

Nietzsche and Plato

A standard view of the relations between Nietzsche and Plato is that Nietzsche is vehemently anti-Platonic. Plato believes that there is a timeless realm of intelligible Forms that is the only true reality, the everyday world accessible to the senses being at best a pale imitation of this; for Nietzsche this is a dangerous illusion, dangerous in part because of its drastic devaluing of the here and now. Plato injects the ethical into the very fabric of reality, with the Good, at least in the *Republic*, being the supreme Form, and with the Forms that represent evaluative qualities being consistently among those in which he is most interested; for Nietzsche, on the other hand, “There are no moral phenomena, but only a moral interpretation of phenomena” (*BGE* 108)¹, and he would no doubt add that the particular interpretation projected on to the world by Plato is of the kind that he elsewhere calls “anti-natural” – that is, “against the instincts of life” (*TI*, “Morality as Anti-Nature” 4). And Plato had a major role in shaping the world-historical disaster that was Christianity.

It is always tempting to try to overturn conventional pictures of things. But in this case the conventional picture has much in its favor. Nevertheless, it is not the whole story, and there are numerous respects in which Nietzsche either explicitly

¹ The translations of Nietzsche’s works that I use, and the abbreviations designating those works in citations, are listed in the section 1 of the Bibliography. Translations of material from the *Nachlass* that does not appear in *EN* or *LN* are my own; in all other cases I rely on translations by others. (My German is not particularly fluent; it is a fair assumption that anyone commissioned to translate a work from German has a better command of the language than I do.)

admires Plato or would have good reason to regard him as in some way a positive force. It is also possible that the depth of his hostility to Plato is greater in some periods than in others, even though he is clearly thinking about him in almost all phases of his career². In what follows I shall first explore Nietzsche's negative verdicts on Plato, and the reasons behind them, and then consider how far this conception of Nietzsche's relation to Plato should be tempered by other, countervailing evidence. Although it would be impossible to discuss Plato in almost any context without some mention of Socrates, and this paper will be no exception, I shall avoid as much as possible the question of Nietzsche's relations with Socrates – a very large topic in its own right, about which a great deal has been written³. Plato is at least enough for one paper. As we shall see, Nietzsche himself is sometimes eager to dissociate Plato from Socrates, and much of the time it is not hard to distinguish what he says about each of them.

I

We may start with an expression of concern about Plato's effect from the beginning of Nietzsche's career, and a remarkable echo of this at the very end. In *The Birth of Tragedy* Euripides is blamed for turning tragedy away from the delicate balance of the Apollinian and the Dionysian that had earlier defined it and marked its special contribution to Greek culture, making it far too rational and conscious and ensuring

² Brobjer 2004, 241 says that Nietzsche mentions Plato more often than any other philosopher except Schopenhauer. A glance at the index in the final volume of *KSA* would seem to confirm this. Among other things, Plato figures very frequently in the *Nachlass* in lists of topics, plans of future works, etc.; clearly Nietzsche thinks of him as a crucial figure to take account of in a great many contexts.

³ Book-length treatments are Schmidt 1969, Dannhauser 1974; briefer accounts can be found in, e.g., Kaufmann 1974, ch.13, Nehamas 1998, ch.5.

its demise. His collaborator in this project, according to Nietzsche, is Socrates, and Plato, as Socrates' disciple, then carried it on (*BT* 13, 14). Plato's dialogues owe a good deal to tragedy, despite the fact that Plato repudiates tragedy and art in general; indeed, the Platonic dialogues are described as "the barge on which the shipwrecked ancient poetry saved itself" (*BT* 14). But it is a salvation that comes at a great price, where poetry becomes "crowded into a narrow space and timidly submitting to the single pilot, Socrates" – that is, ancillary to philosophy rather an art form in its own right. Stylistically, Nietzsche says that the Platonic dialogue is "a mixture of all styles and forms", a trend taken still further by the Cynics; while his tone is by no means vituperative – it never is in *The Birth of Tragedy* – it is hard not to suppose that Nietzsche sees this as a debasement of these previous art forms⁴. But his most direct objection to Plato's writing is that by means of it, "philosophic thought overgrows art". He associates the Platonic concentration on dialectic with the fundamentally optimistic Socratic maxims "Virtue is knowledge; man sins only from ignorance; he who is virtuous is happy", and calls the optimism inherent in these "the death of tragedy"; he also suggests that such a mindset can only push tragedy, should it still exist, "to the death-leap into the bourgeois drama".

Plato, then, emerges as a central figure in the demise of something that Nietzsche regards as of immense cultural value. Since the history of Greek tragedy is his theme in this work, it is not surprising that his criticism of Plato does not extend further than this. However, late in his career Nietzsche picks up a theme

⁴ In unpublished notes that are clearly preparatory for *BT* Nietzsche calls Plato's writing the "annihilation" (*Vernichtung*) of form (*KSA* 7.12, 17); in both places the Cynics are again mentioned.

from this discussion in *BT*, but broadens it into a much more comprehensive condemnation of Plato. In the final main section of *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche somewhat unusually expresses a preference for Roman writing over Greek writing. He then imagines someone citing Plato as a case of the supremacy of Greek style, and embarks on a long tirade against Plato in response to this (“What I Owe to the Ancients”, 2). He begins by disclaiming any admiration for Plato as an artist, and again mentions his mixing of many stylistic forms, here explicitly calling him “one of the first *décadents* in style” for this reason; he also repeats the stylistic link with the Cynics, this time without suggesting that Plato is any less bad than them. He then mentions the dialectic in the dialogues, as in *The Birth of Tragedy*, calling it “repulsively self-satisfied and childish”. This is still in part a stylistic point, Plato receiving low marks compared with some French authors; but it is also a segue into an attack on Plato’s ideas. And here all the themes that I mentioned in my opening paragraph make an appearance. Nietzsche objects in the strongest terms to Plato’s idealism – which I take to be, or at least to include, his postulation of suprasensible Forms – to his being overmoralized, including his elevation of the concept of goodness to the highest rank, and to his proto-Christian attitudes and his role in the eventual dominance of Christianity⁵.

Moreover, as is typical in Nietzsche, the objections are not just to the ideas themselves, but to the kind of *person* of which those ideas are an expression. Plato

⁵ Compare an unpublished note from the fall of 1887: “Dialectic as the way to virtue (in Plato and Socrates: obviously, since Sophistic counted as a way to immorality)” (*KSA* 12, 430). Unlike the *TI* passage, this explicitly connects dialectic and moralizing, and it alludes to a Platonic critique of the Sophists, rather than simply contrasting him with them. As we shall see, both themes make their appearance in *Daybreak* as well.

is said to be woefully “divergent from all the fundamental instincts of the Hellenes” and to be “a coward in the face of reality”, which explains his positing a separate ideal realm. In both respects he is contrasted unfavorably with the historian Thucydides, and more generally with the culture of the Sophists (here labeled a realist culture) of whom Nietzsche considers Thucydides the supreme representative⁶. In distinction from them, Plato and the Socratic schools in general are guilty of a “moralistic and idealistic swindle”, and Greek philosophy as a whole (of which Plato seems to be regarded as the major engine) is called “the *décadence* of Greek instinct”⁷.

This passage is no doubt extreme in its level of animus against Plato⁸. But Nietzsche also compares Plato unfavorably with Thucydides some years earlier in *Daybreak* (168). Again Thucydides is situated in the milieu of the Sophists⁹, and the

⁶ In connecting Thucydides with the Sophists, I think Nietzsche is on to something important; on this see Bett 2002, especially section IV.

⁷ This point also appears in a related note in the *Nachlass* from early 1888 headed “Philosophie als *décadence*” (KSA 13, 292-3); after introducing this theme, philosophy (represented especially by Plato, as eventually becomes explicit) is immediately contrasted with the Sophists’ pioneering critique of morality – and again the Sophists, represented preeminently by Thucydides, are said to be an outgrowth of fundamental Greek instincts, as Plato emphatically is not. See also KSA 13, 167-9 (=LN 237-8), “On the Critique of Greek Philosophy”, where the same set of ideas is connected more explicitly with “the preparation of the ground for Christianity”; also KSA 11, 21.

⁸ See also the (pretty close) prototype for this passage in the *Nachlass* (KSA 13.624-6).

⁹ This passage is a counter-example to Thomas Brobjer’s claim that Nietzsche was uninterested in the Sophists (and when he mentions them, generally critical) until 1888, when he read Victor Brochard’s *Les sceptiques grecs*, which treats them as important precursors to scepticism; see Brobjer 2004, 252-6, also Brobjer 2001 and Brochard 2002, ch.1. It is true, however, that the Sophists do not loom particularly large in Nietzsche writings. Brobjer is also right to object to any simple identification of Nietzsche’s own outlook with that of the Sophists Thrasymachus or Callicles (as depicted by Plato), despite my comment on them below.

culture that they represent is said to be one of impartiality. In his impartial depiction of human types, Nietzsche says, Thucydides “displays greater practical justice than Plato”, because “he does not revile or belittle those he does not like”. We are also told that the culture of the Sophists is very difficult for us to grasp, but that we are apt to “suspect that it must have been a very immoral culture, since a Plato and all the Socratic schools fought against it! Truth”, Nietzsche continues, “is here so tangled and twisted one does not like the idea of trying to sort it out”. But by this last remark, I take it he is encouraging us to try precisely that, and is suggesting at least the following things. First, that the impression of the Sophists’ immorality, which we derive above all from Plato – one thinks of figures such as Thrasymachus in *Republic* I and Calicles in the *Gorgias* – deserves to be taken with a large grain of salt. Second, that if we are to think in terms of the simple contrast moral vs. immoral, it is arguably Plato who comes out worse than the Sophists, given his comparative lack of “practical justice”. But third, that since it was Plato himself who introduced the notion of the Sophists as immoral, and who set up the contrasting notion of what a truly moral character would be like, we should be suspicious of this way of framing the issue in the first place. For a person’s scheme of valuation is an expression of who that person is – Plato is in this respect no different, for Nietzsche, from anyone else – and Plato, as was suggested, is driven by a need to “revile or belittle” certain groups of people¹⁰. And this, of course, is of a

¹⁰ I find it hard to reconcile this with the comment later in *Daybreak* (497) that Plato is an example of the truest type of geniuses, who are able to float free of themselves, who possess “the pure, purifying eye which seems not to have grown out of their temperament and character but, free from these ... looks down on the world as on a god and loves this god”. This is perhaps the strongest indication that *Daybreak’s*

piece with the more general challenges to the presuppositions of morality that play a prominent role in this work (e.g., 97-106).

Thus, although the *Daybreak* passage has much less to say explicitly about Plato's thought than the one from *Twilight*, it is not hard to see it as having implications concerning his philosophy that point in a similar direction. And the picture can be filled out by some other allusions to Plato in *Daybreak*. An earlier passage speaks of Plato's enthusiasm for dialectic (43). This is explained as deriving from contempt for the evil world shown us by the senses and a desire to abstract oneself from it; one therefore "revel[s] in pallid images of words and things", and this engagement with "invisible, inaudible, impalpable beings" – the abstractions with which dialectic deals – leads to the belief in a higher, non-sensory realm; given its origin in the contempt for the sensory, dialectic also points to a conception of the *good* person as someone who inhabits this supposed higher realm. The tone is not explicitly critical – indeed, Plato's project is represented as a certain kind of success – although it is made clear that this is not a project that is any longer open to us. Much later in the same work, however, Plato's "desire to see things only in pallid mental pictures" is described as a flight from reality (448); and the Platonic notion that "Dialectics is the only way of attaining the divine being and getting behind the veil of appearance" is referred to as a simple illusion, "about a nothing" (474). In the first of these passages, interestingly, the flight from reality is said to be due to the fact that Plato was "full of sensibility" and was afraid that his senses would overwhelm his reason. To some extent this foreshadows another section of

critique of Plato, though along similar lines, is by no means as unequivocal as *Twilight's*; see below for other instances of this.

Twilight, where the decision by Socrates and then Plato to make reason a tyrant stems from a fear that one would otherwise be tyrannized by baser instincts. Here Plato's "moralism" and "admiration for dialectic" are both summed up in the equation "Reason=virtue=happiness", and this condition is described as "pathological" (*TI*, "The Problem of Socrates", 10). However, there is no suggestion of pathology in the *Daybreak* passage, and this is an important difference to which we shall return.

All the same, the overriding impression Nietzsche seems to give of Plato in these remarks is of someone who has naively accepted certain errors, and whose thought deserves to be treated with suspicion, as being, at the very least, no longer capable of being taken seriously. In the same vein, elsewhere in *Daybreak* Socrates and Plato are accused of a cluster of errors concerning free will, moral responsibility and self-knowledge (themes that are to become important in Nietzsche's unmasking of slave morality in the first essay of *On the Genealogy of Morality*); their denial of *akrasia* is called "that most fateful of prejudices, that profoundest of errors", showing that they suffer from "the universal madness and presumption that there exists knowledge as to the essential nature of an action" (116). Nietzsche thinks that most people are still victim to this error, and this no doubt makes Plato's authority all the more dangerous. Here too, on the other hand, there is a qualification to the negative verdict; despite this drastic error, Socrates and Plato are described as "great doubters and admirable innovators". In Plato's case, at least, this presumably alludes to the three-part soul in the *Republic* and elsewhere, which points to a more multi-faceted and less transparent picture of human motivation –

one much more congenial to the picture Nietzsche himself pursues, including in this section and the immediately following sections of *Daybreak* (especially 119). We shall come back to this point as well.

So far I have concentrated on three works: one early, one middle, and one late. But the story can be continued with reference to other published works and also unpublished notes. Already in a note from 1875 the tragic worldview is connected with the notion of an unbiased attitude to life in the immediate pre-Platonic period, which seems to preview the reference to “impartiality” (and Plato’s lack of it) in *Daybreak*. Although here it is Empedocles and Democritus, rather than Thucydides, who are emblematic of this attitude¹¹, it is Socrates who closes it off, and this is connected with the ethical absolutism of his followers, Plato included; myths and tragedy are “much wiser than the ethics of Plato and Aristotle”, and the Socratics “have terrible abstractions, ‘the good’, ‘the just’, in their heads” (*KSA* 8, 107-8=*EN* 214-15). At various times in the notes Plato is described as a religious or a moral fanatic¹². His black-and-white ethics is also faulted for resting on a naïve psychology. He fails to understand that the human virtues have at their core an element of “vanity and egoism”, which can also be seen as a failure to understand the “history of the moral sensations” (*WS* 285)¹³; relatedly, he is accused of failing to understand the relation between reason and instinct, characteristically over-valuing

¹¹ Note, however, that Democritus is mentioned alongside Thucydides in *Daybreak* 168.

¹² *KSA* 9, 262 (where being a religious fanatic is contrasted with being a philosopher – the implied stress, I think, being on the etymology of “philosopher”); *KSA* 12, 560=*LN* 203; *KSA* 13, 487.

¹³ On Plato’s lack of historical sense – his lack of feel for “genealogy”, as Nietzsche might have thought of it – see also *KSA* 11, 254.

reason and overestimating its power (*KSA* 11, 431=*LN* 2), and of deluding himself¹⁴ into thinking that “the good, as he wanted it, was not the good of Plato but the good in itself” (*KSA* 11, 612=*LN* 39).

As for Plato’s belief in a higher, unchanging reality, as early as 1870-1 Nietzsche can say “My philosophy is an *inverted Platonism*: the further something is from true being, the purer, the more beautiful, the better it is” (*KSA* 7, 199=*EN* 52). At this point, of course, he still adheres to a Schopenhauerian metaphysics, and so he does not call into question the very notion of “true being”; but at least he already shies away from a Platonic conception of what true being might be like. Much later, in *On the Genealogy of Morality*, this conception – here called “the Christian faith, which was also Plato’s faith, that God is truth, that truth is divine” is implicated in the misguided attitude towards truth, referred to as “*our longest lie*”, from which science still suffers, and which makes it a continued instance of the ascetic ideal, despite apparently standing in opposition to that ideal (*GM* 3.24, quoting extensively from *GS* 344)¹⁵. And this is connected with the devastating six-step thumbnail sketch “How the ‘True World’ Finally Became a Fiction” in *Twilight of the Idols*, where Plato is the first stage and Zarathustra the last, in which the idea of a separate “true world” is banished and the regular world around us is thereby rescued from the status of merely apparent. On the surface, at least, Plato does come out better

¹⁴ Nietzsche is quite explicit that this is intentional on his part. But I take it he is thinking of a form of self-deception that does not operate at a fully conscious level.

¹⁵ It is not entirely clear *what* the objectionable attitude towards truth is supposed to be. Nietzsche seems to combine the idea that truth is non-perspectival, the idea that truth is of overriding importance, and the idea that truth is about a realm of separate, higher beings; it is by no means obvious that any one of these ideas is necessarily connected with any other.

here than the next stage, Christianity; his version is “relatively clever, simple, convincing”, as opposed to “more refined, more devious, more mystifying”. But in summing it up as “I, Plato, *am* the truth”, Nietzsche again points to a certain kind of naivety or self-deception on Plato’s part. For Plato, both in fact and in Nietzsche’s view of him, surely did not conceive of the unchanging Forms as something in, or a reflection of something in, *himself*; he thought he was grasping something objective and independent¹⁶.

Finally, in Nietzsche’s early writings Plato is sometimes criticized as marking a decline for *philosophy*. Both in the introduction to his lectures *On the Pre-Platonic Philosophers* and in his unpublished study *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks* (2) Plato is described as the first “mixed character” in the history of philosophy; he combines Heraclitean, Pythagorean and Socratic elements, and this sort of “mixture” is a feature of philosophy from then on. By contrast, those preceding him – including Socrates, which is why Nietzsche prefers the term “Pre-Platonic” to “Presocratic” – are “pure and unmixed types”. They, then, are “genuine discoverers”, marking fundamentally new paths for thought, whereas Plato’s philosophy is not “an original conception”; as a result it “lacks something essential”¹⁷. This is

¹⁶ In fact Plato is often less confident about the extent to which this knowledge is attainable, even for the wise, than Nietzsche here makes it sound. In particular, Socrates in the *Republic* is notably diffident about claiming to have found access to the realm of Forms in any clarity or detail. The philosophers in the ideal state may be in a different position; but then, the feasibility of the ideal state itself is also something about which the *Republic* seems to vacillate. At no point, however, is there any suggestion that the Forms may be merely a reflection of our own sensibility.

¹⁷ This last quotation is from *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, 2 (KSA 1, 809-10); the others in this sentence and the last are from *On the Pre-Platonic Philosophers*, Introduction (p.5 in Whitlock’s translation).

developed a little further in a note from 1872-3 on philosophical sects. Although the starting-point of sects is said to be the Pythagoreans, Plato is said to have learned from them; Nietzsche then says that “The Academy sets the type” and that philosophical sects in general are “institutes of opposition to Hellenic life”¹⁸, in contrast with the earlier philosophers, who are “isolations of individual drives of the Hellenic character”. In consequence, Nietzsche can only bewail “The superficiality of all post-Socratic ethics!” This theme does not seem to continue into the later writings; in part this may be because he later tends to think of philosophy itself as beginning with Plato, and hence, as we have seen, as inherently decadent (though note his praise of Heraclitus, here still counted among philosophers, in *TI*’s “Reason’ in Philosophy” 2). But it seems to tie in with his suspicion of Plato in *The Birth of Tragedy*. Plato has much responsibility for the demise of the profoundest aspects of earlier Greek culture; what is added here is that the earliest philosophers were representative of that earlier culture, and that here again, Plato marks a decisive, and a lamentable, break.

So Plato has a lot to answer for, in Nietzsche’s view. In a letter to Overbeck from January 1887 Nietzsche exclaims “It is all Plato’s fault! He is still Europe’s greatest misfortune!”¹⁹ This thought has been occasioned by a reading of Simplicius’ commentary on Epictetus’ *Handbook*, which typifies “the falsifying of everything by morality”, “wretched psychology” and “the ‘philosopher’ reduced to the status of ‘country parson’”; and Plato is at the back of all of this. The strident

¹⁸ *KSA* 7, 438=*EN* 111. Löb’s translation in *EN* has the lower-case “academy”; but immediately following the mention of Plato, the reference is surely to Plato’s Academy.

¹⁹ Letter 147 in *SL*.

tone anticipates that of *Twilight*. But while Nietzsche's criticisms of Plato (as of Christianity and much else) are at their most shrill in his latest writings, they are criticisms that, in one form or another, go back to the beginning of his career. It is not too much to say that opposition to central parts of the Platonic outlook is one of the main driving forces of Nietzsche's own philosophy.

II

It is now time to turn the tables. Plato is not all bad, in Nietzsche's view of him; we already saw that in *Daybreak* the negative verdict on Plato is not unqualified, and this point can be extended considerably. I shall draw attention to a number of overlapping respects in which Nietzsche shows a much more favorable attitude towards Plato than the one we have seen so far – understandably, given his own preoccupations, just as in the case of the negative attitudes.

One of the matters on which Plato was given credit in *Daybreak* was his seeing past (even if only partially and intermittently) the fiction of a transparent human subject, the obvious basis for this being his postulation of a three-part soul. In the first part of *Beyond Good and Evil* a view of soul that is clearly reminiscent of this one, even though Plato is not mentioned by name, is interestingly contrasted with the Christian conception and proposed as a fruitful basis for further exploration (*BGE* 12). The Christian conception is labeled "soul atomism", that is, "the belief which regards the soul as something indestructible, eternal, indivisible, as a monad, as an *atomon*". Now, one might find traces of Plato here, too; the picture of soul in the *Phaedo*, in particular, seems to fit this description precisely – the indestructibility and indivisibility of the soul are here among the key arguments for

its immortality, and it is by no means impossible that Nietzsche had this in mind. But he goes on to say that banishing this atomistic view of the soul does not mean that we should give up “the soul-hypothesis” altogether; and he goes on to mention “mortal soul”, “soul as subjective multiplicity” and “soul as social structure of the drives and affects” as conceptions that ought to “have citizens’ rights in science” and that could be useful avenues to “*invention* and – who knows? – perhaps to discovery”. The first of these conceptions, of course, Nietzsche does not get from Plato; even in the dialogues that speak of a three-part soul, some or all of this soul is still conceived as immortal²⁰. But the second and, especially, the third, with its *Republic*-like evocation of the soul as a quasi-political community, could very well be exemplified by Plato’s three-part soul. It is natural to suppose that Nietzsche recognizes and intends the Platonic echo, particularly given the hint supplied in the *Daybreak* passage; and this plausible reading has recently served as an important component in a powerful new interpretation of *Beyond Good and Evil* as a whole²¹. But at the very least, we can say that the approach to thought about the soul that Nietzsche advocates in this passage *should* have led him to think of Plato, in those dialogues that speak of a three-part soul, as a fellow-traveler.

To this we may add Nietzsche’s recognition that for Plato, to judge from the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus* if not other works, philosophy itself is a kind of sublimated erotic expression. This is mentioned in *Twilight of the Idols* (“Raids of an

²⁰ The details seem to vary from one dialogue to another, but at least the rational part is consistently conceived as immortal; for specifics see Bett 1986, section II.

²¹ Clark and Dudrich 2012; for their reading of Plato, see especially chapter 6. For some doubts about Clark’s and Dudrich’s understanding of Nietzsche’s relation to Plato, see Janaway 2014; however, Janaway does not dispute the basic idea that Nietzsche is appealing to the Platonic model in *BGE* 12.

Untimely Man” 22-3), in what is by far the least critical mention of Plato in that work²², and also in two unpublished notes (*KSA* 9, 486, *KSA* 11, 700=*LN* 51); if we take it seriously, it again complicates any notion of the intellect as even potentially pure and unconnected with other drives or affects, and reinforces the sort of picture that Nietzsche approvingly labels “soul as subjective multiplicity”. The same might perhaps be said of Plato’s acceptance, again in the *Phaedrus*, of madness as a positive force in human affairs, alluded to in the course of a discussion in *Human, All Too Human* of the conditions for genius to flourish (*HI*.164).

At least some of the time, then, Plato seems to score highly in Nietzsche’s eyes for his insight into the complexity of our psychology. It is also true that Nietzsche occasionally expresses interest in, and, I think, implied admiration for, the psychological complexity of Plato himself. Perhaps the most intriguing example of this is his report of a story that under Plato’s pillow when he died was found a copy of Aristophanes (*BGE* 28)²³. We have just been told that Aristophanes (among others) is untranslatable into German because of his “bold and merry tempo”; Aristophanes has also been described as “that transfiguring, complementary spirit for whose sake one *forgives* everything Hellenic for having existed”. And commenting on the story, Nietzsche contrasts Aristophanes with the works *not* found under Plato’s pillow: “no ‘Bible’, not anything Egyptian, Pythagorean, or Platonic”, and says “How could even Plato have endured life – a Greek life he

²² Nietzsche cannot resist adding to this account “assuming that you trust Plato at all in the first place” (23). But Plato is used here as a refutation of Schopenhauer, and the view itself seems to survive this apparently undercutting remark.

²³ The story occurs in the biography of Plato at the beginning of Olympiodorus’ commentary on Plato’s *Alcibiades* (2.65-9). On Plato’s alleged interest in Aristophanes more generally, see Riginos 1976, 176-9.

repudiated – without an Aristophanes?” Plato, then, was not as whole-heartedly anti-Hellenic as Nietzsche elsewhere makes him out to be; maybe he did “repudiate” Greek life, but he also retained a deep affinity for it. And this makes him a multi-layered and elusive character, leading Nietzsche to refer to “Plato’s secrecy and sphinx nature”. While there is no explicit evaluation of Plato here, both psychological depth and identification with the Hellenic are traits that Nietzsche generally views in a positive light; this is not the dogmatic and one-dimensional character from which, in *Twilight*, he recoils in favor of Thucydides²⁴. The point about depth becomes more direct in an unpublished note from 1885 (KSA 11, 440), where the magic of Socrates is said to consist in his having a series of souls, one behind another; the image recalls Alcibiades’ image in Plato’s *Symposium*, of Socrates as like a statue of Silenus with lots of smaller statues inside (216d-217a). Xenophon is said to have glimpsed only the first one, but Plato penetrated to the second and third – “but Plato with his own second soul. Plato himself”, Nietzsche continues, “is a man with many back-hollows and foregrounds [*Hinterhöhlen und Vordergründen*]”²⁵.

A further dimension to this psychological complexity has to do with the explanation for Plato’s rejection of the sensory realm as less than fully real. We saw

²⁴ See also a roughly contemporary note (late 1885 or early 1886, KSA 12, 47), where the story of Aristophanes under Plato’s pillow is mentioned again, alongside allusions to the Dionysian, to dance and to merriment. The note is merely a series of phrases with question-marks appended, but it does again suggest that Nietzsche sees the story as linking Plato with his favorite aspects of Greek culture.

²⁵ Contrast an earlier note (KSA 8, 327, September 1876), where Plato is said to be not enough of a dramatist to avoid portraying Socrates as a caricature, whereas Xenophon achieves a truthful portrait. This is more in keeping with the Plato of *BT*, the Plato who helped to kill tragedy.

in the previous section that in *Daybreak* this is accounted for by Plato's having been "full of sensibility" and worried that his reason would be overwhelmed by it (448); I noted that whereas in *Twilight* this condition would have been described straightforwardly as a sickness, in *Daybreak* this is by no means so clear. In *The Gay Science* (372) Nietzsche goes further. Here philosophical idealism, understood rather broadly as a denigration of the senses in favor of a concentration on pure ideas, is described as generally an illness, but Nietzsche adds a remarkable qualification: "except where, as in Plato's case, it was the caution of an overabundant and dangerous health; the fear of *overpowerful* senses; the shrewdness of a shrewd Socratic". As in *Twilight*, the philosophical move is explained by the need to prevent some non-rational element in us taking control, but the polarity is precisely the reverse: it is a consequence of health rather than of sickness²⁶. Nietzsche concludes the section by adding "Maybe we moderns are not healthy enough to *need* Plato's idealism? And we don't fear the senses because –". The concluding sentence fragment is to be completed, I take it, by something like "because our senses are too etiolated and feeble for us to worry about their getting out of hand".

²⁶ That Nietzsche struggled with whether to think of it as healthy or sick is suggested by two unpublished notes from between autumn 1885 and autumn 1886 – thus, around the same time as *BGE* is published (see the next paragraph) and this portion of *GS* is being written (see the next note). Here the same sorts of philosophical move are attributed to Plato's "overexcitable sensuality and enthusiasm" (*KSA* 12, 112=*LN* 78) and his "too excitable and suffering sensibility" (*KSA* 12, 116=*LN* 81).

This picture receives its fullest development in *Beyond Good and Evil*, in a section almost immediately following the one about the soul (14)²⁷. Here the Platonic way of thinking is contrasted with a typical modern attitude towards physics. Again it is suggested that those who followed the Platonic line may have been “men who enjoyed even stronger and more demanding senses than our contemporaries”, but they “knew how to find a higher triumph in remaining masters of their senses”, and they did this “by means of pale, cold, gray concept nets which they threw over the motley whirl of the senses”. Whereas physics is today felt to be convincing because it accords with what the senses tell us, the Platonic way of thinking “consisted precisely in *resistance* to obvious sense-evidence”. This is described as “a *noble* way of thinking”, in contrast to the “plebeian” mindset that values physics because of its fidelity to the senses; both Platonism and physics are interpretations of the world, but Platonism is also “an overcoming of the world”, which brings a distinctive kind of enjoyment no longer open to us. The kind of psychological control, amid complexity and powerfully opposing psychic forces, that Nietzsche alludes to here is strikingly reminiscent of the language he elsewhere uses of those he regards as the greatest human beings, such as Goethe in *Twilight of the Idols* (“Raids of an Untimely Man” 49) or, later in this work, Julius Caesar (*BGE* 200).

This does not prevent Nietzsche from regarding Plato’s philosophy as an error, and a pernicious one. But in *Beyond Good and Evil* – which, as I hope is becoming clear, is probably the most nuanced of all Nietzsche’s works when it

²⁷ This slightly precedes the passage of *GS* just considered, since the latter belongs in the fifth book, which was added to the original four books of *GS* after *BGE* was published.

comes to Plato – this too is put in a context that, consistently with the passage we have just considered, reveals Plato as far from a merely destructive force²⁸. In the Preface to this work, Nietzsche calls “Plato’s invention of the pure spirit [*Geist*] and the good as such” – perhaps “intellect” would be a better translation here than “spirit” – “the worst, most durable, and most dangerous of all errors”. It was “a dogmatist’s error”; that is to say, it laid down as truths about reality in itself what were in fact merely projections of “very narrow, very personal, very human, all too human facts”; thus “it meant standing truth on her head and denying *perspective*, the basic condition of all life”. Despite all this, Nietzsche tells us not to be ungrateful for this error, he also calls Plato “the most beautiful growth of antiquity”, and he calls philosophical dogmatism in general – although Plato’s is the version to which he gives by far the most attention – “only a promise across millennia”. In calling it a promise, he seems to be implying that it has a potential payoff that is yet to be fulfilled; in calling it “*only* a promise”, he implies that its real value is different from, and no doubt lesser than, what its proponents imagined – namely, that of having captured the ultimate nature of reality. But since the attempt to do that is a fool’s errand in Nietzsche’s opinion, there is no reason to think we need be discontented with what it does have to offer.

What this is gets suggested towards the end of the Preface. “The fight against Plato”, says Nietzsche – or against the popularized version of Plato that is Christianity – “has created in Europe a magnificent tension of the spirit the like of

²⁸ In my understanding of *BGE*’s picture of Plato, I have learned a great deal from Lampert 2004. Though I will not pursue this here, I find persuasive Lampert’s claim that Nietzsche here thinks of Plato as a genuine philosopher, rather than a “philosophical laborer”, to use the language of *BGE* 211.

which had never yet existed on earth; with so tense a bow we can now shoot for the most distant goals". We are now in a position to transcend Platonism and Christianity and achieve a higher brand of humanity. What this might look like is never made entirely clear; working this out is, I think, one of the many unfinished tasks of Nietzsche's later career – something that he himself refers to in the final sentence of the Preface as a task and a goal rather than any kind of thought-through conception. But his talk of the *Übermensch*, his often-expressed project of a "revaluation of all values", and again, his sketches of the few truly superior human beings who have yet existed, give us some sense of the directions in which his thinking was going. The important point for our purposes is that an essential ingredient in this potentially so productive "tension of the spirit" is the Platonic-Christian outlook that, after all these centuries, is deeply embedded in the European psyche. We may need to go beyond this, but we could not have done so without going through it first. The thought is not developed in the Preface to *Beyond Good and Evil*, but it becomes a recurring theme in *On the Genealogy of Morality*. Here we are told that to possess in oneself both of the opposed value systems "good/bad" and "good/evil" is the most "decisive mark of the 'higher nature', of the more spiritual nature", and that the conflict between the two has itself "become ever deeper, ever more spiritual" (*GM* 1.16). We are also told that with the bad conscience, which is clearly associated with the good/evil system of valuation, we have "the appearance on earth of an animal turned against itself, taking sides against itself", and that this – far from being merely contemptible, as one might have expected the Nietzsche of *Twilight* to say – is "something so new, deep, unheard of,

enigmatic, contradictory, and full of future ... that the appearance of the earth was thereby essentially changed" (*GM* 2.16). Plato does not make much of an appearance in *Genealogy* (although see again *GM* 3.24). But if Plato is at the back of the Christian world-view, as the Preface to *Beyond Good and Evil* has it, then this makes Plato one of the most vitally creative figures in the history of thought – even if his truly productive effect is delayed by millennia (in fact, is not yet properly realized), and even if this is very different from what he himself might have imagined or hoped for.

One other element of the Preface is worth attending to. Nietzsche asks how Plato, "the most beautiful growth of antiquity", could have succumbed to the antiperspectival error of "the pure spirit and the good as such". His suggestion is that maybe he was corrupted by Socrates, who maybe "deserve[d] his hemlock" after all. This is not asserted, merely posed in the form of questions; but the idea of a distinction between Socrates and Plato is thereby opened up. This is then pursued in two later sections of *Beyond Good and Evil* (190, 191), where Plato is presented as accepting certain Socratic ideas despite himself, but transforming them in a way that reflects himself rather than Socrates. In the first of these sections, Nietzsche says that the Socratic denial of *akrasia*, on the basis that no one wants to harm themselves and the bad is necessarily harmful, is said to be an inference that "smells of the *rabble*", with its crudely utilitarian conception of good and bad; and this is said to be an aspect of the morality of Plato "that does not really belong to Plato", that is present "in spite of Plato", who was "really too noble" for this kind of thinking (*BGE* 190). He adds that "Plato did everything he could in order to read something

refined and noble into the proposition of his teacher – above all, himself”; thus Plato spun a whole series of variations on the Socrates that he found (the metaphor is that of a set of musical variations on a theme), acting as “the most audacious of interpreters” and transforming Socrates into “all of his own masks and multiplicities”. Again we have the idea of Plato as a complex and elusive soul; but it is not yet clear what this transformation and ennobling is supposed to consist in.

A little more light is shed on this in the following section. Here the question is whether our values do or should – it is not quite clear which of these Nietzsche has in mind – derive from reason or from instinct. Socrates is said to have “initially sided with reason”, but to have ultimately “seen through the irrational element in moral judgements” and to have enlisted reason in the service of the instincts; in this, he “got his conscience to be satisfied with a kind of self-trickery” – presumably because he continued, on the surface, to elevate reason above all else. Plato is said to be “more innocent in such matters and lacking the craftiness of the plebeian”. Yet he too is in effect accused of a kind of “self-trickery”; for he “wanted to employ all his strength – the greatest strength any philosopher has so far had at his disposal – to prove to himself that reason and instinct of themselves tend toward one goal, the good, ‘God’” (*BGE* 191). Here we have the elevation of goodness to the pinnacle of reality, which in Platonic terms means a super-sensible reality; and we have reason, here understood as co-equal with instinct instead of in service to it, capable of penetrating to this higher reality. That instinct tends in the same direction – that is, that we are all naturally oriented towards the good before even starting to reason about it – suggests a teleological optimism of which one can certainly find signs in

Plato (for example, in the notion that learning is recollection). It goes against the idea that one finds in *Twilight* that Socrates and Plato chose to be “absurdly rational” in order to fight the instincts (*TI*, “The Problem of Socrates” 10); and since that is part of a generally demeaning picture of their psychology, this difference perhaps works to Plato’s benefit. In any case, what Plato has added to Socratic moralizing is a metaphysical superstructure; as we have seen, this is regarded elsewhere in *Beyond Good and Evil* as a dangerous error, but one that is also an expression of nobility²⁹. Hence I find it plausible that this is at least a key component in how Plato manages, in Nietzsche’s opinion, to transform Socrates’ “plebeian” moral thinking into something more reflective of himself.

The desire to separate Plato from Socrates, to Plato’s credit, did not come to Nietzsche for the first time in writing *Beyond Good and Evil*. As early as 1875 he speculates about what Plato might have been like if he had not met Socrates. Greek culture, he suggests, was in need, and was felt to be in need, of a reformation, but this did not happen. Plato might have achieved this, but was “distracted by

²⁹ Laurence Lampert’s phrase for this is felicitous – “Socratic moralizing rooted in an impossible transcendence” (Lampert 2004, 216). My one serious reservation about Lampert’s reading is that he thinks that, on Nietzsche’s interpretation, Plato was *aware* that he was perpetrating a fiction (for the good of humanity, who at this stage needed something of the kind); the “noble lie”, as Lampert sees it, goes much further than the specific context in which it is actually mentioned in *Republic* III – namely, the need to persuade people in the ideal city that they are literally children of the land on which the city and its environs stand, and that their natures suit them to belong to the classes to which they assigned (415a-c). The language in *BGE* 191, that the idea of a transcendent realm is something Plato needed to “prove to himself”, seems to me to go against this reading. To be sure, there is an element of self-deception imputed to Plato here; we saw something of this occasionally in the previous section as well. But self-deception implies that at a surface level, at least, the subject actually believes what he or she is saying, and I take it that this is how Nietzsche sees Plato. The straightforward reference to Platonism as an “error” in *BGE*’s Preface (rather than, say, a subtle stratagem) points in the same direction.

Socrates”; he then attempts “a characterisation of Plato *without* Socrates”, which goes as follows. “Tragedy – profound conception of love – pure nature – no fanatical turning away: obviously the Greeks were *about to find an even higher type* of man than the previous ones” (KSA 8, 105=EN 213). Of course, this is sketchy at best. But the last comment, at least, which is where the comparative ranking really comes, is echoed in *Human, All Too Human*, in the course of a wide-ranging discussion of earlier Greek culture (1.261). Socrates is here represented as a destructive force in Greek culture, and this prompts Nietzsche to wonder “whether, if he had not come under the spell of Socrates, Plato might not have discovered an even higher type of philosophical man who is now lost to us for ever”. There is a limit to what one can do with these speculative remarks; but they do suggest that Nietzsche had a long-standing suspicion that Plato was in important ways hampered rather than helped by his association with Socrates.

In *Beyond Good and Evil*, though not in the passages I have just drawn attention to, the separation of Plato and Socrates is an aspect of what we might call Nietzsche’s appreciation for Plato’s aristocratic side. There are other aspects of this, and we can end our survey of Nietzsche’s more favorable estimate of Plato with a quick look at these. One is his approval of Plato’s contempt for pity (H 1.50), for compassion (GM, Preface 5), and for giving vent to “expressions of pain, of tears, complaints, reproaches, gestures of rage or of humiliation” (D 157). He does not say where in Plato he finds these valuations, but the most obvious is perhaps the descriptions of the guardian class, and the education needed to mold their characters, in books 2 and 3 of the *Republic*. In the last case, Nietzsche asks whether

the objectionable attitudes, which he associates with his own time, qualify as “belonging to the ‘rabble’”; an affirmative answer seems to be at least suggested. In the other two passages, too, it is the less fortunate for whom such attitudes are said to be appropriate, while higher specimens of humanity should keep their distance from them³⁰.

It is also possible to find Nietzsche approving of the rank-ordering that belongs to the three-class structure of the ideal city in Plato’s *Republic*. Towards the end of *The Antichrist* (57) he distinguishes, as a matter of “*natural order*”, “the predominantly spiritual type, the predominantly muscular and temperamental type, and the third type ..., the mediocre type”. The first type deals in knowledge and “They rule not because they want to but because they *are*; they are not free to be second in rank”. The second type “are the executives of the most spiritual order”, and the third type engage in “the crafts, trade, agriculture, *science*, the greater part of art, in a word the entire compass of *professional* activity”. Plato is not actually mentioned in this section; it is instead presented as a description of the Law-book of Manu. But the parallel with Plato’s ruling class of philosophers, who are *unwilling* to rule (see especially *Rep.* 519c-521b), the auxiliary class who enacts the decisions of the rulers, and the third class who performs all the mundane but necessary functions of society, is too close for coincidence, and Nietzsche must be aware of what he is echoing. Further confirmation of this is that Plato was mentioned just before (end of 55) as one of those who, along with the Law-book of Manu and

³⁰ In *H* 1.50 it is “people of the commonality”; in the Preface to *GM* it is modern philosophers, who have succumbed to the life-denying sickness characteristic of modern times, and later associated with the ascetic ideal.

Christianity among others, engages in a “holy lie”. The intervening section explores the idea that “Ultimately the point is to what *end* a lie is told” (56), and Christianity is lambasted for telling lies to wholly bad ends. By contrast, a “holy lie” can be valuable and worthwhile when put to good ends, and one possible good end is to convey some fundamental truth in such a way that it is viewed as an inviolable command – something that a set of rules by itself would not be sufficiently authoritative to achieve³¹. This point is explored with reference to the Law-book of Manu (57), and Nietzsche refers again to the “holy lie”, having made clear that it admits of a positive use, immediately before the mention of the threefold ranking of humanity. Finally, a contemporary letter of Nietzsche to Peter Gast³² explicitly brings together Manu and Plato in connection with the idea of castes.

It is important not to misconstrue the significance of this. Nietzsche is not a political thinker in any but the most rarefied sense³³. The highest type referred to in

³¹ This, incidentally, seems faithful to Plato’s original intentions in devising his “noble lie”. That people are naturally suited to belong in different positions in society is profoundly true, in his opinion. The lie resides simply in the mechanics of the story – that we were born from the ground and that we each have a certain kind of metal inside us that reveals our true nature. Nietzsche has a number of other things to say about the noble lie; some appear consistent with the present passage, some not, and some unclear in their attitude. It would be too much to try to sort this all through in the space available; see *U* 2.10 (pp.118-19 in Breazeale’s translation), *GM* 3.19, *TI*, “On Those Who ‘Improve’ Humanity 5, *KSA* 7, 476=*EN* 144, *KSA* 7, 488=*EN* 152, *KSA* 11, 189, *KSA* 12, 15=*LN* 55, *KSA* 13, 390, *KSA* 13, 434.

³² May 31, 1888; letter 170 in *SL*.

³³ This point is well made by Brobjer 2004, 250-2. However, Brobjer seems oblivious to the clearly laudatory tone of the *Antichrist* passage. He cites a passage from the *Nachlass*, also from 1888, which seems much more critical of both Manu and Plato (*KSA* 13, 439-40). The difference (which Brobjer attempts to minimize) is striking, and no doubt testifies to mixed feelings. Still, the critical tone of the note does not detract from the approving tone of the published passage; and this approval is more easily understood if one does not try to read the published passage as literally about politics, as Brobjer seems to do.

the *Antichrist* passage do not literally rule; the clearest indication of this is that “the king” is cited as the quintessential example of the *second* type of human. What the highest type do, in Nietzsche’s description, is simply act out their nature as perfect human beings; they “rule” simply in the sense of being supreme specimens of humanity (as in the contemporary English slang “you rule!”). A passage of *Beyond Good and Evil* (61) also seems to divide humanity into three types³⁴, and here philosophers, as Nietzsche ideally imagines them, are again at the highest ranks. But while he does speak here of these people’s “ability to rule”, it is clear that the kind of “rule” he has in mind is that of leading humanity to a higher level. While they are said to make use of the political and economic conditions in which they find themselves, their project is “the over-all development of man” (a goal very different, incidentally, from that of the Plato of the *Republic*, for whom “development” was a dirty word). Nietzsche does mention the Brahmins as one example of such people, and says that they nominated the kings of the people. But this is just a way of emphasizing that “they kept themselves apart and outside, as men of higher and supra-royal tasks”. It is true that in an early unpublished discussion originally intended for *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche expresses a more straightforward admiration for Plato’s ideal state as a state (*KSA* 7, 348-9=*EN* 76-7)³⁵. However, by the time of *Human, All Too Human* Nietzsche is already decrying Plato as a socialist (*H* 1.473), and after that he seems to show little or no interest in Plato as a political

³⁴ This is not, however, as close to Plato’s three-class scheme as in the *Antichrist* passage (*contra* Young 2010, 424-5). The second class seems to consist of those who aspire to ascend above their current status; this is quite at odds with Plato’s rigid structure.

³⁵ Cf. *KSA* 7, 140, where the ideal state is again praised, but interestingly, the place of *philosophy* in these arrangements is singled out as the one point worthy of criticism.

thinker. The passages from the *Antichrist* and *Beyond Good and Evil* that I have referred to are, I suggest, no exception to this. Both channel, to varying degrees, a Platonic conception of the ranking of human beings. Nietzsche approves of this because he too thinks there are higher and lower specimens of humanity – this is no news, even if his conception of “higher” is importantly different from Plato’s – and not because he finds something attractive in Plato’s political thought³⁶.

III

Nietzsche once wrote that his portrait of Plato was a caricature (*KSA* 12, 521=LN 194), and the caricature he had in mind was probably not unlike the “standard view” that I mentioned at the start of this paper. But he was not really being fair to himself. One can certainly think of passages that might justify this verdict; the passage of *Twilight* with which I began is perhaps the clearest example. But the totality of his writings on Plato reveals a more multi-faceted, less single-minded and perhaps less consistent picture. A more apt way to consider his view or views of Plato would be by way of his reflections in *Genealogy* about perspective. “There is *only* a perspectival seeing, *only* a perspectival ‘knowing’; and *the more* affects we

³⁶ Hence the view of Young 2010, 425, that “Nietzsche’s ideas on the *structure* of society ... have not altered at all since 1871”, seems wide of the mark. Young is right that Plato’s philosophers, too, are “big picture” political thinkers, not executives. But there is still a crucial difference, for them, between engaging in the business of ruling – which is, at least considered in itself, unwelcome to them – and engaging in unfettered philosophy, which is what, if no other considerations were in play, they would prefer to be doing all the time. In the two passages of Nietzsche that we have considered, there is no hint of such a division between political and apolitical sides of the highest humans’ activity. One can consider all that they do as political in a sense; but this is, as I suggested, only a very extended sense, somewhat as in the contemporary slogan “the personal is political”. By contrast, Plato clearly conceives of the rulers in his ideal city as doing something akin to what actual rulers in current societies do, even if they will do it much better (*Rep.* 520c-d).

allow to speak about a matter, *the more* eyes, different eyes, we know how to bring to bear one and the same matter, that much more complete will our 'concept' of this matter, our 'objectivity' be" (*GM* 3.12). Nietzsche brought multiple "affects" and "eyes" to bear on Plato. For such a gigantic figure in the history of thought, and especially such a protean one as Plato was, this is surely just as it should be.

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