being, *on*, but exemplify true being or super-intensity, *ontos on*. The arguments brought against Socrates early in the *Parmenides* put the ideas again and again into a common class with things, mere *onta*, which is precisely what should not be done, as nobody knew better than Plato. Thus when Socrates maintains that an idea can be shared among many individuals, 131 a, Parmenides asks him wickedly if it is like a sail spread over the heads of many persons—a *material thing*, one part of it touching each person! Or, turning to the "third man" argument: if the idea expresses something we see in many individuals in terms of which we compare them, then must we not also compare the individual to the idea itself—*in exactly the*

12. Gregory Vlastos helped to shape this widespread interpretation through his treatment of the most well-known of the *Parmenides* arguments, the 'third man' argument; see "The Third Man Argument in the *Parmenides*," now in R.E. Allen, ed., *Studies in Plato's Metaphysics*.

same way!—invoking thereby in this further comparison a further idea under which our first idea must be ranged along with the various individuals; and so on *ad infinitum*? But the *Phaedrus* would teach us that there can be no such second comparison. Instructed by the *Phaedrus*, then, we would read the *Parmenides*, Part One, as a cleansing of the ideas from the inadequacies that had gathered round them when they were conceptualized with inadequate attention to the truth and the true being that constituted them.