

Platons Tankevärld

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This book, a Swedish translation published in a simple paperback by the imprint of Prisma, was given to me as a Christmas present in 1968. I did not read it at the time, although I probably would have liked to, if not to read it, at least to have read it, as it would have meshed nicely with my emerging idea of myself. At the time I was interested in philosophy, in particular that of mathematics, and indeed in its capacity as indubitable truth of an eternal character. Clearly it was my father who had bought the book for me, along with some other books on philosophy, among those a thin one by Russell on the philosophy of knowledge, which I may have read at the time. Now almost forty years later I pick it up again, and this time I am ready for it in a way I certainly was not back then. Had I read it as a teenager I would probably have been puzzled and disappointed. Now I read it for a specific purpose, namely to check what Plato scholars have to say about Plato, in particular in order to find out what I have not figured out for myself. In addition to that the reading of the book is an act of nostalgia, it brings me back to my early youth and somehow repays a debt I feel I have incurred to my father and his solicitations for my intellectual development at the time.

Now how does a scholar approach Plato? First he is not intent upon developing the ideas of Plato and to be caught up in his philosophy, his attitude is one of detachment, so although Plato addresses some of the most ontological questions a human can ask, namely that of existence and reality, a scholar has to stay aloof and not get caught up in it. So Raven is much more of a historian, that is an historian of thought, than a philosopher. His assignment is to put Plato in context, trying to elucidate what he really meant as opposed to what he should have meant. As such he is an observer not an active agent as would a true philosopher be. A true philosopher would try to reconstruct Plato's thoughts, not necessarily as they were thought, but as they should have been thought, just as a true mathematician happening upon an ancient mathematical text is less concerned about the history of it and what the people thought about it, than the mathematics involved, trying to identify the underlying questions and to solve them, using the text as a source of inspiration rather than be restrained by its authority such as is the case of fundamentalists reading the Bible, the Quaran or the American Constitution.

One of the first things Raven considers is the availability of the sources for there being a historical person by the identity of Plato. Plato lived well over two thousand years ago, but nevertheless the documentation of his life is far more substantial than that of our almost contemporary Shakespeare. Seldom do complete works survive from antiquity, in most cases we only have some minor tantalizing fragments, indicating the extent of a large and rich oeuvre, which will for ever be closed to us. In many cases not even that much is retained, only secondary or tertiary sources are available. Very many notables survive only in mentions, and one can only speculate how many will be for ever unknown to us, because even those intermittent references have not survived into posterity. However it

seems pedantic to doubt the historical existence of Plato, as opposed to say that of Jesus. The other question is to what extent the material on Plato, especially the famous epistle VII which purports to be autobiographical, is authentic. It may be a forgery, but even if a forgery it might still narrate true facts. Those are classical problems that beset a historian, and the way of addressing them involve a variety of techniques from strictly forensic ones (whenever an option) to more subjective. In the case of Plato scholarship the former options are not available and instead the historian is forced to argue on the basis of similarities of style as well as possible internal contradictions. In fact the existence of the latter can in many ways indicate authenticity the argument being that a forger would not fall into such traps, while reality may. Needless to say such considerations are far more in the nature of mere opinions than actual truths.

One fundamental, but basically trivial question, trivial as Plato no doubt would have been able to answer it right away had he been available for cross-examination, concerns the sequence in which the different dialogues have been written. This is clearly very important if you want to understand the evolution of Plato's doctrines. Now the task is almost impossible, the tools of settling it being through logical convenience and matters of style, which in their turn are based on similar considerations. Thus it no doubt will furnish material for endless academic disputes and changing opinions. Anyway the scholars seem to identify three or rather four stages of dialogues, the internal chronology within each highly speculative, while the grand outline seems to be of a consensual character. Without such an agreed upon classification, the work by Raven would have been almost impossible. The main three stages are the early dialogues (such as 'Menon' and 'Gorgias'), the mature ones (such as 'Phaedon' and 'the Republic'), and the late ones (among them 'Parmenedis' and 'the Sophist'). Then there are also the real late ones, such as the 'Laws', but the general consensus seems to be that those simply do not measure up and should be counted as belonging to senescence, and only brief references are made to them.

First one is interested in when Plato conceived of his idea of forms? Did he receive them from Socrates fully formed, or did he develop them from the teachings of the latter and attributing them to him as a particular potent form of homage? The death of Socrates probably being more of a trauma for Plato than for Socrates himself, and unlike the case of the latter, one of the defining moments of his life. Ravens opinion is that Plato developed his ideas gradually, fusing three disparate elements into a coherent philosophy. Namely the ideas of Heraclites of the fluidity of the world, of the Pythagorean number mysticism, and finally the ethical teachings of Socrates. Heraclites taught him to identify a world of the senses and the imperative to see beyond it. The Pythagoreans indicated what kind of nature such a world might have, and finally Socrates teaching gave him the meaning of the search, because ultimately what seems to motivate Plato is the notion of the just and the good. Heraclites with his 'panta rei' is often contrasted to Parmenedis, whose notion of unity beyond the confusing world of the senses must have also been a powerful incentive to Plato. His debt to the Pythagoreans school, which he seems to have visited if the available documentations of his life is not egregiously misleading, is often considered the least felicitous and provides most modern detractors with the argument of mysticism that is often associated with Platonism, while his emphasize on the just and the good may be seen as anchoring his philosophy to closely to the parochial concerns of humanity. In

my opinion historical Platonism should indeed be seen as an imperfect manifestations of a more ideal Platonism, which Plato was only able to glimpse, thus any imperfections are just historical accidents. Thus ironically, the incisive critique by Aristotle and his consequent elaboration of it actually weakens it by making it more precise, anchoring it more closely to the historical circumstances and hence more vulnerable to the passage of time.

The bulk of Ravens book concerns 'the Republic' more or less completely ignoring the political speculations and concentrating on three metaphors, namely those of the Sun, the divided Line, and the Cave, which are seen to be central to Plato's doctrines. Of those that of the Sun is the easiest to understand. In it the 'Good' is simply likened to the Sun, being the source of Light which enables Reason to perceive objects in the eternal world of forms. Thus the Good (or God?) corresponds to the Sun, and the Reason to the Eye, whose sight alone enables man to see his surroundings. And Light emanating from the Sun being Knowledge. Now if one is simple-minded enough to take a metaphor too literally, Platonism does indeed appear as a species of mysticism postulating a world beyond that of the one in which we physically dwell. But if one is not to be accused of being simple-minded how should one really conceive of the other world? The clue is Reason, the fact that we can by our reason see and understand things that lie behind the mere manifestations accessible by our senses. Mathematics is one obvious example, in which we reason about things that have no counterpart in the sensual world. A triangle in the sensual world only exists as a specific one, while in our reasoning we are not so much arguing about the ideal triangle as the abstract one transcending all particular manifestations, having only those qualities which are needed. Such generic triangles exist, but where do they exist? In our minds, or outside our minds, but yet accessible to them? The distinction is crucial, and by putting the 'form' of the triangle outside our imagination, but embraced by it, Plato crosses his intellectual Rubicon. This step by Plato is what invites the most scathing criticism from his modern detractors. It is a point worth dwelling on. The notion of abstract entities is of course something that is universally acknowledged, the quarrel is how tangible an existence to give to them. One prosaic interpretation of the notion of form is simply to think of them as residing within human language. Thus a form is just the linguistic symbol under whose heading we collect a great variety of things having just this notion in common. In short a word¹. According to Raven it is possible that Plato himself flirted with that notion only to reject it. Human language is extolled and is now seen as the one defining feature that separates us from the animals². For most of the 20th century, as opposed to the metaphysical excesses of the 19th, academic philosophy has mostly been concerned with the subtleties of linguistic representation, sometimes prompting some proponents of reducing it to a social language game. Few philosophers if any would deny that the ideas of forms, suitably interpreted and positioned, provide inevitable tools in transcending the mere world of the senses as in particular involved in scientific investigation and explanation. True such an elevated view of language rises it above mere linguistic concerns, and one may start to wonder to what

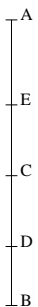
¹ To the mathematician the notion of naive set-theory presents itself naturally as another prosaic interpretation, which of course if pursued would lead into the standard antinomies of such a naive theory

² the late Maynard-Keynes argues that Language is one of the crucial inventions of evolution along with multi-cellularity and sexual reproduction

extent language is actually independent of people. Obviously language is independent of the individual mind and can be conceived of something belonging to some kind of Jungian collective unconsciousness³. Russell stresses that Platonism was initially an essentially logical concern, trying to isolate common characteristics (such as 'whiteness'), but that it invites mysticism, which has become its undoing. As to the general characteristics of a form, Peirce has remarked that when we try to visually imagine something in our minds, it is usually devoid of specific visual characteristics only a general sense being retained⁴. This gives another, even more prosaic interpretations as to the notion of Platonic forms and the way the mind perceives them.

In summary the main point of Plato's metaphor of the Sun is that knowledge is only attained by the intellect and can only be had of what is eternal and that the source of knowledge is the good. Now leaving aside the more or less embarrassing question whether 'the Good' should be identified with some sort of 'Deity' (in fact an identification with an abstract such is more or less implicit) it is hard to fault Plato with the injunction of going beyond mere appearances and to construct abstract explanations, which we can only ignore at our peril. The idea appears inescapable in all scientific investigation as noted above.

The Divided Line seems to have caused the author a lot of headaches and consequently he spends a lot of time on it as if to report on his eventual triumph. I think that mathematicians have a particular edge when it comes to following Plato's thought here and that Raven is rather confused and at a loss. The Divided Line is an elaboration of the notion of the world of forms as far as its relation to the world of the senses. For that purpose Plato considers a line divided into two unequal parts, and Raven suggests that instead of representing it lying down it would be far more to the point to have it standing up, thereby emphasizing the intrinsic asymmetry. Raven is fond of that idea and for several pages in the book it decorates the margin. The somewhat pedantic references to the different segments gives associations to elementary geometry, which one somewhat maliciously may suspect to entail the mathematical expertise of the general Classicist. Still for ease of exposition consider a line segment AB (with A on top) and somewhere along a point C (One should think of C being closer to B than to A). AC denotes the realm of intelligence, while BC the realm of the senses. Then each of the sections are divided in same proportions by points E and D respectively⁵ So what do those points refer to? In the lower world there are real objects as well as mere reflections of them. This constitutes a metaphor for the relationships between the upper and the nether world, thus the similarity of the three points BDC and BCA. This suggests that even the upper world is divided into sections (as suggested). Plato recognizes a lower form of intelligence, namely reasoning as exemplified by mathematical. In mathematical reasoning, Plato points out, one starts with assumptions and then works out the consequences. This is reasoning downwards generating a multiplicity,



³ Which can be seen as some kind of 'cheap' Platonism.

⁴ although different people can differ widely as to the vividness of their images, vividness measured by the amount of detailed questions about their images

⁵ If the lengths of BC and CA are 1 and x respectively, with $x > 1$, the four successive lengths will be $1, x, x, x^2$. Ideally Plato would have liked them to form a geometric progression, but this is clearly impossible.

which thus, if eternal, shares characteristics with the nether world. This is familiar to mathematicians deriving a multitude of true facts, creating a complicated confusing web. This is the meaning of the segment CE. The uppermost segment EA on the other hand represents some kind of 'bootstrapping'. This is reasoning upwards. Assumptions can be made, and they in their turn can be replaced by even more basic assumptions, invariably leading to an infinite recess. But when we reason upwards, what we sense is in fact not so much a question of other assumptions but some fundamental principles which we can but vaguely formulate. And so on. This is familiar to mathematicians⁶, but not only in the setting of foundations, but perhaps even more so in the discovery and exposition of mathematics, when more and more general patterns are discovered unifying a bewildering variety under higher principles. A kind of hierarchy of thought.

Finally the metaphor of the cave is actually a bit weakened when it is elaborated. The primitive version of it, with mankind chained in a cave forever doomed to mistake the real world for the faint fluttering shadows on its rough wall has a very strong poetic appeal. In the extended version the idea of mankind being able to transcend their situation is suggested. Namely by certain people being freed from their chains (by using their intellects) and at first blinded by the lucidity of the real world, and then obliged by their mission to return to the cave and free the others, being at first hampered to do so because of the darkness to which their eyes have grown unaccustomed. The natural question is what exactly will they bring to their unenlightened fellows, is it to once and for all for ever abandon the world of the senses and dwell in the eternal world? One may here make a very strong case against Platonism, not at its ontology, but at its practical philosophical aspect. Should man really dwell in such rarified atmosphere? Is there not an intrinsic worth to the richness of the sensual world, and is this not what man craves psychologically? Besides only through an intimate immersion in the world of the senses do you feel the need to transcend it. The upper world derives its interest for the light on which it can throw on the nether. I suspect that much of the instinctive rejection of Platonism among those who are not passionate philosophers can be attributed to this injunction. It is like the case of heaven, unless it will provide a purified world of the kinds of delights we have become habituated to on Earth, most of us will have no truck with it.

When it comes to the late dialogues, Plato subjects his ideas of form to some more specific logical criticism, from where I also suspect that Aristotle take his departure. In particular if the forms share the characteristics with that of which it is a form, does that not mean that there is some essence shared by all, for which there need to be postulated a new form, and so *ad infinitum*? The point Plato obviously wants to make is that forms should not be taken too literally, first of all they are not canonical examples, but of such an abstract nature, that the single-minded argument gets no purchase at all.

Raven ends his book by the basic question of how to connect the eternal world with that of the mundane. Of course if those notions are taken at face values they provide

⁶ The kind of dizzying feeling is caused by say the ordinals. First we get an infinite sequence of such, but then we realize the principle of infinity and go one beyond, and continue to a second infinity, then a third, a fourth and an infinite infinity, and so beyond. One may speculate as to what it all means, especially in the theory of higher cardinals. To humans is it really a matter of cardinalities or just the impossibility to codify thought, because the very act of doing so becomes a new thought.

serious problems. A tentative solution offered by the ancient Platonists is that it is the immortal soul⁷, thus providing man with a crucial role in the universe. Such considerations strike us as totally outdated, so of course any modern version of Platonism has to avoid the trap of literalness, to which the ancients were bound to fall.

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⁷ We all scoff about the idea of the soul, immortal or not, at least in public. What we do in private is quite another matter. Cartesian Duality, so much derided, and to which much of the thinking of Plato inevitably complies, is actually what most of us ascribe to in practice, making clear distinctions between Thoughts and Things, although of course Thoughts themselves can be considered as Things when they are thought about not just thought. In one sense we feel as if we have always existed, partly because each Thought, as Peirce remarks, presupposes a previous Thought. In the other sense we feel that we have been born, and what is it that has been born, namely ourselves. Thus we can decry the fact that we may have been born at the wrong time or may have preferred to be born later on in the history of the Universe, just as we have been in limbo all that time, and been called into earthly existence. And as the Greeks (or at least Plato and his disciples) reasoned, what has always existed must in a sense always exist. In fact it is very hard by definition to imagine non-existence, the best we can come up with is total sensory deprivation, which gives to many of us a feeling of impending claustrophobia and boredom.