Joscelyn Godwin
Annals of the Invisible College

Joscelyn Godwin teaches at Colgate University and is the author of many books on both music and esoteric traditions. His most recent volume is *The Theosophical Enlightenment.*

5 The Platonic Tradition

The vision of a cosmos ordered in hierarchies and bonded by love is, one hopes, close to the reality of things. In *Lapis 3*, David Fideler described the spiritual mechanics of such a universe, and its celebration in the art of the Renaissance. This vision is the essence of the Platonic tradition. As we shall see, it provides both a metaphysical framework for philosophy, and guidelines for personal and political life.

Platonic metaphysics takes as its premise the existence of a "world of Forms" that is the matrix from which the material world arises. These Forms, far from being imaginary, are more real than what most people mistake for reality. We might call them archetypes: such things as Unity, Justice, Goodness, and Beauty, that are dimly reflected in what we know of these qualities.

As the Platonic tradition developed, the Forms were identified with the gods and goddesses of pagan religion. To the Neoplatonists, the personal beings that people worship are actually the Forms to which they feel a natural kinship. Between these and matter stretches a chain of intermediate beings — demigods, daimons, etc. — who also participate in their parent Forms and have a role in the governance of the world. The entire cosmos is a hierarchy, suspended in pyramidal fashion from the One and its archetypal emanations.

How do we know this? Another Platonic principle is that like is known by like. To know matter, one must have a physical body. To know immaterial things, one must have a soul. To know the Forms, one must have a higher intellect that is akin to them. Thus the individual is a microcosm of the whole.

But in most of us these organs of knowledge are not fully developed. Most of what we know comes through the senses and is distorted by our opinions, so that we have only a vague notion of what is. Higher and more accurate knowledge begins with the rational mind, and continues to the point of direct perception of the Forms through the impersonal intellect. Someone who sets out on this journey of self-development is a philosopher: a "wisdom-lover".

Plato's Myth of the Cave (*Republic*, Book 7) describes what happens to people who succeed in developing these higher degrees of perception. Human beings are likened to prisoners in a cave, forced to sit and look at a wall. Behind them are the operators of the cave-system, who use firelight and cutouts to project a shadow play on this wall, which the prisoners watch with passionate interest, since it is all they know. It is just like a cinema. But once in a while, a prisoner manages to look around, and he sees to his surprise that the shadow play is not real, but created by the operators. He may even sneak out past them and discover the stairs that lead to the world outside, where he is thrilled to find himself in a world infinitely more wonderful than what he has known. Here he encounters the originals of the shadow play: real people, trees, mountains, stars, etc., in all their glorious form and color. The philosopher, for that is what he now is, is moved by compassion for his old friends, still chained in the cave, and burns to dispel their illusion. He

Hubert Robert *The Mouth of a Cave*

returns to the cave to tell them of his discovery. But far from welcoming him, jumping up, and escaping to the real world, they meet his report with disbelief, mockery, and hatred. They cannot bear it that someone pretends to know better than they.

Thus Plato's teacher Socrates found, when an Athenian jury condemned him to death by hemlock poisoning in 399 BCE; and the lady philosopher Hypatia, when Saint Cyril, Bishop of Alexandria, incited a mob to dismember her in 415. These martyrs mark the dawn and the long twilight of the original Platonic tradition. When Plato's Academy was closed by the Emperor Justinian in 529, it had lasted longer than any known educational institution.

The last philosophers of the Athenian Academy found refuge at the court of Persia. From then on, the Platonic tradition led a largely underground existence. Although in its original form Platonism is incompatible with any of the three Abrahamic religions, clever compromisers succeeded in adapting elements of it to each one, giving rise to Kabbalah, Christian theosophy, and Sufism. This state of affairs is responsible for the term "Invisible College", whose occasional lapses into visibility appear to us as so many descents into the Cave, on the part of a slender but unbroken chain of philosophers.

Socrates had introduced to Plato and other young Athenians the subversive notion of questioning accepted beliefs and opinions. He used rational inquiry not so much to reach truth — that would be too much to ask — as to dispel illusion. He taught his students, and forced his opponents, to admit their ignorance, as the necessary prelude to acquiring knowledge. This is the result of the famous "Socratic method". But when Socrates wanted to make a positive statement out of his own convictions, he used not dialectic but myth. A myth is a tale that embodies higher truth, using symbols to kindle the imagination and stir the memory. All learning, for Socrates and Plato, is simply remembrance of what our souls once knew, but have forgotten. We all came here from outside the cave.

A practical philosophy follows inevitably from this system. Its principle must be the separation of the soul from the material world and its reinstatement in its own domain. But no one would embark on this difficult and frustrating journey if not driven to it by overwhelming desire. The erotic element is an essential part of Platonic education: as the lover is drawn to the beloved, so the soul is drawn to the Forms of the Beautiful and the Good. Carnal lust is the first step on the ladder of ascent through a cosmos suffused with desire in its every part. Every being in it, from the One downwards, emanates the next state of being, loves it as its own child, and is loved in return. Platonists forget this at their peril, for hierarchy without love turns to tyranny, whether in the person, the family, or the state.

So we come to the vexed question of Platonic politics. Plato and Socrates receive a bad press these days because of their antidemocratic views. At least we can understand why they could not think otherwise. Their ultimate reality consisted in the One and its emanated Forms (or gods), which give existence and shape to all else in the long descending chain of being. Human society, they thought, should mirror this. There must be a One — the monarch — and there must be Forms — the laws and their executors. But if the political hierarchy is to work, the monarch must emulate the wisdom of the model, society must be as orderly as the stars in their courses, and the levels of society must be joined through love. Has this ever happened?

Clearly not. One reason is that the necessary prescription has never yet been followed: that kings must be philosophers, and philosophers, in consequence, must be kings. Plato tried to groom Dionysus, future king of Syracuse in Sicily, for such a role, and failed when the young man escaped his moral control. The Roman Empire was more fortunate with its philosopher emperors Hadrian, Marcus Aurelius, and Julian. But an empire is far too large an entity for Platonic reform; the proper scale is that of the city-state. In fifteenth-century Florence, Cosimo de' Medici and his family graduated from bankers to philosophers under the tutelage of Gemistos Plethon and Marsilio Ficino, with magnificent results for the fine arts but little advantage to the populace. In Weimar, where Johann Wolfgang von Goethe became the advisor and friend of Duke Carl August (ruled 1775-1828), one can fairly say that a philosopher was running if not ruling the state. This and other "enlightened absolutisms" of the 18th and early 19th centuries came as close to the Platonic ideal as any so far. But it was not very close.

Platonic politics is antidemocratic because, like the cosmic order, it is ruled from the top and not the bottom, for the benefit of all. True knowledge belongs to the philosopher, not to the people who have never been outside the Cave and are still in thrall to their senses and opinions. The philosopher alone can tell what is best for the body politic, for only he has seen things as they are.

Statements like these have a dreadfully hollow ring today. There are two good reasons. First, because we live 2400 years after Plato, in a cynical and world-weary age, and have seen no sign of a philosopher-king. Philosophy itself has earned itself a bad name since it degenerated from "wisdom-loving" into competing schools of thought, and finally into a series of fashionable intellectual poses. As for the fruits of higher wisdom, we have seen enough "spiritually advanced" people with very evident clay (or cloven) feet, and know that they, too, are as subject as the rest of us to power, money, sex, and fear. To imagine them in politics is a frightening prospect. We mistrust fascisms, and the Platonic Republic, with its martial guardians and rigid controls, seems fascistic. Democracy has persuaded us that we ourselves know what is best for the body politic, and that we have the right to elect leaders who will execute our choices.

These are some of the grounds for

the instinctive rejection of the Platonic political ideal — never mind that they, too, are subject to cynical review. The second main reason comes from Christianity, which began by being anti-hierarchical and socially leveling. The Jesus of Luke's Gospel, for example, is always giving preference to those at the bottom of the pyramid (women, lepers, the poor, Samaritans, etc.) and promising a reversal of status in the Kingdom of Heaven. This accords with the doctrine already mentioned as integral to the Platonic philosophy: that every man and woman is a microcosm, with not only a body but also an immortal soul and the potential for knowing God, or the One. In comparison to this common heritage, earthly distinctions are irrelevant and fundamentally unjust. Everyone is a child of God, hence entitled to an equal voice in the community.

Unfortunately democracy has not worked that way. Everyone may be a child of God, but most of these children are very young and have much to learn before they can safely be entrusted with the dangerous toys of government. At the drop of a hat, and with the best of intentions, they will elect a tyrant to lord it over them. This may not be obvious in the West, unless it is realized that elected leaders do not represent the people who voted for them, but the patrons that enabled them, through advertising, to get elected. The tyrants are not our well-meaning presidential candidates, but the multinational corporations, the special-interests lobbies, the military, legal, and medical industries, the bankers and speculators, etc. No amount of democracy can cure society of growths so firmly ensconced.

These are the operators of the cave-system today. It is in their interest to keep most of us fairly prosperous, contented, and dumb. The show that they put on is indeed a blockbuster, and quite enough to keep most people's minds fully occupied. Under the circumstances, it is foolish to expect the Cave to be run on the lines of the Platonic Republic, or the Kingdom of Heaven. These are models that exist in the world of archetypes, not on earth. But one does not have to be a great sage or mystic to have glimpsed the world outside the Cave. The Serb who actually does not hate Bosnians and Croats has been there: he has seen the Form of their common humanity. So has the person who turns off the television in disgust, rejecting the images to which his fellows are addicted. Something has stirred the memory that, however deeply buried, can respond to truth. If we know anything of this — and we would not be reading this magazine if we did not — we are on our way to freedom, and have the potential to take others with us, one by one.

DÖ KHAM

Dö Kham unveils the largest collection of "Vegeterian Fake" and Real Fur Hats... Crowned with Jewel Toned Exotic Tibetan Silk Brocades—by Phelgye

TREASURES FROM TIBET AND THE HIMALAYAS

Velvet Hats • Silk Scarves • Clothing • Tibetan Singing Bowls for relaxation and music • Ritual Objects • Textiles • Antiques • Rugs • Beads • Silver Jewelry • Books, handmade rice paper products • Incense • Special Tibetan house decorations and furniture

7 days 10-8
51 Prince (between Lafayette & Mulberry)
966-2404

TIBETAN MARKET

LAPIS