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Plato: Man's Exile from Being

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Why Read Plato?

We know as Catholics, from the Divine Revelation that has come down to us from the Apostles, that we are exiles in this world. This world is not an illusion. It is quite real and beloved by God, created and sustained by Him. At the same time, we also know from Revelation that this is a fallen world and that this fall was due to human sin: the willful rejection of God by our first parents and the mysterious participation in that rejection by every human being born into this world. The exile we suffer as a result is tragic but temporary and ultimately comedic, for there is a way out. God Himself entered into our exilic state by becoming a human being, and through His life, death, and resurrection, He overcame the exile and thereby put an end to it, at least for those who believe. By uniting ourselves in faith, hope, and love to the God-Man who now reigns in Heaven but also mystically remains intimate with us even in this fallen world, we are enabled to do what He did, through the power of His grace, and conquer death. "After this our exile," we are promised a life in our true home with Our Father forever.

Every human being is born into exile, and the experience of and various responses to this exile constitute what we call religion, which, etymologically, is *re-ligio*, a binding or tying back. There is a universal recognition in the major religions of the world, including non-theistic religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism, of a radical separation of human existence from its true *ground*; from something more *real* than what we normally experience; from a transcendent *source*; from a unifying, resolving, perfecting, guiding, guarding, nurturing, and loving *presence*; from an *ultimate* that answers the question "why?" because it is unquestionable in itself—in short, a *home* for us who are homeless.

Though the major religions of the world *suggest* our present exile and give *hints*—not always trustworthy—of a way back, Catholicism alone provides the correct map, as it were, as well as infallible navigational tools and an unsinkable vessel to carry us, if we only desire it enough, across the watery abyss of our exile to our homeland. Since this is the case, and since we have been subject to exile only to learn how to overcome it, it would seem prudent with the limited time we have in this pilgrimage to keep to the map: to keep our hearts focused on the Sacred Scriptures and Catholic theology, to practice the science of the Saints, and to seek only the Wisdom of the Cross.

This is all a preface to the obvious question suggested by the title of this first part of my essay: Why study Plato? Indeed, why study *philosophy*, the *search* after wisdom, if Wisdom, in the person of Jesus Christ, has already been *found*? Why perpetuate unnecessarily the asking of questions about the nature of the Good, the purpose of existence, the immortality of the soul, etc., since these questions have already been answered by Divine Revelation? Don't such questions distract us from the one thing necessary—knowing and loving Jesus Christ? And why study the philosophy of a *pagan* who lived before the Incarnation and thus whose grasp of and solution to the problem of exile is bound to be incomplete at best and erroneous at worst? As St. Paul wrote to the Christians in Corinth (1 Corinthians 1:21–25), Jesus Christ is a stumbling block for the Jews, who preferred an earthly savior with a military cast, and foolishness to the Greeks, who didn't really want answers, but rather wanted only to keep up their fruitless questioning.

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In response to these doubts, I could note the fact that the Gospel of St. John was written in Attic Greek, which, due to its precision and unique capacity for abstract articulation, was the language of ancient philosophy; and that the word that the beloved disciple chose for the very identity of the Second Person of the Holy Trinity was *Logos*, a word with profound philosophical resonances and connotations. I could mention that the bishops and theologians of the early Ecumenical Councils who gave us definitive

declarations of the nature of the Trinity and Jesus Christ were able to do so because they were steeped in Platonic metaphysics, and their doctrinal formulations, such as the hypostatic union and the distinction between nature and person, were borrowed directly from distinctions made in Greek philosophy. I could remark that the greatest Church Father, St. Augustine, would most probably not have been a Church Father, and perhaps not even a saint, if it were not for his initial conversion to spiritual reality through reading Plotinus, the great pagan theologian of Platonism.

But these would be arguments for the importance of Plato for *something else,* in this case, for understanding the history and the development of Christian theology. And it would seem that with all the wonderful Catholic theology there is to read in a lifetime, teachings that we know with certainty are true and salvific, we should just read St. Augustine and St. Francis and St. Bonaventure, and leave Plato and philosophy—solid scaffolding, yes, but better to be discarded with the completion of the building—to the scholars and academics. Does Plato deserve our attention for himself?

To see that the answer is yes, one must simply read Plato. Read, say, the "Allegory of the Cave" from *The Republic* (Book VII 514 a2 to 517 a7) or the "Ladder of Love" from the *Symposium* (210a to 212a). If you have an open mind and inquiring heart, you will recognize something incomparably wonderful in Plato's writings: its profound resonance with Christian teachings. The Cave is a masterful metaphor for the soul trapped in sin, and the Ladder is a striking description for the ascent of the soul from creation to Creator. But again, though there is certainly an amazing foreshadowing of Catholic theology in Plato—his trinity, for example, which includes the One "beyond being," the Intellect comprising the perfect forms of created things, and the World-Soul as their agent in this world, is incredibly suggestive of the Holy Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—Plato is essential reading on his own terms. This is especially the case when we consider the theme of this year's Wyoming School of Catholic Thought: exile.

Before grace can divinize the soul, the soul must yearn for divinization. What makes us so yearn? A sense of the inadequacy and shadow-like nature of this world, an intense feeling of alienation and homesickness, a profound intuition that there is much more to reality than what ordinarily appears to us. Plato's dialogues evoke these senses, feelings, and

intuitions. Eric Voegelin, the great twentieth-century German Platonist, wrote that "there is no answer to the Question other than the Mystery as it becomes luminous in the acts of questioning." Paradoxically, the answer to spiritual questions is found in the questions themselves, or better, in the very questioning, the art of which was brought to perfection in practice by Plato's teacher Socrates, and in writing by Plato himself. In his capacity to prompt recognition of our alienation from true reality, evoke yearning for it, and enable us, through the dialectical method of inquiry he invented, to achieve participation in it, Plato is simply indispensable, both as a precursor to faith and as a guide along the way home.

Philosophy as a Spiritual Exercise

We touched on the Christian understanding of spiritual exile from God as originating in our banishment from the Garden of Eden through original sin, and culminating in not tragic loss but a comedic recovery of everything we had lost—and more. The ancient pagan world also possessed a deep sense of exile, of having fallen from an original perfection and harmony, but tragedy was the inexorable upshot, with comedy only the soothing salve for an inevitable pain and loss. As Peter Leithart has written in his book *Deep Comedy*:

> For Greeks and many other ancient peoples, history was essentially tragic. Things had begun well in a world of plenty and joy, but the world was bound to degenerate and decline until it sputtered and whimpered to a halt. For some, history was seen as a turning wheel, so that the pathetic end was a prelude to a new beginning. Cyclical views of history such as these look more optimistic, but that is only apparent. If it is cyclical, history merely repeats the story of decline again and again, unto ages of ages, the tragedy becoming more banal with each repetition.

There is only one pagan author who held a real hope for a return to the bliss of the golden age, and that is Virgil, who, in his *Fourth Eclogue* written only forty years before the birth of Christ, prophesied the birth of a child who would inaugurate a new age in which all wars would eventually cease, and earth and man would obtain such harmony that commerce and agriculture would no longer be necessary—a return to Eden.

But if Virgil and Job, exiled on his dung heap 1500 years before him—"I know that my redeemer lives"—are the closest that pagans ever got to hope in a redemption from exile, Plato got the closest to grasping what this post-exilic reality might be like, one that he also hoped for in his unshakable conviction, modeled by Socrates through his courageous indifference to his death (read *Phaedo*), of the immortality of man's soul and eternal reward for the care of it. Through his dialogues, Plato invites all men to grasp the transcendent world of perfection for which the soul yearns. "The nature of man is openness to transcendence." This definition of man, given to us by Eric Voegelin, was learned from Plato. And while it is a truth expressed to some extent in all the ancient religions of the world, Plato was the first to treat it scientifically, so to speak, by providing intellectual justification for its truth through not only myth but also rational discourse and logical argument.

Alfred North Whitehead, the great twentieth-century British mathematician and philosopher, once quipped, "The safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato." Plato invented philosophy as a form of written discourse, whose living embodiment and exemplar was Socrates. It is important to understand that philosophy for Plato, and for the ancient Greeks in general, whether stoic, cynic, epicurean, or skeptic, was not a mere academic exercise or quest for abstract knowledge. It was, as Pierre Hadot has shown, a *way of life*, and the practice of philosophy, whether alone with one's thoughts, in one's study with a tablet, or in dialogue with others on the portico or in the agora, was more a *spiritual exercise* than an academic study in the modern sense. As Voegelin put it: "Philosophy in the classic sense is not a body of 'ideas' or 'opinions' about the divine ground dispensed by a person who calls himself a 'philosopher,' but a man's responsive pursuit of his questioning unrest to the divine ground that has aroused it." In this way, the life of philosophy for the ancients was more akin to the life of prayer for the Christian, with contemplation, reception of the sacraments, and attendance at the liturgy constituting the "responsive pursuit of our questioning unrest to the divine ground that has aroused it." The great difference, of course, is that our spiritual exercises are, when most authentic, practiced by the Holy Spirit in us through our receptive consent. And while our souls remain in "questioning unrest" in this life, aside from those rare mystical moments when we find ourselves immersed in God's

ineffable peace, we do have, through our participation in His very life, "the answer" in Christ, along with the peace that surpasses understanding. Nevertheless, reading Plato's dialogues, if we read them more as sacred texts than academic works, is surely a spiritual exercise. On every page of Plato, from the most tedious logical argumentation to the most fantastic myths and sublime allegories, are hints, suggestions, and sometimes what feels like revelations of that mysterious and transcendent reality he had first experienced in the person of Socrates and then in his own soul as he pursued, with more passion, intelligence, and determination than perhaps any pagan before, the divine ground that aroused his wonder.

Dialogue, Dialectic, and the Good City

So, what was Plato trying to teach the fourth-century B.C. Athenians of his day, and what can he teach us, particularly about exile? Two things must be said before we go into Plato's main teachings. The first is that Plato was not only critical of poetry and literature due to their being twice removed from reality, a copy of a copy, but also of writing itself, including philosophical writing. Truth for Plato is found, not in books or lectures, but in the soul, and all the more when it is actively engaged in inquiry and contemplation. A written account of a philosophical insight or argument is only the lifeless and shadowlike vestige of the original ecstatic experience, one that cannot ask or answer questions and just keeps saying the same thing to the reader over and over again. An oral lecture is better, for it exists interactively in present time, but also second-rate, as it is primarily rhetorical, the attempt to persuade another to right opinion or action, and not dialectical, the attempt to justify an opinion or action in truth or the good. Even if the belief or action is a true or good one, the listener is not enabled through lecture alone to recognize this truth as true and action as good for and in himself; the back and forth of dialogic and dialectical inquiry is required for this.

Nevertheless, of course, Plato recorded his thoughts, not in the form of an oral or written treatise but in that unique literary form that he himself invented, the philosophical dialogue. For Plato, writing at its best should aim to imitate the drama of the face-to-face conversation in which the soul's movements occur at *this* place and in *this* time and with *this* person. Like the Apostles, whose lives were transformed not by reading Old Testament texts but by meeting in person the very living embodiment of those

texts, Plato experienced a radical *periagoge*, a turning or reorientation of the soul, and a *metanoia*, a change of mind, by listening to and speaking with Socrates in the Agora. Like the writers of the Gospels, Plato wanted to convey to those not privileged to meet this master something of his experience so they too could be transformed. To do this, Plato invented the philosophical dialogue and wrote more than thirty of them, some of them book-length. And as Plato reflected on the master's words in the privacy of his study, he eventually became a master himself. His dialogues contain both the teaching of Socrates and his own, and it is sometimes very hard to distinguish between the two.

About the Platonic dialogue, Voegelin wrote: "The dialogue is the symbolic form of the order of wisdom, in opposition to the oration as the symbolic form of the disordered society. It restores the common order of the spirit that has been destroyed through the privatization of rhetoric." Voegelin was primarily a political philosopher, but then, so was his master. Plato wrote his dialogues not just for the purpose of personal *periagoge*, the conversion of individual Athenians, but for the conversion of the entire Athenian *polis*.

Athens was radically in need of conversion, having suffered a tremendous defeat by Sparta in the Peloponnesian War. The war ended in 404 B.C. after twenty-eight years of fighting, just five years before the execution of Socrates by that same defeated Athenian so-called democracy. The public political culture of the Athenians was dominated by a cynical desire for power among the young aristocracy, of whom Plato was an illustrious member, and by a ruling class of politicians and educators, the sophists. These, for a large fee, would deign to teach aspiring politicians the secret of political success, namely, the manipulation of the populace through clever, self-serving rhetoric. It was a situation not unlike our day in which expensive education is ordered to career success and power instead of the good of the soul and wisdom, and politics is a game of struggle for dominance ordered to the preservation and extension of private freedom or empire, instead of the common good and virtue. This is what Plato had to say about his beloved *polis* in his *Seventh Letter*:

> Finally, it became clear to me, with regard to all existing communities, that they were one and all misgoverned. For their laws have

> got into a state that is almost incurable, except by some extraordinary reform with good luck to support it. And I was forced to say, when praising true philosophy, that it is by this that men are enabled to see what justice in public and private life really is. Therefore, I said, there will be no cessation of evils for the sons of men, till either those who are pursuing a right and true philosophy receive sovereign power in the States, or those in power in the States by some dispensation of providence become true philosophers.

In other words, unless philosophers rule, politics fails. And it was for the purpose of making philosophy and the good (rather than sophistry and might) the ruling religion of the state that Plato set out to write his dialogues. Plato sought to replace the reigning educational curriculum of Athens—an incoherent and unstable synthesis of the older, informal education of music, stories, and gymnastics and the newer, formal education of sophistical rhetoric and a dialectic of cleverness—with his own curriculum, combining the best of the old and the new, but arranged in the light of the highest wisdom. Socrates discovered this wisdom; Plato systematized and developed it. Education, or *paideia,* would be ordered to the good of the soul, which is nourished on the Good, the True, and the Beautiful.

Plato was not alone in desiring educational reform, being part of the fourth-century movement towards a more systematic and rigorous formation of the Greek citizen by the state. But he was way ahead of his time in the moral, intellectual, and spiritual depth he sought in this formation. Richard Tarnas puts it this way:

> This ideal of man was the pattern and model toward which all Greek educators and poets, artists and philosophers always looked. It was this universal ideal, this model of humanity which all individuals were to imitate. This ideal was to be embodied in the community, and the goal of education was to make each person in the image of the community. Plato's primary directive for philosophy focused on the strenuous development of the intellect, the will, and the body, motivated by a ceaseless desire to regain the lost union with the eternal, for the recollection of the ideals is both the means and the goal of true knowledge. Education, therefore, for Plato is in the service of the soul and the divine. Under Plato, the classical paideia assumed a deeper and metaphysical dimension in

his Academy, holding forth the ideal of inner perfection realized through disciplined education.

For Plato, what began with an unkempt bricklayer walking around the marketplace, bothering people with his incessant questions, was to end through the establishment of his *Academy* and, he hoped, schools modeled on it throughout Athens. Such a vast educational system would produce rulers for Athens who, being brought into intimate soul-contact with the Real, which is the Good beyond being, would, like artists gazing upon the beauty in their mind and incarnating it on canvas, incarnate the just political order by gazing on the eternal and immutable Forms and effecting a constitution mirroring its eternal wisdom in this time-bound and mutable world.

Intimations of Christ: The Cave and the Ladder of Love

We turn finally to the content of Plato's teachings: Although Plato's teachings are spread among more than thirty dialogues, I think we need look no further than his description of the Ladder of Love in the *Symposium* and the Allegory of the Cave in the *Republic* to encounter the core essence of Plato's teachings, which relate quite well to our theme of exile.

"Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains." So goes the opening lines of *The Social Contract* by Jean Jacques Rousseau, the intellectual architect of the French Revolution. For Rousseau, the chains were political ones, to be broken only by the revolutionary institution of his social contract. For Plato—and this is the essential meaning of the Cave Allegory—they are chains of the soul broken only by an intimate encounter with the Real, culminating in a vision of the Good. The Real is bright and undeniable as the Sun, but we the unenlightened seem doomed to mistake the shadows it casts for the Real itself.

The teaching of Plato that we discover in the Cave Allegory is that our true exile is from ourselves, who, though divine and destined for immortality, have somehow forgotten our true identity. The way to recover our true selves, and thus the true world that is our home, is by the spiritual exercise of philosophy. But such contemplation must be translated into action (though the contemplators would have it otherwise). And we can best prepare ourselves for the liberation of the soul unto the life that never ends by being formed in an educational system and state ordered by and to the Good.

The cave, then, is not an actual place but a state of mind or consciousness, one in which the soul, our true self, is eclipsed by the false self and the illusory world it mistakes for reality. It is akin to the identification of evil as "the Flesh, the World, and the Devil," not to be taken literally as our bodies and the created world (though the Devil is to be taken quite literally). The flesh in the New Testament means a life intent on the goods of the body at the expense of the soul; the world connoted the desire for prestige above truth; the Devil was, well, the Devil.

For Plato, the true evil we face is deception through the abuse of language, in whatever form and through whatever agency. It is an evil against which the philosopher must fight incessantly with the sword of dialectic and passionate philosophical inquiry. In short, the material world we live in is not the Cave—the Cave is our unenlightened perspective of this material world. If we look with the eyes of the soul, which requires great discipline and ordered desire, we see not a dark, suffocating cave full of flickering shadows cast by lying manipulators upon the eyes of slaves, but an infinite and eternal heaven of truth, goodness, and beauty overseen by a mysterious transcendent source whose nature is pure giving. If this sounds like Christian theology, then you are beginning to understand something of the miraculous wisdom of Plato.

But how do we look with the eyes of our soul? Who can show us how to do this? Who can break the chains of us prisoners? And how did the mysterious person described in the allegory who descends into the Cave to liberate the prisoners break his own chains? Does Plato give us answers, or even hints? Read Plato and find out, especially his vivid description in Book II of the *Republic* of the perfectly just man deemed unjust by all and crucified. That Plato had an intimation of the Just Man is indubitable.

Finally, turning to the Ladder of Love selection from the *Symposium*, I am tempted just to quote the passage itself, one of the most profound and beautiful in all literature. I will just say this about it: what this passage articulates is Plato's teaching of *participation*. The particular, changeable, and multiple realities that appear to us *are*—they exist—precisely because they, to a certain extent, *are not.* I mean that the things of this material world are real, but only as real as shadows, real to the extent that they borrow reality from something else that possesses reality in itself, as a reflection, imitation, image, and copy are parasitical, so to speak, on their origi-

nal hosts. But there are not *two* realities: the individual material things in this world, on the one hand, and the universal forms of which they are the reflections, on the other. There is only one reality, the reality of the Forms, which appear *to us* as particular things due to our unenlightened state. The material things we see are just the Forms, though perceived on a lower level of consciousness. To use the *Symposium* example, it is Beauty itself that appears to us in beautiful things, but we just cannot easily see it.

We are exiles from Being only because we do not see what is right in front of us. So how are we to escape this myopic exile, if such an escape is even possible? These are questions that Plato the pagan, however noble, was not able to answer adequately, for only Divine Revelation can tell us these things. What he did teach the world is that the examined life is worth living, and such questions are the very life of the soul—and he taught us how to ask them.

Another great teacher, who lived four hundred years after Plato, taught us something very similar when He said, "Ask and it will be given to you, seek and you shall find, knock and the door shall be opened to you." This Teacher was the very Answer Himself.

Archbishop Bruno Forte once said, echoing Plato, "What really is important in life is not so much to provide answers as to discern true questions. When true questions are found, they themselves open the heart to the mystery." Why is this? Origen, the Church Father and Platonist who articulated the first philosophical exposition of Christian doctrine, tells us: "Every true question is like the lance which pierces the side of Christ causing blood and water to flow forth."

"All education is conversion" (Pierre Hadot).

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