

# **How Buddhist was Plato?** Robert Ellis

## **Introduction**

When investigating Plato a Buddhist is confronted with a mass of apparent contradictions. On the one hand it sometimes seems that Plato can be read almost as a Western alternative to the Buddha: for he invokes a spiritual path by which we can ascend to the highest wisdom beyond worldly attachments. The techniques by which the Socrates of Plato's dialogues leads his interlocutors out of their limited viewpoints towards wisdom, from a standpoint of sagacious clarity, is often reminiscent of the Buddha's responses to his various questioners in the Pali suttas. The parallels are so tempting that one can even begin to talk, like Edward Conze<sup>1</sup>, of the "Perennial Philosophy" of which the Buddha and Plato are leading exponents, a philosophy based on engagement with the transcendental in contrast to the desiccated "Sciential Philosophy" of the modern West.

On the other hand, we can read Plato in an entirely different fashion. He can be seen as a wayward disciple who betrayed the insights of his teacher Socrates. He can be the first great dualist, the thinker who started off the endless, and fruitless, reactive process in Western philosophy between eternalistic rationalism and nihilistic empiricism. His dogmatic eternalism can be seen to have created a sceptical reaction in Aristotle which was endlessly repeated afterwards by followers of the two contrasting approaches. Politically, too, he can be read as a sort of Fascist, wanting to impose his idea of the perfect realm by force on a probably reluctant population.

Of these two views, I incline somewhat towards the second. But it is important to do justice to the real complexity of Plato's situation. Some of the apparent contradiction can be removed by making a distinction between the earlier "Socratic" dialogues (which most scholars<sup>2</sup> take to be representative of the position of the historical Socrates) and the later "Platonic" ones, which reveal Plato's later metaphysical views. However, I shall argue that even in these early dialogues the most important features of Plato's eternalism are already evident, only to be strengthened in the later ones. Plato does seem to have betrayed the most basic principles of his teacher, but the tendencies which gave rise to that betrayal are already present in Socrates' view as it is reported in the Socratic dialogues. From a Buddhist viewpoint the weaknesses can be clearly seen as due to a failure to fully understand a non-dualist approach which could have given greater consistency to the flashes of insight that we find in both Socrates and Plato.

In this paper I shall be attempting to offer a philosophical argument for this position based on evidence from the most important dialogues and some modern commentators. My analysis will take the form, first of an attempt to disentangle dualist from non-dualist tendencies in Socrates, then of an account of how Plato's errors can be attributed to his dualism. Throughout by "non-dualist" I shall refer to a position like that of the Madhyamaka in which all conceptualisations of our experience are understood to be ultimately empty, and metaphysical claims about what is absolutely true or untrue are thus likely to be misleading. This Buddhist form of non-dualism has an integral relationship with practice, as it insists on the limitations of reason, and has its relative expression in the Middle Way, which avoids both the dogmatic approaches to value found in eternalism and the sceptical dismissal of universal value found in nihilism<sup>3</sup>.

### **a) Socrates' aporesis**

The non-dualist elements in Socrates' thought centre around his claim to be wise only in the sense that he knows the extent of his own ignorance, a claim known as the aporesis<sup>4</sup>. If we take this claim seriously it implies that Socrates recognises the contingent relationship of all

theories, and of the language of which they are composed, to reality. His philosophical claims should then be, at best, hypotheses about reality to be tested against experience, but at the same time he should equally avoid the sceptical position of insisting that no progress can be made and no universal measures used for value due to that ignorance.

There are good reasons for claiming that this is in fact Socrates' position. Firstly, as Soloviev points out<sup>5</sup>, in relation to his contemporaries he certainly seems to have held a Middle Way position between conservatives, who identified traditional law as absolute truth, and the relativistic Sophists, who saw no reason to respect the law if it was not in their interest. Unlike many societies, that of fourth-century Athens was not entirely dominated either by nihilism or by eternalism, so in differentiating himself from both (and in the process antagonising both) Socrates was able to find subtle ways of questioning both sets of assumptions. Indeed Popper, whilst putting Socrates in the political context of a city-state swinging between oligarchic and democratic forces, attributes Socrates' death to a political side-current, as though he had got caught up in the cross-fire when he genuinely intended to remain neutral<sup>6</sup>. This social position alone, however, does not necessarily indicate that Socrates has found a sufficiently consistent non-dualist view to sustain the aporesis.

Secondly, Socrates' chief method of enquiry, the *elenchos*, involves the attempt to reach a universal definition, usually of a virtue, by using the relative means of probing the assumptions of his interlocutors so as to remove inconsistencies in their views. Socrates thus neither reasons from an ethical foundation in the classic eternalist fashion nor assumes that a moral argument which merely appeals to coherence therefore has no claim to truth, as the nihilist does. Instead, he makes a distinction between knowledge and human wisdom whereby he recognises that absolute knowledge cannot be gained by human beings, but that the wisdom of knowing one's own ignorance and thus being led to subject one's beliefs to scrutiny provides a basis for philosophically-grounded moral conviction<sup>7</sup>. In this way Socrates both encourages others to recognise their ignorance and encourages them to form provisional beliefs about value, avoiding either dogmatism or scepticism about absolute truth. In this respect, then, Socrates' approach in the early Platonic dialogues appears to be non-dualistic.

Pierre Hadot provides further evidence that, seen in context, the fundamental purpose of the Platonic dialogues was psychological or spiritual<sup>8</sup> rather than metaphysical, attempting to promote the right attitudes towards the discovery of truth rather than actually defining it<sup>9</sup>. The dialogues were used in the Platonic academy as models of the sorts of dialogue which Plato's students should have, not just with others, but with themselves, the purpose of both internal and external dialogue being to change a spiritual attitude<sup>10</sup>.

...it is not enough to disclose the truth. It is not even enough to demonstrate it. What is needed is *persuasion*....Even at that, it is not enough to use rhetoric, which, as it were, tries to persuade from a distance, by means of a continuous discourse. What is needed above all is *dialectic*, which demands the explicit consent of the interlocutor at every moment. Dialectic must skilfully choose a tortuous path... in order to bring the interlocutor to discover the contradictions of his own position, or to admit an unforeseen conclusion.<sup>11</sup>

Hadot here brings out the ways in which the Socratic *elenchos* does not aim to produce objectivity in the sense of a verbal formula which represents reality so much as objectivity in the psychological or spiritual sense of a more developed mental state. The *elenchos* achieves this by guiding the interlocutor out of the limitations of his explicit dogmatic or sceptical moral views towards a broader view, by making more of his implicit moral views explicit and revealing the contradictions between these newly revealed moral views and the previously asserted ones. According to Hadot, many modern commentators are perplexed by, not only Plato, but nearly all ancient philosophy, because they fail to understand the fundamental point of the texts' psychological or spiritual functionality, which emerges not from ancient texts

themselves so much as their relationship to their context<sup>12</sup>. “One must always approach a work of ancient philosophy with this idea of spiritual progress in mind”<sup>13</sup>.

Thirdly, support can be found for a view of Socrates as a non-dualist through a psychological interpretation of his doctrine of the unity of the virtues. Terry Penner<sup>14</sup>, drawing on analysis of the *Protagoras*, argues that when Socrates asserts that “virtue is one” he does not mean that all terms describing virtues can be analysed so as to mean the same thing, but that the actual psychological quality which gives rise to one virtue is the same as that which gives rise to others.

When Socrates asked “What is bravery?” ...His question was not (what has become) the philosopher’s question...; it was not a request for conceptual analysis...His question was rather the *general’s* question, “What is bravery?” – that is, “What is it that makes brave men brave?”. The general asks this question not out of interest in mapping out concepts, but out of a desire to learn something substantial about the human psyche.<sup>15</sup>

If we take this view, which is consistent with that of Hadot, Socrates’ ethical discussions can be seen not as hopeless attempts to reconcile the irreconcilable particular virtues, which are obviously only relatively good in particular contexts, into an absolute nature they do not possess, but as attempts to use analysis of the virtues as they are evident through behaviour to point to an inner state of psychological objectivity which was ultimately beyond description. This psychological objectivity was also identified with knowledge, leading to the assertion that weakness of the will (*akrasia*) was impossible and that all evil was due to ignorance. All of these moral doctrines, it appears, become much more explicable when “knowledge” is not interpreted cognitively but as psychologically or spiritually.

All these arguments suggest that the Socratic philosophy was relatively much more non-dualistic than most modern Western philosophies. The non-dualist elements are partly due to an understanding of philosophy as a spiritual path which was widespread in Socrates’ time, and he refined this approach by his use of the *elenchos* and through his *aporesis*. However, the non-dualism of the Socratic method needs to be seen in the context of a more basic eternalism which appears both in the doctrines and in the practice of Socrates.

### **a) Socratic eternalism**

Socratic eternalism centres around his *ethical foundationalism*, by which I mean the respects in which he derives his ethical approaches dogmatically from some presupposed metaphysical foundation of knowledge, rather than adopting provisional beliefs pragmatically in order to maintain spiritual progress, after the fashion of the Buddha.

At first sight the arguments I have already considered appear to contradict the view that Socrates was in any respect an ethical foundationalist. If he took the *aporesis* seriously, and made a distinction between absolute knowledge and human wisdom, surely he would have no grounds for assuming a metaphysical foundation for ethics? The issue, however, appears to be whether Socrates in fact (remembering that we are still talking about the Socrates presented by Plato) made moral judgements on this basis. If Socrates in fact makes moral judgement as though he had non-provisional absolute knowledge, he will be seen to be implicitly relying on metaphysical assumptions, and his non-dualism will be revealed as relatively superficial.

Socrates is depicted in the *Apology*, the *Crito* and the *Phaedo* as making a crucial series of decisions which contribute to his death. He allows himself to come to trial when he could have avoided doing so, and after being convicted and sentenced to execution, refuses to escape and go into exile according to the wishes of his friends<sup>16</sup>. Finally he faces death with calm and equanimity. Even if we limit the sources of evidence to the “Socratic” *Apology* and

*Crito* and do not include the much more Platonic *Phaedo* which actually gives an account of Socrates' death, not only his actions but the arguments he uses to justify them suggest, I shall argue, not a metaphysical agnosticism so much as the martyr's sense of metaphysical certainty about the rightness of his actions.

This becomes evident in the *Crito*, where Socrates, in refusing Crito's pressing invitation to escape with the help of Crito himself and other friends, appeals to a kind of absolute legal contractarianism<sup>17</sup>. Socrates argues that, since he has spent all his life in Athens and taken advantage of the law and order it offers, he has thereby entered into a contract with the laws and constitution of Athens which prevents him from disobeying the Athenian authorities even when they have convicted him unjustly. Observance of the contract thus appears to be absolutely required because no appeal to a higher conception of justice than that embodied in the contract is to be accepted as a basis of conduct, if the state cannot be persuaded to act according to that higher conception. "Both in war and in the law-courts and everywhere else you must do whatever your city and your country commands, or else persuade it in accordance with universal justice; but violence is a sin even against your parents, and it is a far greater sin against your country"<sup>18</sup>. There seems to be no appreciation here of any ethical limitations of the contract in providing the basis for an absolute direction of conduct, for it appears that the laws and constitution of Athens could commit absolutely any outrage and Socrates would still not be justified in breaking his assumed contract.

Gregory Vlastos brings out another aspect of this weakness in the consistency of Socrates' ethical practice here when he points out that Socrates failed even to protest against a series of moral outrages committed by the Athenians abroad, during his active philosophical lifetime, with the sanction of the city's assembly, when he might well have used his philosophical skills in arguing against them in the Assembly<sup>19</sup>. Vlastos just takes this as an inconsistency which vitiates the view of Socrates' personal perfection which Plato is evidently inclined to promote, but I would suggest that it is rather an indicator of his failure to consistently apply his non-dualism. Seeing his relationship to the state in the entirely personal terms of a contract between himself and the constitution, he apparently did not see the state itself as subject to any higher ethical norms. For this reason, perhaps, he failed to involve himself in political life even where his intervention might have made a crucial difference, for to do so would have amounted to recognising that the state itself was not entirely independent of him and thus that the contract was not an absolute event of moral legislation made between two morally independent entities. It is true that Socrates gives a reason for his non-involvement in politics in the *Apology*, where he claims that an inner voice has always dissuaded him from any such involvement, and that "if I had tried long ago to engage in politics, I should long ago have lost my life, without doing any good either to you or to myself"<sup>20</sup>. This argument, however, appears quite inconsistent with his later disregard of his life and its potential value for doing future good, and its consequentialism is thus a sort of post hoc rationalisation. Socrates does not argue in terms of the specific occasions when he may or may not have achieved good by intervening in politics and may or may not have lost his life, but rather appears to restrict himself from any such involvement because of the status which he gives political life *a priori*.

Even if it is not accepted that unacknowledged dependence on metaphysical assumptions finds its way into Socrates' ordinary ethical decision-making in this way, his doctrine of virtue gives further evidence of his acceptance of an approach which makes assertions about causal relationships going too far beyond experience to be fruitful. There seems to be reasonable evidence even in the "Socratic" dialogues that Socrates believed in cosmic justice (a necessary causal link between the moral quality of actions and consequences), and this belief develops in the middle dialogues and after into the clearly eternalist "Platonic" doctrines: immortality of the soul and freewill, supported by idealism and an essentialism of the Forms. Since the belief in cosmic justice can stand quite distinct from that in the immortality of the soul or of the afterlife, it is perhaps important to consider this first in its

Socratic context in order to see that ethical foundationalism is implicit in Plato's dialogues from the beginning.

The assertion of cosmic justice takes the form of the assertion that virtue is sufficient for happiness, an assertion found in nearly all the early dialogues. This can be understood either in instrumental terms (happiness is something distinct from virtue, but those who have virtue will also have happiness), so that virtue becomes a means to the end of happiness, or in non-instrumental terms (happiness is identical to virtue) whereby virtue becomes an end in itself and the basis on which happiness is analytically defined. Irwin offers persuasive arguments for an instrumentalist reading<sup>21</sup>, though he also almost acknowledges that Socrates may not have made his position very clear because he did not see any need for accepting the dichotomy<sup>22</sup>. Irwin's analysis relies strongly on Aristotle, who had a non-instrumental understanding of the virtues and thus a reason to set Socrates up as a straw man holding an opposed position. It is thus difficult to tell whether Socrates' position is really instrumental (reflecting the real position of the early Plato), or whether he has just been pinned into that position from one which is in fact non-dualist. We could coherently imagine that Socrates thought it psychologically useful for his more eternalistically-inclined interlocutors to reject instrumentality and his more nihilistically-inclined interlocutors to accept it in order to work towards a more balanced non-dualist belief in value which both related to their experience and transcended it. However, to assert this would perhaps be too speculative given the extent to which Socrates has been understood to hold an instrumentalist view of virtue. Even if he was really much more of a non-dualist than we give him credit for (bearing in mind that we are still talking about the Socrates of the dialogues, and not some reconstructed historical figure), the way he was interpreted in his time and subsequently is more important in understanding the development of eternalism in Western philosophy.

If we take an instrumentalist reading and virtue is distinct from happiness, then happiness must be understood in the worldly terms of the way any given interlocutor relatively understands it prior to the further development in virtue that Socrates would like to aid him in. From any given position A of relative (psychological or spiritual) objectivity then, the benefits of virtue must be understood at the same level of engagement in the concerns of the ego: the happiness to be encountered is thus happiness A. If virtue is then developed as a means to happiness A, though, the interlocutor will have progressed to a new position of higher objectivity, B. At position B the interlocutor's conception of happiness will have changed because it is less identified with egoistic motives: it will have become happiness B. Thus, if we take a psychological or spiritual account of objectivity like the Buddhist one, happiness cannot result from virtue in a way which is just to each particular case. For this reason Socrates' assertion that virtue is sufficient for happiness, taken instrumentally, must be false in the terms of any given interlocutor. Of course it is possible that, being motivated by the desire for happiness A, the interlocutor will not progress to position B at all because one of the virtues required to do so will be an understanding of the limitations of happiness A, which the interlocutor does not possess. In this case the interlocutor will simply have no way of knowing whether virtue as he conceives it is sufficient for happiness, and the claim will remain purely abstract and unfruitful. Either way Socrates the instrumentalist will not succeed in enabling real advances in ethical objectivity through teaching this particular doctrine: rather his disciples will make progress only insofar as they see beyond it and understand ways in which virtue can be an end in itself and that the happiness they seek cannot be an end in itself.

It is in this way, at least if Socrates has been correctly interpreted, that we can see ethical foundationalism in his approach at an earlier stage than that of the explicit introduction of Plato's metaphysical doctrines. The subtlety of this implicit dualism can perhaps be seen most clearly in the following quotation from the *Apology*:

...to be afraid of death is only another form of thinking that one is wise when one is not; it is to think that one knows when one does not know. No one knows with regard to death whether it is not really the greatest blessing that can happen to a man; but people dread it as though they were certain that it is the greatest evil....<sup>23</sup>

At the same time here Socrates both challenges the popular attitude to death by asserting the *aporesis*, and introduces a further assumption of his own which over-compensates for the popular view. If one does not know what happens after death, naturally one does not know that it is an evil, but why should one therefore assume that it is a blessing? There would appear to be no particular reason to fear the unknown just because it is unknown, but neither is there any reason to welcome it. In the context of the trial at which this speech was made, though, Socrates uses this argument as a justification for his lack of practical resistance to execution. Because of his degree of certainty about the unknown, it seems that Socrates in some ways preferred it to the known, when a more balanced judgement might perhaps have led him to take a more optimistic view of the good he could continue to do in more clearly foreseeable circumstances.

### **c) Platonic eternalism**

Perhaps the most important cause for the development of Socratic eternalism into the explicit metaphysics of Platonic eternalism lay in the personal relationship between Socrates and Plato and the effect that Socrates' death must have had on his 28-year old disciple. Soloviev puts this psychological event and its connection with its philosophical implications very well.

The death of Socrates, when Plato had recovered from the shock, gave rise to a new view of the world – platonic idealism.... That world, in which the righteous man had to die for truth, is not the true, positive world. Another world exists, where Truth lives. Here we have a foundation in actual experience for Plato's firm belief in a truly existing, ideal cosmos, distinct from and contrasting with the visible world of physical phenomena. It was Plato's fate to deduce his idealism –and this generally has been but little observed – not from that abstract reasoning by which he subsequently explained and demonstrated it, but from the profound emotional experience with which his new life began.<sup>24</sup>

One way of explaining what happened to Plato is in terms of alienation and repression. At the time of Socrates' death, we can imagine, Plato found himself in the grip of two quite contradictory emotions: those of respect for Socrates' teaching and horror at the way in which that teaching appeared to be contradicted by events. These contradictory emotions could be expressed in a triad of inconsistent propositions: (a) Socrates was a virtuous man, (b) Virtue is sufficient for happiness, (c) Socrates' death was a unhappy event. Plato appears to believe (a), and Socrates clearly taught (b) at least in the sense I have discussed above. In order to maintain consistency, then, Plato was obliged to alienate the feelings attached to (c) and deny philosophically that it was true, at least for Socrates himself. To maintain such a position he was obliged to have ever greater recourse to dogmatic metaphysics.

Plato's metaphysics, then, consists in an interdependent set of views which attempt to support Socrates' nascent ethical foundationalism and to deny the reality of the processes which led to his death. These views consist in an understanding of cosmic justice which operates not only in this life but in the afterlife (going far beyond Socrates' attempt to apply the *aporesis* to death in the *Apology*, quoted above), an implicit doctrine of freewill, an enshrinement of linguistic essentialism through the doctrine of the Forms, and an idealism. All of these can be defended as in some respects developments of Socratic doctrines, yet they also show an alarmingly rapid slide further into dualism. Despite the fact that Socrates was probably the nearest thing Western philosophy ever had to a clear exponent of non-dualism, it seems to have taken only a few errors on the part of Socrates himself, magnified by a few more on the

part of his foremost disciple, to have begun a process of obsessive dogmatic assertion and sceptical counter-reaction which was hugely influential in subsequently obscuring the light of non-dualism in Western civilisation.

One clear indication of the abandonment of the aporeisis appears in the *Meno*, where Plato seems to be questioning and abandoning the acceptance, implicit in the earlier dialogues, that one can seek the definition of a virtue that one does not already know. After being brought to a state of perplexity by Socrates as his previous certainties about the nature of virtue are annihilated through the process of the elenchos, Meno brings up the crucial question.

MENO. But how will you look for something when you don't in the least know what it is? How on earth are you going to set up something as the object of your search? To put it another way, even if you come right up against it, how will you know that what you have found is the thing you didn't know?

SOCRATES. I know what you mean. Do you realise that what you are bringing up is the trick argument that a man cannot try to discover either what he knows or what he does not know? He would not seek what he knows, for since he knows it there is no need of the inquiry, nor what he does not know, for in that case he does not even know what he is to look for.<sup>25</sup>

Although he describes this argument as a trick one, the Socrates of this dialogue takes this argument seriously enough to think it worth refuting, where the Socrates of the earlier dialogues might simply have reiterated his ignorance of any solution. The argument, though, is one which was used by the Sophists and involves an appeal to a false dichotomy between absolute knowledge and absolute ignorance, no allowance being made for provisionality of belief in the object of the search, or for incrementality in the degree of knowledge and the clarity of its conceived object. If this false dichotomy is accepted, there are only two possible responses to this argument: either acceptance that we have no knowledge and no reason to seek for any, or some kind of foundational appeal to an absolute knowledge which already exists regardless of experience. Following the dialogue directly after the previous quotation, it soon becomes clear which of these strategies Socrates will adopt.

MENO. Well, do you think it a good argument?

SOCRATES. No.

MENO. Can you explain how it fails?

SOCRATES. I can. I have heard from men and women who understand the truths of religion –

*[Here he presumably pauses to emphasise the solemn change of tone which the dialogue undergoes at this point.]*

MENO. What did they say?

SOCRATES. Something true, I thought, and fine.

MENO. What was it, and who were they?

SOCRATES. Those who tell it are priests and priestesses....<sup>26</sup>

Plato here exploits the dramatic potentialities of the dialogue form to try to make his appeal to religious authority more palatable. The change in tone can perhaps be taken as reflecting a larger one in the succession of dialogues: a change in which Socratic ignorance gives way to Platonic knowledge and Socrates the gadfly gradually gives way to Socrates the sage. For what follows this solemn introduction is the doctrine of recollection, by which it is claimed that our immortal souls have essential knowledge of things prior to our birth, and all apparent increase of knowledge is thus merely recollection. Rationalism is born.

The demonstration of this which Socrates offers is that an uneducated young slave-boy, with suitable prompting, can work out a simple geometrical problem. No distinction is made here between the boy's capacity to acquire knowledge through *a priori* reasoning and the

knowledge itself. This however, is not the only sacrifice made in order to provide some sort of answer to the Sophistic question on its own level. More importantly, knowledge in general is now understood, not as the relative product of experience, but as an *a priori* matter. We are now to judge knowledge in relation to objects about which, in Plato's view, perfect assertions can be made. Mathematics and geometry are taken as the paradigms of such perfect knowledge, against which the relative knowledge which we understand purely through experience appears shadowy and insubstantial.

Once this fundamental shift has been made, the other features of Platonic eternalism can be added easily. The doctrine of the Forms, derived from the true definitions of virtues which Socrates sought but failed to absolutely achieve in the early dialogues, provides the theoretical possibility of essential definitions of absolute reality, seen in the *Republic* as the moral counterpart of mathematical knowledge. The Guardians of Plato's ideal Republic go through an education in mathematics before proceeding to the practice of the elenchos, the aim of which is to enable the fundamental examination of moral assumptions. After a further fifteen years of practical experience, it is claimed that the future rulers of the ideal state will have attained knowledge of the Form of the Good: knowledge which is understood in terms of a fundamental definition. Although Socrates in the *Republic* refuses to say what this definition actually is, the path mapped out for the philosopher-kings is clearly no longer one of merely acknowledging ignorance, but of gaining essential knowledge itself.<sup>27</sup>

Plato's rationalism is also founded on the tripartite division of the soul into rational, spirited and appetitive parts found in the *Republic*<sup>28</sup>. Here the indicator of moral progress is the dominance of the other parts of the soul by the reason, so that the other parts, acknowledging their subservience, act in harmony. Given Plato's belief in the immortal soul, this internal ordering is the only kind of psychological moral ordering open to him, for if the individual soul is to be the vehicle of goodness and its relationship to any other quantity is entirely contingent, nothing beyond it can provide any criterion of goodness. Bottled into its apparently solipsistic contemplation of goodness, the ideally ordered soul continues its lonely voyage through eternity without encountering anything more real than itself.

In my analysis of this tripartite division I shall identify the rational soul with the ego, or self-obsessed reactive mind of Buddhism. Although of course Plato's analysis of the soul was based on quite different assumptions, it is only possible to understand the weaknesses of these assumptions by examining them in the light of other assumptions expressed through different categorisations. However, these categorisations do intersect in terms of their goals - namely to give an account of spiritual and ethical objectivity - and in this respect I would argue that Plato's rational soul performs the same function as the ego: namely to be the centre of a self-conscious ordering of experience. One aspect of this ordering consists in the classification of experiences within a subject-object dichotomy, and another aspect consists in the exertion of the will, assumed to be that of the free subject, over what is perceived to be object. Plato's idealism enabled him to treat the rational soul as an absolutely real entity identified with the thinking subject and its *a priori* classifications, whilst his views about the need to exert the rational faculty to gain control over the whole mind<sup>29</sup> give grounds for thinking that Plato had at least an implicit belief in freewill.

Whether we understand Plato's approach to the foundations of ethics in terms of the understanding of a rational definition or merely in terms of this psychological ordering of parts of the soul, the same difficulties are evident: in either case it fails to take sufficient account of the complexity of psychological conditions. An absolute definition of goodness, if it should ever be known by any individual, could not by itself bring the appetitive and spirited parts of the soul to entirely subjugate themselves to the rational, since the verbal formula would only be accessible to the rational part and would have no appeal to the other parts. Implicit in the very idea of an absolute definition of goodness is a linguistic essentialism which, rather than harmonising the parts of the soul as Plato depicts them, will



tend to divide them because of the rigidification of ego-boundaries created by the representational relationship between subject and object. Definition of goodness itself implies the identification of the ego (or rational soul) with what is defined as good, whilst the excluded remainder of the psyche is grouped with those aspects of the represented reality which are not good. Knowledge of the Form of the Good, then, would not be of any practical use in bringing about goodness, simply because it would not necessarily have any affective power. Perhaps this provides a psychological background to Aristotle's criticism of the same doctrine on the grounds of its apparent lack of relationship to practice: "What advantage will a weaver or a joiner get from knowledge of this good-itself? Or how will one who has had a vision of the Idea itself become thereby a better doctor or general?"<sup>30</sup>.

If we interpret spiritual and ethical order purely in the psychological terms of the ordering of the soul, we are left with the same basic problem created by the duality of soul and other. If the rational soul is understood as merely imposing its control over the other parts, then we can expect the other parts to remain rebellious, and to make their rebellion felt at times when the vigilance of the rational soul is relaxed. However, Plato makes it clear that he expects that ideally the spirited part of the soul should be tamed and subordinated by means of "harmony and rhythm" to then assist the reason in keeping the appetites under control, just as, in the macrocosm of the state, the auxiliaries assist the rulers in controlling the craftsmen in the population<sup>31</sup>. This approach increases the likelihood of success, though it still seems to ignore the possibility of the appetitive part of the soul itself being cultivated. Plato's view of the kind of strategy that should be adopted in working with the appetitive aspects of the soul does vary, the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus* particularly offering apparently more positive views of it than the *Republic*<sup>32</sup>. However, even if Plato is understood to mean that all parts of the psyche should be positively cultivated so as to work in harmony rather than forcibly subordinated to the reason, there are further fundamental difficulties.

One of these is the basic authoritarianism still implicit in the approach. Although potentially rebellious parts of the soul are to be soothed as well as suppressed, this is merely a skilful means to power on the part of the rational soul. The policy itself remains that of reason, the proper role of which is to rule over the rest of the psyche by whatever means are at its disposal. However, this assumes that the rational soul, or ego, is itself capable of grasping and practising the good for a given psyche within its own limitations. This self-appointed role of the ego as arbiter of good for the whole psyche is inadequate because it implies the alienation of the "good" of the excluded parts of the psyche. However skilfully rebellious parts of the soul are handled, they will never become full allies of the reason unless their wishes are actually taken into account, and their rebellious energies are actually channelled into a purpose which incorporates them.

A further difficulty lies in the way in which Plato understands psyches as isolated entities: that is, as immortal souls. If we ignore the above difficulty and imagine that all parts of the soul can actually be brought into complete harmony at a given point in time, how long can we expect this harmony to continue? If all the components of the psyche actually remain unchanging and absolutely isolated from external influences, this harmony would continue eternally. However, given any allowance whatsoever for the respects in which minds are affected by outside stimuli, we would expect changes in one part or another of the psyche which would disturb this harmony and re-introduce conflict. If the boundaries of the soul are absolutely impermeable there can be no interaction with the world and thus apparently no ethics in which motives have any causal role. If, on the other hand, the boundaries of the soul are permeable to any extent, then the components of the soul cannot achieve any lasting stability unless all other components of the universe also have a similar stability. Thus any understanding of goodness as a static psychological relationship is incoherent: it must be understood in dynamic terms or not at all.

Plato's understanding of the soul as immortal also allows him to make much stronger claims about cosmic justice than those made in the Socratic dialogues. His justification for doing so goes back to the crucial point of the Meno that I discussed earlier. For it appears that in accepting the Sophistic question about knowledge and attempting to answer it Plato is accepting a distinction between knowledge and true belief which the earlier Socrates did not accept. On the Socratic account of cosmic justice, virtue is sufficient for happiness and (according to the interpretation I earlier discussed) instrumental to happiness. According to the new Platonic approach, however, virtue does not merely consist in what is instrumental to happiness, but also contains an element of knowledge which is an end in itself. On the Socratic account, true belief was sufficient for virtue because virtue is only to be understood in practical terms, but on the Platonic one, true belief is no longer sufficient because virtue also consists in metaphysical knowledge<sup>33</sup>. Plato's approach to cosmic justice, then, is not that we should develop virtue in order to experience good consequences which necessarily follow from it, but rather that in developing virtue we reach an understanding of the consequences which will follow. Although it is thus claimed that virtue will be rewarded both in this life and after death, if we achieve the highest levels of virtue this can only become a matter of indifference to us. Why should we be concerned with the operation of justice in a cosmos which is ultimately illusory?

Plato's attitude to knowledge thus allows him to be explicit about the afterlife, providing several mythic accounts of it, at the same time as offering a standpoint beyond it, which, as I have already argued, itself embodies eternalistic illusions about the absolute nature of the soul. Plato's belief in cosmic justice in this life and the next, then, could be understood as an expedient, a temporary illusion to be cultivated by the Platonic disciple who has not yet progressed far enough with his studies to be inspired by the highest knowledge in itself: were it not for similar limitations in the ideal of highest knowledge itself. The future pleasures of an afterlife or reincarnation following the acquiring of virtue are merely a pale imitation of the higher pleasures to be gained through metaphysical knowledge itself and the accompanying self-sufficient rationality of the soul. Even if the experience is an ever more subtle one, the basic appeal remains an appeal to the ego.

Plato's eternalistic ethics may often nevertheless be subtle and inspiring. From many starting points, the challenge to gain rational control of the soul appears quite sufficient as a basis of ethical practice for the foreseeable future. Plato's dualism may appear to offer a weakness which will only become practically relevant at a very remote point. I shall go on to argue, though, that this weakness has important implications from a more immediate ethical standpoint.

#### **d) Platonic conservatism**

Plato's eternalism also has undesirable consequences for his political philosophy which, as I shall try to show, are antithetic to the Middle Way. In general, the eternalist appeal to a dogmatism about ethical foundations creates a clear division in social and political groupings because dogmatic reasoning allows only clear affirmation or denial. If what is affirmed is associated with the state, the result is a conservatism in which eternalist doctrines cannot be questioned without questioning the power of the state, whilst if what is affirmed is contrary to the state, the result is a radical grouping which may be in conflict with the state. Of course the distinction between conservatism and radicalism here rests only on how one conceives the state. There may be some occasions when a state itself becomes radical with respect to some larger power, or a smaller grouping than the state is conservative relative to an even smaller grouping based on different principles. "State" then here just means a relatively large power, and eternalist philosophies tend to be "conservative" or "radical" only relative to each other or to an intervening liberalism<sup>34</sup>.

These distinctions need to be borne in mind when considering the characterisation of Plato as “conservative”. Plato has been variously accused of communism and fascism, but rarely of being staid. The *Republic* appears to offer a model of a state so different from those that have actually existed in his day or ours that even “radical” is an understatement. However, it is Plato’s authoritarianism, and his preference for modifying an existing social order into a utopian one, that means, ultimately, that he must serve the interests of existing states, at least where these are judged to have the potential to be changed into the kind of utopia Plato envisaged.

The parallel between the microcosm (the soul) and macrocosm (the state) running through the *Republic* provides the basis for identifying the weakness in Plato’s political philosophy which corresponds to that in his understanding of the psyche. Just as the rational soul, however subtle its techniques, effectively imposes its policies on the other parts, so the rulers of the Republic subtly impose their vision on the rest of the population. The whole system of education is geared not only towards preparing the rulers for this task, but towards preparing the rest of the population to be content with this situation and to fulfil their more humble roles. Once the ideal Platonic state is created, then, it must remain in a completely stable state to avoid the decline into timocracy threatened in the text<sup>35</sup>. Both the rationality and the authority of the rulers must remain perfect.

There is also the question of whether such a state could actually ever be set up. The model that Plato offers here is that philosophers must be kings<sup>36</sup>, and he maintains that the ideal state could conceivably come about either by philosophers coming to power or kings becoming philosophers<sup>37</sup>. The way in which the state is to be set up, then, is through authoritarian imposition by enlightened dictatorship: “imposition” not necessarily meaning the use of force, but as in the case of the soul the enactment of a policy created by reason by whatever means are available, without any influence being allowed to contrary policies not judged in accordance with reason.

Exactly parallel objections can be made to the method of creation and maintenance of the ideal Platonic state as those made above with regard to the ideal Platonic soul. Firstly, unless the subjugated elements of the state actually have a role in the creation of policy their energies would not be wholly integrated into the project and thus one would expect some level of non-acceptance of the authority of the philosopher king, which would bring an element of instability into the realm. Secondly, even if the realm itself could be created and maintained as a perfectly stable entity, it is not an isolated entity and will thus be subject to instability created by outside forces. This latter point is strongly made in Aldous Huxley’s novel *Island*, where a utopian state is shown to be powerless before outside forces<sup>38</sup>.

Further difficulties are created by the inexactness of the comparison between the individual and the state, reflecting that of any macrocosmic-microcosmic comparison. A necessary inexactness is created by the fact that however regular the symmetry of features, the macrocosm always contains an extra element of complexity absent in the microcosm because of its greater level of scale. In this case, the stability of the state depends on the behaviour of all the individuals comprising it, but this behaviour, in order to be stable, is also dependent on the stability of relationship between all the components of those individuals. Such a stability, even in Plato’s terms, could only be achieved through the complete rationality of each individual: but to achieve this every member of the population would have to go through the same training directed towards knowledge of the Good which Plato ordains for the rulers. We would thus require not only philosopher-kings but philosopher-subjects. It can only be a failure to appreciate this complexity which leads Plato to believe that the ideal state could be produced through application of the will of the ruler alone.

But I do not want to impose a false dichotomy on Plato which recognises only the existence or non-existence of the ideal state. Perhaps he should be read as only recommending a method

of producing a better state than those currently existing, or the best practicably realisable state. This is an dilution parallel to that which I temporarily accepted above with regard to the soul: for perhaps it can be argued that Plato's ethics at least show a way in which the soul can be improved. This dilution, however, is not to be wholly accepted at either level. The difficulty lies in the fact that Plato's ethics (in this respect like all other dualist ethics) depend upon an appeal to the absolute nature of their final justification in order to support any relative application. An ethical foundationalism without foundations produces very unstable structures, because even the first hesitant low-level walls have been built in ignorance of the conditions which affect the whole building. To exemplify this more practically we only have to think in terms of numerous modern revolutions which attempted merely to reform the state through political action from above, but in every case failed either to create or to sustain the reforms due to either internal or external conditions.

All of these criticisms are ones that apply equally to conservative and radical forms of eternalist political philosophy. What places Plato in the conservative camp appears to be the practical adherence he developed later in his life to the political scheme of turning a king into a philosopher. This was evidently the motivation behind his three visits to Sicily, where he attempted to gain influence over Dionysius the Elder and later Dionysius the Younger. This policy, which Plato persisted with despite its clear lack of success, provides evidence of one of the more extreme types of the eternalist psychological state. The *Laws*, which are dated by most scholars at the end of Plato's life (though according to Ryle they were originally written to provide an actual legislative programme to be enacted by Dionysius the Younger<sup>39</sup>) give an indication of a completely conservative Plato for whom the desire to realise an increasingly abstract ideal has led to complete support of the existing mechanism of state, completely overtaking all consideration of psychological and political complexity. Soloviev strongly expresses the horror of this:

A direct and complete renouncement of Socrates and philosophy is expressed in those laws, by virtue of which any man was subject to the death penalty who questioned or impaired the authority of the ancestral laws, in their relation to the gods as well as in their relation to public order. In this way Socrates' greatest disciple, who had been provoked to independent creative work in philosophy by his indignation at the legal murder of his master, towards the end definitely adopted the point of view of Anytos and Melitos, who had demanded the sentence of death on Socrates precisely because of the freedom of his attitude to the established religious and social order. What a profound and tragic catastrophe, how complete the moral fall! The author of the *Apologia*, *Gorgias* and *Phaedo*, after half a century's cult of the wise and just man slain by the law, openly accepts and affirms in his *Laws* that very principle of blind, false and servile faith, through which the father of his better self had been put to death.<sup>40</sup>

Although I do not entirely share Soloviev's rather idealised view of Socrates, the distance Plato has travelled in the wrong direction is made clear here..

Popper also provides an account of Plato's slide into authoritarianism which, although limited to a political perspective and an uncritical liberalism, in many ways supports mine. For Popper the initial cause of tension for Plato is not just Socrates' death, as it is for Soloviev, but the strain created by the movement out of traditional "tribalism" towards an open society. In a city-state in constant conflict between oligarchs and democrats, Plato's sympathies by both birth and temperament are with the oligarchs who seek a return to the certainties of the old closed society. Thus although both Socrates and Plato are largely themselves products of this openness, Plato, in his perfectionism, can only see progress as lying in a return to collectivism. For Popper there is no doubt that Plato was sincere in his apparent volte-face against Socrates, for he convinced himself (and many others with him), through the strength of his idealism, that authoritarianism was the natural interpretation of Socrates'

humanitarianism. The conservatism he created then, whilst politically no different from that of the oligarchs, contained many more sophisticated rationalisations which only served to strengthen it. What Plato had failed to face up to were the strains of personal responsibility and freedom of enquiry. It was a failure of courage.<sup>41</sup>

But Plato's decline is not merely one which can be tracked in terms of attitudes to the freedom of the individual, but one which illustrates both the connections between eternalistic philosophy and psychology and the perils of those approaches. Plato had not just become over-attached to idealised political goals, he had also failed to appreciate his own ignorance of the complexity of the processes which might bring those goals about. The direct result of abandoning Socrates' aporesis, with its implicit non-dualism, was a disastrous arrogance.

### **Conclusion**

Plato's failure of courage in the face of the unknown emerges equally both in his metaphysics and in his politics, and unfortunately was enormously influential. Witnessing it propelled Aristotle into a cautious empiricism which later influenced many empiricist thinkers into a premature dismissal of the ethical universality which Socrates had sought. Likewise Plato's metaphysics had much influence over the development of Christian theology, where it helped to entrench the Church into centuries of dogmatic attitudes. Plato's influence on the development of Western culture seems to have been much more negative than positive.

But at the same time we must acknowledge and celebrate Plato's role as the communicator of the Socratic aporesis, probably the nearest thing to non-dualism that the West had until its encounter with Buddhism. It is this aporesis which formed the basis of the much less arrogant mysticism developed by the neoplatonists, and provided often an inspiration to subsequent Western philosophers. Though Plato's compatibility with Buddhism should not be overestimated, he can nevertheless also in some respects provide an inspiration which, like Michelangelo's figures in that great seat of dogmatism, the Sistine Chapel of the Vatican, shine through and out of their doctrinal context.

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<sup>1</sup> Conze (1967)

<sup>2</sup> see for example Irwin (1995) p.11-13

<sup>3</sup> It is not feasible to give much more than this very general description of non-dualism within the scope of this paper. Nor do I think it would be helpful to provide references to existing works, none of which in my view provide a satisfactory account of it. I must thus assume a degree of prior *sense* as to the meaning of non-dualism on the part of the reader, and hope that the treatment of Plato itself will help to elucidate its meaning more precisely by applying it. The whole issue of non-dualism understood in the terms of Western philosophy is one that I am currently working on in my Ph.D. thesis, provisionally entitled "A Buddhist theory of moral objectivity". This paper is an adaptation of a small part of this work in progress.

<sup>4</sup> *Apology* 21A-24A : Plato (1959) p.49-53

<sup>5</sup> Soloviev (1935)

<sup>6</sup> Popper (1962) p.189-194

<sup>7</sup> *Apology* 23: Plato (1959) p.52; Irwin (1995) p.28-9

<sup>8</sup> For the purposes of this paper I do not make any distinction between the spiritual and the psychological (such as that the former operates in the transcendental and the latter in the mundane sphere), but use both together to indicate the sphere of the whole psyche (which is also the sphere of spiritual development), often as opposed to the cognitive faculties which only compose a part of the psyche.

<sup>9</sup> Hadot (1995) p.89-93

<sup>10</sup> Hadot quotes the *Statesman* 285c-d in direct support of this.

<sup>11</sup> Hadot (1995) p.92

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.* p.56-66

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.* p.64

<sup>14</sup> Penner (1973)

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.* p.39-40 (Penner's parentheses)

<sup>16</sup> *Crito* 45: Plato (1959) p.83

<sup>17</sup> *Crito* 50A-53A: *ibid.* p.89-94

<sup>18</sup> *Crito* 51B: *ibid.* p.91

<sup>19</sup> Vlastos (1994) p.127-133

<sup>20</sup> *Apology* 31D: Plato (1959) p.64

<sup>21</sup> Irwin (1995) ch.5

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.* p.77

<sup>23</sup> *Apology* 29: Plato (1959) p.60

<sup>24</sup> Soloviev (1935) p.53-4

<sup>25</sup> *Meno* 80 D-E: Plato (1956) p.128-9

<sup>26</sup> *Meno* 81 A: *ibid.* p.129. The "stage directions" are Guthrie's.

<sup>27</sup> *Republic* 521 C – 541 B: Plato (1941) p.234-263

<sup>28</sup> *Republic* 434 D- 445 B: *ibid.* p.129-143. Robinson (1970, p.39-46) points out that this division was made only for the purposes of the argument in the *Republic*, where this psychology is adopted only to deal with the question of conflicts in motive. Elsewhere a bipartite division suits Plato's purposes equally well. However, since it is only with the area of conflicts in motive that I am concerned, for these purposes Plato's approach can be adequately indicated using the tripartite model.

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<sup>29</sup> See for example *Timaeus* 87-90: Plato (1977) p.117-122

<sup>30</sup> *Nicomachean Ethics* 1097a: Aristotle (1976) p.72

<sup>31</sup> *Republic* 441: Plato (1941) p.140

<sup>32</sup> Here particularly see Nussbaum (1986) part 2

<sup>33</sup> see Irwin (1995) p.145-7. Irwin sees Plato's approach as justified because he is asking epistemological questions that Socrates fails to ask. He does not consider that Socrates may have had good reasons for not asking them.

<sup>34</sup> This general political characterisation of eternalist philosophies as either conservative or radical is only meant to be applicable up until the time of Kant and the Utilitarians, when a liberal form of eternalism also develops based on an accommodation with nihilism through a strong division between public and private morality. Both eternalists and nihilists who recognise each other's persistent existence then agree to a political system which allows both to be pursued in private. In Plato's time, however, no such strong public/private division existed.

<sup>35</sup> *Republic* 543A – 550C: Plato (1941) p.265-273

<sup>36</sup> *Republic* 471C – 474B: *ibid.* p.175-9

<sup>37</sup> *Republic* 497A – 502C: *ibid.* p.205-211

<sup>38</sup> Huxley (1962)

<sup>39</sup> Ryle (1966) p.256-9

<sup>40</sup> Soloviev (1935) p.80-81

<sup>41</sup> Popper (1962) p.169-201