

Transcendent Apriorism

Pure Reason's Quest for the Noumenal

Mark Robert Burgess

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*Transcendent Apriorism:
Pure Reason's Quest for the Noumenal*

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Preface

For many years, I have been interested in the traditional project of building a transcendent metaphysical system upon a pure, a priori, epistemological foundation. According to Kant¹, this extreme rationalist programme, to extend speculative knowledge beyond the limits of experience, was a natural but dangerously misleading disposition of the human mind. In contrast to this view, I have always regarded the cultivation of this proclivity to be a legitimate and important aim of the philosophical reason. I therefore agree with Fichte that engaging the mind in pure thought represents an elevation of human consciousness.² I would supplement this notion by endorsing the Platonist claim that the herementioned elevation affords the only viable route to transcendent metaphysical knowledge. Although this currently unfashionable perspective influenced the general research concern of my thesis, the intention was never merely to present an apologetic defence of this view. Instead, the analysis was undertaken as an antidote to all extant prejudicative treatments of the subject. In fact, it was intended as a continuation and furtherance of a long forgotten wholly objective method of enquiry developed by Hegel.³

The more specific research undertaking originated from an investigation, prompted by a curious statement made by a philosophical commentator. Some years ago I was reading a brief section on transcendent metaphysics, in *Reason and Experience* by W. H. Walsh, when I came across the following cursory value judgement, "There seems to be little difficulty in showing that metaphysics in this sense is an impossible undertaking".⁴ It struck me that, in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant had found it necessary to develop lengthy and complex arguments, to putatively demonstrate the epistemological illegitimacy of this form of metaphysics. It also occurred to me that Hegel, in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* and *The Science of Logic*, had subsequently found powerful reasons to reject Kant's main conclusions. Naturally, I was aware that the Logical Positivist's had used their verification principle in an attempt to establish the epistemological impossibility of transcendent metaphysics. However, this argument had never convinced me and had fallen out of favour more generally. Hence I read on, with eager anticipation, to ascertain the previously undiscovered straightforward refutation.

At this point, it was certainly difficult to envisage the impressive metaphysical monuments of the rationalist tradition collapsing before an argument that presented "little difficulty". My doubts were soon confirmed when Walsh's purported refutation was disclosed as an uninspiring repetition of an old Kantian line of reasoning. Puzzled and dissatisfied with Walsh's superficial analysis, I searched the literature for more profound reflections on the subject. As a result, it was discovered that, subsequent to the brilliant Hegelian study, there was a general sharp decline in the standard of philosophical commentary. The perfunctory opinion had emerged that transcendent metaphysics was impossible because its epistemological foundation was unsound. In fact, this supposedly erroneous epistemology, that I designate transcendent apriorism, rarely seemed to be given serious consideration. Instead, it was found that the negative evaluations of Ayer and Kant were generally just accepted on trust. In exceptional cases, arguments against the epistemological doctrine were actually promulgated, but they were brief and poorly constructed. More normally transcendent apriorism is either ignored or rejected with a cursory remark. The only real exception to this trend was the philosophy of Bergson.

Recognising that ingrained prejudice, rather than reasoned debate, was determining contemporary research, gave me the impetus to provide a totally new account. In order to do this effectively the whole edifice of current understandings would have to be overturned. There would need to be a return to the absolute basics from which the foundations of a more enduring structure could be constructed. The historical origins and development of transcendent apriorism, its essential epistemological nature, and many of the extant arguments that purport to undermine it, must undergo a thorough re-examination. The *raison d'être* of this thesis is the fulfilment of this reformatory programme.

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This thesis is dedicated to my parents Anne and Arthur Burgess. I would also like it to be a tribute to the memory of the Hegelian philosopher Hywel Thomas who inspired my interest in traditional metaphysics. Thanks must also go to my long-suffering tutor Pat Shaw and to Kenneth Haycock who persistently solved my computer problems.

Introduction

There was a time when transcendent apriorism was regarded as the epistemological master doctrine underpinning the most profound metaphysical systems. Indubitably, the vast and enduring philosophical heritage of Platonism was built upon its firm foundations. In that tradition, the doctrine was considered to provide a methodology by which the highest philosophical knowledge could be attained. In both Christian and Pagan Platonism, it had functioned to disclose the existence and nature of God, the immortality of the soul, the eternal archetypes, the true nature of the universe and the moral destiny of man. The discovery of the seminal route to such ultimate wisdom had been the epistemological golden legacy of the Eleatics. It is unsurprising therefore that Parmenides allegorised his discovery of the method as a journey, "far from the steps of men",¹ to receive the enlightenment of a divine being. It is testimony to the doctrine's power, that it was only the growing influence of mediaeval Aristotelianism that eventually displaced the method from its deserved position of prominence. However, when the Cartesian tradition of continental rationalism emerged, a reinvigorated transcendent apriorism was engendered from the ashes of the mediaeval world. It flourished again as the dominant epistemological method in the works of Descartes, Malebranche, Leibniz and Spinoza.

Yet, a moment of crises was looming. Immanuel Kant had brilliantly attempted to bolster and purify the method in his *Inaugural Dissertation*. However, before this work was complete, an historic volte-face occurred in his thinking. In fact, his next work, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, was a sustained attack on the doctrine's pretensions to transcend experience. According to conventional wisdom, this attack was so devastating that it dealt transcendent apriorism its deathblow. In succeeding centuries, the mesmeric rise to prominence of the empirical method coincided with an explosion in scientific progress. Despite the restraining voices of Hegel and Bergson, the old and venerable rationalist methods were ridiculed and swept aside on a tide of enthusiasm. Reflecting this fervour, a young A. J. Ayer confidently enunciated a simple principle² that putatively rendered the old master doctrine obsolete. Since then it has become the background assumption of our empiricist age, that the doctrine is false and that this has been proved the case. In a typical recent article, Norman Swartz³ has argued that rationalist methodologies "ought to be

defunct" and assures us with conviction that their "total extinction is assured". Transcendent apriorism cannot even look for support from Lawrence Bonjour's espousal of rational intuition in his recent book *In Defence of Pure Reason*. It is symptomatic of our times that even when synthetic a priori knowledge is granted legitimacy the possibility of it having transcendent claims is just never considered. The grounds for the disregard of this possibility, by Bonjour and others, are rarely stated. In fact, it is normally considered that the rationale behind the disregard need not be made explicit because it is wholly self-evident. Hence, Rudolf Steiner has observed that, "the thing-in-itself and a transcendent ultimate foundation of things are nothing but illusions. It is easy to see that this is the case".⁴

Historically speaking, it is undeniable that the reputation of transcendent apriorism has undergone a radical reversal. The Parmenidean journey of enlightenment, once viewed with reverential awe, is now derided as an embarrassment to philosophy. It is the contention of this thesis that, contrary to popular opinion, the dramatic status transformation is not justified by any of the existing argumentation. In fact, the judgemental revision results from an unquestioning faith in the ubiquitous use of scientific method, a misguided adherence to socially constructed common sense and a gross overestimation of various putative refutations. In other words, the modern derogatory attitude is founded on prejudice rather than argumentation. Unfortunately, this unsympathetic treatment has also engendered a complacency that has grossly distorted post-Hegelian epistemological analysis of transcendent apriorism. Another negative result has been the false history that has emerged from the disingenuous attempt to prove that various famous transcendent apriorists were actually empiricists at heart. As a consequence, this thesis has ridiculously had to demonstrate that transcendent apriorists like Plotinus do not have secret empiricist agenda. If complacency is the root of the general corruption of analysis, then simple definitional inaccuracy is a primary branch. The issue of the essential definition of transcendent apriorism is technical and is dealt with comprehensively in chapter 2 of this thesis. However, the reader requires a simple general understanding of the doctrine by way of introduction.

Historically speaking transcendent apriorism seems to emerge as a solution to an intractable epistemological problem set by the ancient doctrine of universal flux. Fragments of Heraclitus confirm his central conviction that everything flows ($\pi\alpha\nu\tau\alpha\ \rho\epsilon\iota$ ⁵), so that like a moving river reality is never at rest but is undergoing continuous transformation. Cratylus⁶, a disciple of Heraclitus, argued cogently that because things

are perpetually in a state of flux it was impossible to know them. In fact, true things cannot even be said of that which changes, because as soon as the putative truth is uttered the object of that truth has changed. Hence, the attempt to capture reality in a truth seeking net of words is to introduce a false stability into a world that is essentially impermanent. Cratylus, conscious that he had reached an epistemological dead end, quite consistently refused to say anything further, merely wagging his finger at a reality he could not know.

The radically sceptical consequences that are embedded in the Heraclitean theory present a profound epistemological problem. Knowledge seems to require an immutable object. Undoubtedly, the fundamental characteristic of the few things that we consider ourselves to know, with apodeictic certainty, is fixity or permanence. We do not usually consider that the principle of non-contradiction or simple mathematical equations can be rendered false by the passage of time. In contrast, the objects of our experience do not seem to possess the necessary stability to be known. Hegel⁷ states that even the simplest sense statement like "this is night" when applied to a changing world "soon becomes stale". This incompatibility problem facilitated the inception of transcendent apriorism, for it drove a wedge between epistemological aspiration and the world of experience. The argument developed that the impermanent world, which cannot become an object for knowledge, is revealed to us by the senses. However, our reasoning and truth seeking functions demand a different epistemological object that is stable and unchanging. Therefore, truth cannot reside in the reports of the senses. In fact, an early argument used by Melissus of Samos⁸ denies the senses can attain truth, because the objects that are revealed by the senses are impermanent and therefore unknowable. It is necessary then to reject the senses if we are to attain knowledge.

However, for the Eleatics, this is not to revert to Cratylus type scepticism. For them, the arguments do not legitimate a universal scepticism but rather a local scepticism concerning only the senses and the world of experience. The revelation of the goddess to Parmenides had been that, if the senses are rejected and the pure reason engaged, then an intelligible realm of permanence could be attained. The world, as it is presented to the senses, is rejected and the question is raised concerning how the world necessarily is according to the dictates of pure reason. This is not the application of pure reason to the sensory world, but the transcending of the false sensory world by the pure reason. The transcendent intelligible reality that is attained, unlike its sensory counterpart, is a congenial knowledge object because it is immutable. Parmenides brings home this point when he observes of it, "changeless

within the limits of great bonds it exists without beginning or ceasing, since coming to be and perishing have wandered very far away, and true conviction has thrust them off".⁹ Hence, the early transcendent apriorist method in the Eleatic tradition, as it did later in the Platonic¹⁰, represented a solution to the scepticism induced by the Heraclitean doctrine of flux.

As can be seen from this historical account of the doctrine's inception, the essential feature of transcendent apriorism is the downgrading of sensory information. Apriorism, as an extreme rationalist doctrine, is a call to eliminate all sensory elements from the knowledge quest, for they corrupt true knowledge and can act as an ignis fatuus to the mind. In the *Inaugural Dissertation*, Kant¹¹ blames the failure of metaphysics to attain the progress of science on the recurring contamination of pure a priori knowledge by sensory data. The infecting sensory elements that are to be excluded by apriorism take many forms. For instance, they include not only immediate sensory data but also the developed and often abstract reasoning on the senses typical of the scientific understanding. For the apriorist, it is the epistemological ancestry that counts. If reasoning, no matter how abstract, has its ultimate origins in sensation then it cannot become a legitimate vehicle for transcendent knowledge. This variety of unsuitable knowledge will be designated logico-sensitive cognition because it involves a mixture of sensation and abstract reasoning.

There is a modern trend, post-Frege¹², to call a proposition a priori if, although it has its origins in sensation, it can be justified independently of the senses. The transcendent apriorist, however, is a purist in these matters and repudiates any knowledge originally acquired from an illegitimate union with the senses. Collectively all knowledge that is intrinsically contaminated with sensation will be designated as emerging from the aesthetic functions of the mind. The term aesthetic is used in direct connection with its etymological root in sensory perception and must not be confused with artistic endeavour. It is certain that the aesthetic functions cannot have any intrinsic role. Yet, many transcendent apriorists do think that they can have an extrinsic role. In Leibniz' theory of innate ideas sensory experience does have a role in uncovering noetic ideas that are dormant in the soul.

However, these sensory elements are not intrinsic to the ideas formed but function only in the method of their discovery and are therefore tolerated. Hence, not all transcendent apriorists believe that everything the aesthetic functions can achieve is wholly negative. Admittedly, there are many who believe that the sensory acts as a veil of Maya obscuring the true reality with illusion. However, there are others who, although

they deny that ultimate knowledge can be attained by experience, admit that there is an inferior realm to which the senses are passably adequate. The former embrace a full sensory scepticism. For the latter it is a matter of adequation; the senses are adequate to their proscribed inferior realm so long as they do not stray into the intelligible realm. These different transcendent apriorist theories of perception are important because they dramatically affect the resulting ontology. If there is a realm to which the senses are adequate as well as an intelligible realm then there is a pull towards an ontological dualism. If sense-objects are merely obstructing illusions then their status as full existents is undermined, so that they could not constitute a realm, and an ontological monism most naturally results.

The repudiation of an intrinsic role for the senses in the attainment of ultimate knowledge is the negative aspect of apriorism. The question remains, which functions of the mind are uncontaminated by sensation and so can lead the apriorist to his goal? It is important to note that historically all answers to this question, within the tradition, have posited some form of intellectual intuition. This is a very broad category and includes, within its range, both the humble intuition, involved in finding the conclusion of a simple syllogism, and the grand intuition that claims a direct acquaintance with the divine being. These intuitions can occur in addition to, during or separate from a pure deductive process. Generally, they fall into two categories and are either discursive or illuminative. The discursive ones are propositional in nature and form an integral part in the building of deductive systems of metaphysics. Many such systems, inspired by the Euclidean model, proceed *more geometrico* and require both intuitions that grasp the basic axioms (axiomatic intuition) and those that grasp the conclusions of deductive sequences (deductive intuition). In contrast, the illuminative intuition does not mediate knowing through propositions and instead grasps reality directly. It functions to know things, not to know about things. All such pure intuitions and processes, that constitute the positive aspect of apriorism, will be designated collectively the noetic functions.

It must always be remembered that transcendent apriorism is an epistemological method of attaining philosophical knowledge. Hence, various trans-rational or mystical intuitions, used to obtain transcendent knowledge, are disqualified from the methodology. This does not however mean that certain transcendent apriorists have not engaged with such intuitions. Plotinus¹³, for example, talks of an intuition by which the intellect is "transported" and "drunk with nectar". However, here he is going beyond the transcendent apriorist method in a mystical

flight. Such trans-rationalist intuitions will be designated hyper-noetic visions and are always carefully distinguished.

So far, we have merely considered the transcendent apriorist's pure *apriorist* methodology and it is now time to examine the *transcendent* goal. The sensory purification of the apriorist method is designed to lead the mind from that which is immanent, within our experience, to the realm that transcends such experience. According to the early Kant the pure intelligence, "is the faculty of the subject through which it is able to represent things which cannot by their own nature come before the senses of that subject".¹⁴ It is usually considered as a journey from the impermanent or illusory phenomena to the ultimate goal of stability and truth, viz. the realm of the in-itself. Hence, to purify yourself from sensory contamination and then take the phenomenal world as your ultimate object of knowledge would have seemed strange and wrong to the early transcendent apriorists.

However, as we shall discover, this immanent rather than transcendent apriorism itself has a long history. It was this type of apriorism that Engels¹⁵ had criticised in Hegel and Düring. It formed the basis of Cartesian science and Husserlian phenomenology. It also has a less distinguished role in Austrian Economics. Unfortunately, because of a deep misunderstanding, this doctrine has often been erroneously associated with transcendent apriorism. However, in distinct contrast, the transcendent apriorist does not set himself up as a rival to the physical or social scientist. He does not see it as his goal to pontificate on the phenomenal world using the apriorist method. In fact, he would regard science, like Plato, as dealing with an inferior realm in which only belief rather than knowledge can apply. Alternatively, he would agree with Parmenides that the scientist deals only with an illusory object unworthy of serious study. If the transcendent apriorist can be described as anything, he is a noumenalist not a phenomenalist or phenomenologist. The Hegelian method is profound but it has more to do with Aristotelian immanentism than Platonic transcendence. Hegel wrote the *Phenomenology of Spirit* whereas a transcendent apriorist would have to write a noumenology of spirit.

Most philosophers have had their primary and most sustained contact with transcendent apriorism in its Platonic guise. In fact, it is widely accepted, though not universally held, that Plato's epistemology is both transcendent and apriorist. It is for this reason that, although the earlier Parmenidean version marked the doctrine's historical beginnings, this thesis commences with an analysis of Plato. The initial chapter therefore contains a deep analysis of Plato's epistemology, which is designed to expound and clarify at least one version of the transcendent apriorist

method. The insights of many years study into extreme rationalist systems have been condensed into this chapter. This has resulted, among other things, in a modern defence of the traditional but very unfashionable Platonic two-world's theory; a new contribution to the debate on whether Plato's notion of *επιστημη* meant true belief plus a logos or direct acquaintance with the forms, and the discovery that Plato held a secret doctrine, revealed only to initiates.

This initial analysis introduces the phrase "transcendent apriorism" to Platonic scholarship as if it were an accepted and familiar terminology. The analysis also proceeds from the assumption that the definition of transcendent apriorism is fully understood and therefore serves to distinguish the doctrine from other epistemologies. However, the reality is that the terminology has never been used and, post-Hegel, the understanding of the doctrine's definition, and hence its distinction from other epistemologies, is a lost legacy. In the first part of chapter 2, the confusion that results both from this loss of understanding, from complacent definitions and from the inconsistent use of terminology is considered. As a remedy to this situation a new system for categorising epistemologies is developed and those with which transcendent apriorism is most often confused explained and distinguished. Many commentators have thought that philosophers like Hegel, Wolff, Bradley and Heidegger were transcendent apriorists. In fact, they use the same arguments against them as they would against Plato or Spinoza. The new categories will allow us to determine to what extent this is legitimate. In the second part of the chapter, a new and requisite precise definition of the doctrine is given to entirely end the confusions. At this stage, the amazing fact emerges that no one since Kant and Hegel has fully understood the doctrine.

Having arrived at a better understanding of exactly what transcendent apriorism is, it is then time to look more closely at its component parts. We have already seen that it is the noetic functions, or those aspects of cognition uncontaminated by sensation, which are considered the gateway to the transcendent. In the third chapter, the various forms of noetic functions used will be enumerated and analysed. This will be important in the process of distinguishing the various types of transcendent apriorism. There are many paths that lead to the transcendent and different methods place their trust in different noetic functions.

The entire preceding analysis had been an excellent preparation for answering a hotly disputed question in the history of philosophy. It had been assumed until this point that Parmenides, rather than Plato, was the founder of the transcendent apriorist method. However, this is

normally seen as a very contentious issue. In fact, there are commentators who deny that Parmenides was an apriorist at all. In order to prove the case it is necessary to fully analyse the Parmenidean epistemology. This analysis will determine both whether Parmenides did hold to the doctrine and, if he did, what version. It is discovered that, whereas Plato's admits a two-world system, Parmenides will only countenance the existence of one. This difference highlights an important distinction for the whole history of the doctrine. In its progress, the analysis goes some way to resolving the perennial and unanswered question of the status of the Parmenidean "way of opinion".

Parmenides developed his apriorist method with great confidence and would never have foreseen the interminable modern debates concerning what is to count as a priori knowledge. However, no modern account of transcendent apriorism can ignore this essential debate and it is therefore dealt with in the fifth chapter. It was discovered that transcendent apriorists have a very strict notion of the a priori, which is designed to ensure complete purification from sensory knowledge. Kant's whole project of rescuing metaphysics, in the *Inaugural Dissertation*, had been founded upon a concentrated focusing upon this stringent criterion for excluding experience. Yet, this notion of the a priori, *in sensu stricto*, has caused a lot of confusion to modern philosophers, post-Frege. This is largely because they are accustomed to working with a much less restrictive criterion. Influenced, no doubt, by the apparent epistemological triumph of empiricism they see no need to decontaminate the a priori of all experiential input. In broad terms, for them, a priori knowledge is fundamentally knowledge that can be justified independently of experience. This understanding does not prevent the senses playing their part in the process of the acquisition of such knowledge. In contrast, for the transcendent apriorist, even the process of acquisition must exclude sensory experience. The confusions that result and those also arising from determining what counts as "experience" whether excluded or not, are then identified and resolved.

The real question, raised by the debate on the a priori, is how is it possible to acquire knowledge without the intrinsic contributions of sensory experience? Traditionally, of course, the main theory that accounts for this possibility is the doctrine of innate ideas. In the sixth chapter, which deals with this theory, it will be argued that innate ideas are definitely the most promising foundation for a certain variety of transcendent apriorism. This may lead the modern philosopher to think that this would constitute a refutation of this version, because the antiquated theory of innate ideas is now defunct. However, again, the theory of innate ideas has generated much prejudice, confusion and

failed refutations. In fact, the ignorance concerning a priori knowledge has also affected theories of innatism and the distinction between the a priori and the innate is confused as a result. It is certain that Herbert of Cherbury and Leibniz developed very sophisticated dispositional versions of the theory, the fundamentals of which, even today, Noam Chomsky still endorses.

The theory of innate ideas, however, is not required in the illuminative tradition of transcendent apriorism considered in the seventh chapter. That there is such a tradition, is totally ignored by Ayer in his attack on transcendent metaphysics. The illuminative tradition states that the ultimate transcendent knowledge can be gained directly through a special type of illuminative intuition. In the *Seventh Epistle*, Plato¹⁶ had stated that, although inexpressible in propositional form, certain knowledge could be attained by acquaintance when the mind is, "flooded with light". This type of intuition is sui generis and forms the basis of an entire epistemological tradition, of which Augustine, Plotinus, Malebranche and Bergson form an integral part. The nature of the intuition is closely examined and the history of illuminative transcendent apriorism traced. The viability of the theory can be challenged by certain arguments in Kant and Ayer and these are dealt with. As a result of the new understanding, important questions in the history of philosophy can be answered. For example, whether Henri Bergson was in fact an irrationalist and whether Malebranche's claim to "see all things in God"¹⁷ forms part of the illuminative tradition.

So far, there has been a concentration on various apriorist methods to transcend experience. Chapter 8 deals exclusively with the telos of this method, the goal to which it is striving viz. the transcendent itself. Contrary to a widely held belief, it is disclosed that the transcendent apriorist does not claim to directly know the in-itself. The massive obstacle that Kant and Schopenhauer placed in the path of transcendent apriorism, viz. that the in-itself just cannot be known, in this way, is consequently removed. It is also seen that the perennial problem that has been thrown at transcendent apriorists since Plato, viz. the status of the relationship between the phenomenal and the noumenal, just does not apply to certain varieties of the doctrine. For certain transcendent apriorists, who are also monists like Parmenides and Spinoza, there is simply no relation, because the phenomenal world just doesn't exist. Hegel's devastating main criticism of Kant's critical philosophy is also considered at this point. In the light of all that has been discovered the famous problem of the Cartesian circle is given a new solution.

In the final chapter, consideration is given to the important relationship between the scientist and the transcendent apriorist. There

is an initial discussion of the nature of scientific epistemology. Some commentators have suggested that the scientist is going beyond experience and positing noumenal entities of his own. This claim will be considered. Much has been written recently about traditional accounts of the continental rationalists being mere caricature. In fact, it is extremely fashionable to promote the idea that Descartes, Leibniz and Spinoza had scientific interests and empiricist strands to their philosophies. It is discovered that this entire viewpoint stems from a prejudice. Cartesian science which all these philosophers saw as paradigmatic was deductive not inductive, and hence apriorist in nature. It is admitted that the continental rationalists had a function for experience in their epistemologies. However, this type of justification was considered necessary due to the limits of the human mind. It had an inferior status and was only appealed to as a last resort. In terms of the history of philosophy, there is also a serious contribution to the unresolved debate on the status of Spinoza's *scientia intuitiva*.

The conclusion examines important contemporary arguments in this research area. The journey through the thesis, in its entirety, will involve a fundamental loosening of assumptions. In fact, it is organised to effect a paradigm shift in our understanding of an epistemological theory of ancient lineage and immense importance. The dominance of empiricism, in contemporary epistemology, must not be allowed to close and prejudice minds to divergent philosophical approaches. After all, the empire of empiricism, like all empires, is subject to decline and transformation.

CHAPTER 1

Plato's Transcendent Apriorism

[Q1] Don't you think that the person who is likely to succeed in this attempt most perfectly is the one who approaches each object, as far as possible with the unaided intellect, without taking account of any sense of sight in his thinking, or dragging any other sense into his reckoning - the man who pursues the truth by applying his pure and unadulterated thought to the pure and unadulterated object, cutting himself off as much as possible from his eyes and ears and virtually all the rest of his body, as an impediment which by its presence prevents the soul from attaining to truth and clear thinking? Is not this the person, Simmias, who will reach the goal of reality if anyone can?

[Plato¹]

1.1. Paradigmatic Transcendent Apriorism

Plato is normally adjudged, by commentators, to be the paradigmatic exemplar of transcendent apriorist epistemology.² It is normally considered, firstly, that the positing of entities, i.e. Forms (εἶδος), which are regarded as (i) the ultimate object of knowledge and (ii) ontologically³ separate (εξὑπερισσᾶν) from the sensory world, demonstrates a clear commitment to epistemological transcendence. With regard to point (i), Plato puts special emphasis on the epistemological importance of the Forms, which are not disclosed to the aesthetic functions, when he observes, "For the existents which have no visible embodiment, the existents which are of the highest value and chief importance, are demonstrable only by reason and are not to be apprehended by any other means".⁴ Dominic J. O' Meara, in his essay 'The Hierarchical Ordering of Reality in Plotinus', states what is accepted by most commentators viz. that, "What is fundamental in Plato is, of course the forms".⁵ The same point actually provides a foundation for an important but controversial interpretation of the *Theaetetus*. F. M. Cornford, in *Plato's Theory of Knowledge*, had observed that the aporia that results from the ultimate inadequacy of the presented definitions of knowledge, in the *Theaetetus*, is induced to emphasize a very specific epistemological issue. The point is that without the forms considered as

the true objects of knowledge no such definitions can actually be given. This, according to Cornford, was the ultimate purpose of the dialogue and explains why Plato is not transparent about his true epistemology, "Plato could not press the argument further in this direction without openly discussing the Forms as the true objects of knowledge".⁶

The evidence for point (ii) underpins most interpretations, both traditional and modern. It was Aristotle who had used the notion that the Forms are *εξορισαν* to distinguish the Socratic from the Platonist ontologies, "Socrates did not take the universals to be separate, nor the definitions, but they [the Platonists] made them separate, and called such entities Forms".⁷ There is much debate in contemporary scholarship, as we shall soon discover with regard to establishing the sense in which Aristotle uses the term "separation". However, the orthodox interpretation posits ontological separation and connects it with the notion of transcendence. Hence, G. F. Else in his article "The Terminology of Ideas" understands Aristotle in this way, "The exaltation of the true seat of the ideas to a 'place beyond heaven' is the transcendence of which Aristotle speaks".⁸ Such and other evidence, for this standard picture, leads Hamlyn quite naturally to conclude that Plato is predominantly a metaphysician, "of the transcendent type".⁹

Secondly, since the rejection of the aesthetic functions in favour of the noetic is conspicuously evident, in dialogues from all periods, Platonism and apriorism are normally closely associated. Aristotle assures us that, "From his early years Plato was familiar with the Heraclitean doctrine of Cratylus, that all sensible things are in a constant state of flux and that we can have no knowledge of them. To the end of his life Plato remained loyal to those tenets".¹⁰ More recently J. C. B. Gosling draws attention to Plato's "polemic against sense-perception",¹¹ while A. Ajdukiewicz regards Plato as an "extreme apriorist".¹²

Notwithstanding, the standard picture is regarded by some commentators as just too simplistic and there are certainly some who have taken issue with it. Few, if any, have denied Plato's apriorism but some have questioned whether his epistemology, particularly in the later dialogues, is truly transcendent. The criticism of the standard interpretation has usually taken the form of a denial of the ontological separation of the Platonic Forms from the world of experience. Naturally, then, the traditional "two worlds" hypothesis is firmly rejected. (This, not just for the standard reason that the forms are truly eternal - not sempiternal - i.e. outside space and time and therefore cannot have any location in a "world" or anywhere else). A single example of such a separation denial, out of the many that will be discussed subsequently, is evident in what T. Irwin calls the "non-reducibility thesis".¹³ This thesis

states that the Forms are not independent existents but are merely elements within experience that are not entirely definable in sensible terms alone, "forms...are not definable through sensible properties alone".¹⁴ Certainly, this theory, as Gale Fine observes, involves, "rejecting a version of empiricism according to which everything can ultimately be explained in terms of, or reduced to, sensible features of the world".¹⁵ However the apriorist theory, that results, is obviously going to be immanent rather than transcendent. The interpretation of Plato that underlies the non-reducibility thesis, and other such unorthodoxies is incorrect and the debate surrounding it will be considered. However, the main emphasis in this chapter will be on correctly categorizing Plato's transcendent apriorist epistemology, not on defending the legitimacy of the ascription to Plato of this type of epistemology. This categorization issue certainly throws up more controversy and a proper understanding of it will allow us to correctly locate Plato's contribution, in relation to the tradition.

1.2. Plato and Apriorism

1.2.1. Intrinsic Scepticism:

Αισθησιω in Relation to Αληθεια and Δοξα.

Fundamental to the broad consensus on Plato's epistemological apriorism is the analysis of the aesthetic functions. It is certain that Plato conforms to the strict transcendent apriorist criteria for the treatment of these functions. However, the nature of this treatment is open to misreading. Parmenides rejects the aesthetic functions because of certain implicit sceptical considerations. For Plato, in contrast, it is explicit issues of adequation that are fundamental. Indeed the sceptical thesis that the aesthetic functions are deceptive "in themselves" is not the ultimate reason for their rejection in the Platonic epistemology. Instead, it is the fact that these functions just cannot intrinsically deliver knowledge with regard to that which is Truly Real. However, this is not to endorse any view, which might suggest that Plato did not recognize that the aesthetic functions could be distorting, false, deceptive or misleading "in themselves". It is just that this scepticism is subsidiary. It certainly exists, as subsequent examples will prove. However, it is the inadequacy theory that makes scepticism inevitable, not scepticism that makes the aesthetic functions inadequate.

References to truly sceptical issues do occur but are relatively infrequent. In the *Phaedo*, the aesthetic functions in general are described as "not clear and accurate"¹⁶, and are consequently regarded as a hindrance when used in partnership with the soul in any inquiry.¹⁷ In this dialogue the same functions are regarded as "entirely deceptive"¹⁸

and we are again urged to refrain from using them.¹⁹ In the *Republic* all the senses are considered to be "defective"²⁰ or subject to error²¹. In fact, with regard to the last mentioned passage and a later passage in the *Theaetetus* there is some prefiguration of the examples used in Cartesian scepticism. The first, [Q2], contains the so-called "argument from illusion" and is the locus classicus for the famous example where the stick appears bent in water. The second [Q3] conclusively demonstrates, using the perceptual mistakes that occur in dreams and madness, that the aesthetic functions can be unreliable in themselves:

[Q2] The same magnitude, I presume, viewed from near and from far does not appear equal, Why no. And the same things appear bent and straight to those who view them in water and out, or concave and convex, owing to similar errors of vision about colours.²²

[Q3] There remains the question of dreams and disorders, especially madness and all the mistakes madness is said to make in seeing or hearing or otherwise misperceiving.²³

All such examples, taken together, may seem like a Platonic renewal of Eleatic-type scepticism. However, the Platonic attitude to the aesthetic functions is substantially different. The first point to make is that, despite the evidence to the contrary presented above, Plato's attitude to the aesthetic functions is more positive than that of the Eleatics. For him, sensory information undoubtedly has both an *extrinsic* role to play in attaining to the Truly Real and an *intrinsic* role to play in forming opinions or probable beliefs.

Let us first consider its contribution to the attainment of knowledge (*επιστημη*) of the Truly Real. It must be emphasized that the role of the aesthetic functions in Plato, as in the Leibnizian apriorism, is entirely extrinsic to the reasoning-function itself. This extrinsic use, as we saw in the introduction, can be the only legitimate function for the senses within any apriorist system. It is worth remembering that if the aesthetic functions are used to grasp the Truly Real intrinsically, i.e. in terms of knowledge-acquisition or knowledge-justification, then we are not dealing with an apriorist epistemological system.

How then do the aesthetic functions operate extrinsically in Plato? To speak metaphorically they act upon the pure reasoning function as triggers or catalysts for knowledge-acquisition. For example, in the *Republic* Socrates speaks of a specific group of sensations that "invite the intellect to reflection".²⁴ He is referring to a range of perceptions that initially provoke a degree of confusion in the soul viz. "those that issue in

a contradictory perception".²⁵ The soul is then motivated to solve the anomaly presented by its sensory experience and is hence stimulated to use its judgement in the "opposite way from sensation".²⁶ Ironically the positive contribution sensation makes here is to encourage the mind to reject the aesthetic functions. In the *Symposium*, there is a related function for sensation. Certain primary sensory experiences can initiate in the soul a graduated process of knowledge acquisition. Admittedly, such sensations only function to initiate a long and involved process. However, the process itself is an important one. In this case the visual experience of beautiful young men, can initiate a process in the soul culminating in a vision of the Form of Absolute beauty itself, "And so, when his prescribed devotion to boyish beauties has carried our candidate so far that the universal beauty dawns upon his inward sight, he is almost within reach of the final revelation".²⁷

There is no doubt that the Platonic theory of anamnesis, viz. that knowledge is recollection, lies at the back of this sort of theory of sensation. Sensation acts as a trigger that facilitates the remembrance of the pre-natal experience of the Forms. For instance, the experience of the beauty in this world triggers a distant memory of the soul's pre-natal confrontation with absolute beauty. This is certainly the role appointed to sensation in the *Phaedrus* where Plato observes, "Such a one, as soon as he beholds the beauty of this world, is reminded of true beauty and his wings begin to grow".²⁸ Again, in this case, the initial sensation is an extrinsic trigger to the development of a more profound understanding that requires the rejection of sensation. This rejection is necessary because the true wisdom sought is of something that lies beyond the aesthetic functions, for "sight is the keenest mode of perception vouchsafed us through the body; wisdom, indeed, we cannot see thereby".²⁹

According to Plato, in all these cases, sensation should not be trusted on its own, nor should it be used in partnership with the soul (logico-sensitive cognition) in any inquiry whose object is the Truly Real. A demonstration of why this is so will be given in the next section. Certainly, such uses would constitute an illegitimate intrinsic use for the aesthetic functions with respect to an apriorist epistemology. Yet, there is no doubt that Plato considered the aesthetic functions as sometimes acting positively as a springboard to a higher understanding. They could do this however only in so far as they were extrinsic to the enquiry.