

New Skins for Old Wine

Plato's Wisdom for Today's World

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*New Skins for Old Wine:
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For David

‘If in the future you should ever attempt to conceive or should succeed in conceiving other theories, they will be better ones as the result of this inquiry. And if you remain barren, your companions will find you gentler and less tiresome; you will be modest and not think that you know what you don’t know. This is all that my art can achieve, nothing more.

I do not know any of the things that other men know, the great and inspired men of today and yesterday. But this art of midwifery my mother and I had allotted to us by God; she to deliver women, I to deliver men that are young and generous of spirit, all that have any beauty.

And now I must go to the King’s Porch to meet the indictment that Meletus has brought against me; but let us meet here again in the morning, Theodorus.’¹

1 Plato “Theaetetus” (210c-d)

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Preface

‘And who are the true philosophers? Those who love the sight of truth.’ [Plato “Republic” (Book V 475e)]

This book is written for everyone who seeks for meaning in their life. More realistically it is addressed to those who are disillusioned with contemporary society and are looking for answers to questions that they hardly know how to pose. Most Western Europeans nowadays profess no particular religious belief system, and many are hostile to the very idea of “organized religion”. It is mainly for such as these that I write. My hope is to indicate how a solid philosophy of life can be built upon an intuition of truth, beauty and justice.

It is not enough to be rigorous and sceptical, though these attitudes are both necessary and praiseworthy. These virtues are worthless if they have nothing positive to address or critique, nor any aspirational objective. Modern philosophy is overwhelmingly negative, pessimistic and destructive. It offers no hope or prospect of fulfilment or success; no purpose or goal to pursue. For any progress to be made, there is a need to combine the analytic virtues with a sense of vocation, wonder, synthetic creativity, imagination, intuition and receptiveness to new ideas. This book is an attempt to do just that.

I discovered Plato after reading K.R. Popper in the 1980’s. I was surprised how many modern questions and problems were live issues in ancient Athens, and the subject of Plato’s incisive thought and humorous pen. Rapidly, I recognized in his words answers to various problems that had been worrying at my brain for years and I determined to write them down. The result is the volume in your hands.

I write as a Catholic and a physicist as well as a Platonist. Nevertheless, I intend to address myself to all people of good-will and not just Catholics or physicists. This book is not intended as any kind of apology for Catholicism. Indeed, much of what I have to say is implicitly critical of the Catholic establishment. However, I do set my thought in the context out of which it grew; namely Physics and traditionalist Catholicism. I hope that readers

unfamiliar or uncomfortable with Physics, the Bible or Vatican dicasteries will bear with this foible. It would be disingenuous for me to disguise my roots.

I have kept explicit references to Physics at a minimum and have avoided Mathematics entirely. For the sake of those readers who may be interested in pursuing the relationship of my thought to the Catholic Tradition, I have provided references to the Bible and Church sources as I judged might be helpful.

Some of my more speculative philosophy is informed by theological ideas. In particular, faith; and the doctrines of the Trinity, Incarnation and Resurrection. I do not think that this invalidates my conclusions for those who do not happen to start from where I have begun; but I leave my readers to judge this according to their own lights.

It is frustrating for a Platonist, committed to inter-personal dialogue where “heart speaks to heart”, to be constrained to commit words to print. Plato himself cautioned against doing so, because the written word at best compromises the living process of revelation and discovery.¹ Nevertheless, needs must; and just as Plato became a prolific author (against his better judgement) so I have committed these words to paper in the hope that the seeds sown will germinate and yield a good harvest.

Perhaps there is some prospect of this, as our minds have met, dear reader. I hope that you will engage with me and will find in my words a point of departure for your own journey into a knowledge of the truth. Following the example of Plato himself, I beg your indulgence where it may seem that I have erred; and direct your admiration towards “the form of the good” in those cases where my words bring you enlightenment.

1 Plato “Phaedrus” (274c-277a)

Acknowledgements

‘If we continue like this, one of two things will happen. Either we shall find what we are going out after; or we shall be less inclined to think that we know things which we don't know at all - and even that would be a reward we could not fairly be dissatisfied with.’

[Plato “Phaedo” (187c)]

I thank each of the following for permission to quote their words.

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Bible quotations are from the RSV translation, Catholic Edition (1946, 1952, 1957, 1966), the copyright of which belongs to the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America.

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Introduction

‘And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; if he does, the new wine will burst the skins and it will be spilled, and the skins will be destroyed. But new wine must be put into fresh wineskins. And no one after drinking old wine desires new; for he says, “The old is good.”’

[Lk 5:37-39 RSV]

This is an “Old Age” book. Its theme is that we have lost sight of reality and attempted to substitute “what we think we want to be true” for “what is in fact true.” In other words, we have rejected Objective Realism in favour of Subjective Relativism. In doing so, we have turned our life both as individuals and as a society on its head. One result has been a division of society into conservative or reactionary forces and those of a liberal or progressivist bent. This mirrors the pathological conflict between the Athenian Oligarchs and Democrats which characterized the era of Socrates and Plato.

A major cause of our present predicament can be traced to the rejection of Platonism as the basis of Western European culture, which took place in late medieval times. We then attempted to intrude a new philosophy into existing institutions and patterns of life. In doing so, we compromised their integrity and are now watching our culture disintegrate before our eyes. We attempted to put “new wine into old wineskins” and have found that they have burst open.

The rational response to our present predicament is to declare our experiment with Subjective Relativism a failure and to reverse the fateful decision to abandon Objective Realism. It is now well past the time that we should begin to rescue what we can of the old philosophy and re-express it in whatever new external structures, institutions and patterns of life that are now appropriate.

In this book I try to put into practice the programme that I have just outlined; proposing partial and provisional answers to a number of questions that – it seems to me – are central to the confusion and distress of contemporary philosophy and society. In the

first few chapters I concentrate on the more theoretical aspects of the problem, before offering some positive perspectives on issues facing society.

In the theoretical chapters I first answer the question: “What is life and what is its purpose?” I then consider what it is to be human, and establish an anthropology that is at core personal, spiritual and individualistic. Adherence to such a view of mankind is necessary if any idea of human dignity is to be sustained. I then discuss what it is to come to know or to believe something, and how it is that we do so. It is crucial to have a coherent account of this process, in a time when many reject the idea that anyone can really know anything about anything. I then elucidate how faith is basic to all knowledge, whether philosophical or scientific. Finally, I discuss friendship and what it means to say that something is “good” or “evil”.

In the more practical chapters that follow I first consider why it is rational and right for an individual to be gentle and just; and how it is in their own personal interest to be kind to others. Next, I discuss the dangers inherent in the popular view of multiculturalism and propose an alternate approach. Then I criticize contemporary educational theory and practice – which is failing our young people and tending to the decay of society – before offering some thoughts on sexual and medical ethics, two of today’s most divisive issues. Finally, I discuss Democracy in theory and practice and suggest options and alternatives.

Chapter 1 Platonism

‘Tell me, Socrates; are we to take you as being in earnest now, or joking? For if you are in earnest, and these things you’re saying are really true, won’t this human life of ours be turned upside down, and won’t everything we do evidently be the opposite of what we should do?’

[Plato “Gorgias” (481c)]

The Greek philosopher Plato (428-348 BC) was one of the most creative and influential thinkers in Western philosophy. He was born to an aristocratic family in Athens and became the principle disciple of Socrates. Plato’s written accounts of his beloved teacher’s thoughts are the only record we have of them. It is far from clear that any of them are accurate transcriptions of actual events and very clear that some are not. While some of what Plato has Socrates say is plausibly authentic, much is best understood to be Plato’s own thoughts – lovingly attributed to his mentor: who may or may not have agreed with them!

After witnessing the death of Socrates at the hands of the Athenian democrats in 399 BC, Plato left Athens and travelled to Italy, Sicily, and Egypt. In 387 BC Plato founded the Academy in Athens, the first European university. Plato’s surviving writings are voluminous. His prose style is accessible and attractive. He concerns himself mainly with matters of Ethics, Law, Politics, Ontology and Epistemology. Plato taught that principle was prior to fact: so that “might” is not “right”, “law” is not “justice”, “possession” is not “ownership” and “obedience” is not “goodness.”

Distinctive Features of Platonic Philosophy

The main characteristic of Platonism is not any particular positive doctrine, but rather an attitude of devout scepticism. Plato takes great care to distinguish between empathic, intuitive knowledge or “episteme”, based on a fundamental understanding of reality; and empirical (or as we might now say scientific) opinion based on experience or “doxa”. He insists that all presumptions should be

subjected to criticism, and that all easy and ready answers should be held suspect.

‘Give but little thought to Socrates, but much more to the truth. If you think that what I say is true, agree with me; if not, oppose it with every argument and take care that in my eagerness I do not deceive myself and you.’

[Plato “Phaedo” (91c)]

Doxa is provisional. Even when it happens to be accurate (and so is “orthodoxy”) one cannot know for certain that it is so. Hence belief (especially what is fervently thought to be right belief) is untrustworthy, dangerous and must be constantly and remorselessly challenged.¹ This is the task of philosophy. The hope is that a dialectic process will awaken the soul to a knowledge of what is real. The basis on which this process must be built is a fundamental humility of soul and admission of personal ignorance.

‘Those who are already wise no longer desire wisdom... nor do those desire it who are so ignorant that they are entirely bad... There remain only those who have this bad thing, ignorance, but have not yet been made entirely stupid by it. They are conscious of not knowing what they don’t know.’ [Plato “Lysis” (218b)]

Plato’s emphasis on Arithmetic and Geometry is significant. It is likely that this focus on Mathematics comes from Plato’s study of the writings of Pythagoras. Plato came to believe that Mathematics – and especially Geometry – was somehow basic to the very nature of reality. In this regard, he can be regarded as one of the first great theoretical physicists.

Plato’s austerity is lightened and transfigured by an abiding conviction that the pursuit of truth and wisdom is not forlorn, but fruitful – and basic to the life of anyone who would be fully human. For centuries, scholars have tried to interpret and explain Plato’s “philosophical system”. Scholastic philosophers came to practice “philosophy” as a dissection of concepts. Such an ap-

1 Plato “Gorgias” (470c)

proach to Plato can never hope to connect with his spirit, whose outlook is characteristic more of a mystic than of a scholar.

Exiled from the true home of the spirit... the soul... yearns for a higher and nobler form of life. It essays to rise but its eye is darkened by sense, its wings are besmeared by passion and lust; it is 'borne downward until it falls upon and attaches itself to that which is material and sensual,' and it flounders and grovels still amid the objects of sense...

How may the soul be delivered from the illusions of sense... and the disturbances of passion, which becloud its vision of the real, the good, and the true?

Plato believed and hoped that this could be accomplished by philosophy. This he regarded as a grand intellectual discipline for the purification of the soul. By this it was to be disenthralled from the bondage of sense, and raised into the empyrean of pure thought, 'where truth and reality shine forth.'

All souls have the faculty of knowing, but it is only by reflection and self knowledge, and intellectual discipline, that the soul can be raised to the vision of eternal truth, goodness, and beauty – that is, to the vision of God. [B.F. Cocker "Christianity and Greek Philosophy" (1870)]

Indeed, Plato's writings can sensibly be regarded as a verbal mystical initiation, and Plato has Socrates claim to be one of the few true devotees of Bacchus. ["Phaedo" (69d)]

Like the adherents of the various mystical sects, Orphic and Eleusinian and Dionysian, Plato longed to be free from the trammels of the senses and almost as in the act of dying to find union with the eternal goodness in the universe. Thus the ideas may become the object of immediate mystical intuition; and Plato's thought is often permeated with the very language of the mysteries, imaginative or even ecstatic.

[W.C. Greene "The Dialogues of Plato" (1927)]

Plato's writing style is that of a poet. The structure which he chose for most of his writings – the dialogue – itself indicates that he was not interested in creating a system of orthodoxy.

One can only be thankful that for once in the history of the world Lady Philosophy learned to speak with utter charm the language of true poetry, and that Plato preferred the dramatic essay, with its personal touch, to dry-as-dust system building.

[W.C. Greene "The Dialogues of Plato" (1927)]

Plato never speaks for himself, always putting the ideas he is presenting in the mouths of others. Even when words are put into Socrates' mouth, it is not at all clear that they are to be taken as authoritative. After all, Plato's Socrates regularly disclaims any personal expertise or knowledge. On occasions, he contradicts himself. Hence, it is generally difficult to identify Plato's personal belief in what he writes. In an important sense, this simply does not matter. Plato's basic purpose is not to propound his own views, but to assist his students to achieve a deeper understanding of reality. He wrote whatever he thought might assist in achieving this enlightenment.

While on occasion Plato does propose definite solutions to particular problems and give clear answers to specific questions; Platonism is more an attitude, an approach and a habit of thought than a dogmatic system. Indeed, Plato seems to have written many of his dialogues in a vein of light-hearted, tentative enquiry.² Nevertheless, over many centuries, followers of Plato amplified or elaborated his teachings. Some remained faithful to the central ethos of his philosophy; others mistook commitment to Plato's every word – no matter how ironic – for respect for his genius; and yet others erected vast esoteric schemes on some of his more figurative speculations.

2 Plato "Theaetetus" (210c)

The Forms

The core of Plato's philosophy is the theory of "the forms". This gives an account first, of how knowledge is possible and how one can come to understand something; and second, what it means for something to exist and how things come to be as they are. On the first account, it is a theory of Epistemology; on the second, a theory of Ontology. In both, it is a response to the problem of change. Briefly put, this is as follows: "How can anything ever change? After all, if it were to change, it would no longer be the thing that it was. How can the first thing be *identified* with the second when – because it has changed – it is in fact *different* from it?"³

Parmenides responded to this dilemma by denying the reality of change altogether; whereas Heraclitus took the opposite view, insisting that permanence is only apparent.⁴ Plato adopted an intermediate position. He postulated a world of abstract ideas, which exists apart from the world of our experience. He held that both abstract ideas like "love" and "truth" and concrete things like "horse" or "table" were manifestations of "ideals" or "archetypes" or "patterns". He called these universals "forms".

And beauty itself, and good itself... we set down according to a single form of each, believing that there is but one, and calling it 'the being' of each... and we say that the many beautiful things and the rest are visible, but not intelligible; while the forms are intelligible, but not visible. [Plato "Republic" (Book VI 507b)]

Using the famous Parable of the Cave,⁵ Plato taught that the forms exist apart from the physical world, in which they are nevertheless manifested. This position is called "Realism". The significance of the name being that the forms are real. According to Realism, Parmenides was right to say that – ultimately – reality does not change; for the real world of the forms is eternal and stat-

3 Plato "Phaedo" (96e-97b)

4 Plato "Theaetetus" (179d-181a)

5 Plato "Republic" (Book VII)

ic. Equally, Heraclitus was right to say that there is real change in the world of our immediate experience; for the degree to which any physical thing variously participates in the unchanging forms does itself change.

Mathematics

The theory of forms can best be approached from geometry. A circle, is a plane figure made up of points which are all the same distance from a given point: the centre. While many things exist that are approximately circular, no pure and perfect ideal circle can ever physically exist. Nevertheless, although the ideal circle has never existed in the physical world, mathematicians know very well what a circle is. Hence the form “circularity” is real, intelligible and has being, even though it neither exists itself – nor is it precisely represented – anywhere in the physical world. It inhabits the world of forms or ideals, which can only be known of and explored by abstract thought.

The forms are more robust than physical objects, because they are perfect and static. Moreover, they are the models, patterns or templates according to which physical objects are formed. It is only because a physical thing has some correspondence to one or more forms that it has any reality, intelligibility or stability and can be recognised for what it is. Without such a correspondence, all matter is raw, formless – and therefore chaotic.

The objective reality of the forms is commonly disputed,⁶ However, Mathematics is not Engineering. Mathematical entities do not come into being when some mathematician – whether human or extraterrestrial – discovers them. The planets themselves “discover the ellipse” as they move in the gravitational field of the sun. The conic sections – of which the circle and ellipse are examples – were not “thought up” by mankind. In common with

6 “A perfect circle is a nonsense. It does not exist in the real world and it is only an abstraction in the imagination of men. Take away mankind from the universe and there will be no imaginations to think of circles. They simply do not exist. There is no guarantee that aliens would think up the concept of a perfect circle, any more than that they would think up the game of chess.”

[D. Abbott “Private Communication” (2006)]

many other mathematical objects, they existed prior to our knowledge of them. It is only because they pre-exist that we can discover them. Research discloses them, as the beach-comber finds pretty shells among the shingle. Similarly, “gliders” and “glider-guns” (and other, more complex forms) subsist implicitly in the deceptively simple rule-set that constitutes the mathematical “Game of Life”.⁷ They only wait there to be recognised and given concrete expression.

The forms relate to all things, not just geometrical figures. The word justice, for example, can be applied to very many distinct acts or situations because they all have something in common. This is their participation in the form of justice. Similarly, a particular act is courageous or cowardly to the extent that it participates in the corresponding form. An object is beautiful to the extent that it participates in the form of beauty. Every physical thing and event is what it is by virtue of its participation in one or many form. The ability to discourse coherently about a form (and ideally account for it in terms of its elements) is evidence that one has understood what it is.

Hierarchy

The forms are hierarchical. Simple forms, such as that of the “Triangle”, have a robust existence. They are simple to understand and do not depend on many other even simpler forms, according to some subtle *account*. Of course, the “Triangle” is not one of the very simplest forms, as it depends upon the even simpler and more elemental forms of the “Straight Line”, the “Three” and the “Closed Figure”. The forms of mathematical entities (such as the “Triangle” or “Equation” or “Square Root”) do not rely for their existence on being materially exemplified. They are adequately defined – and so substantiated – within abstract axiomatic systems. Such is their proper context, just as the evolutionary play of life is the substantiating context for the forms of living creatures.

Intermediate forms – such as “Chess” – have an intermediate kind of reality. They are ordered combinations of simple forms which only exist relative to a rational agent that is able to make

7 M. Gardner “Scientific American” (1971)

use and/or conceive of these combinations.⁸ The most complex forms of all are those of living beings. These are grand coherent associations of intermediate forms – such as “Gene” and “Chloroplast” and “Protein” – that persist and hold together by virtue of their own success in sustaining themselves in a given environment. They exist relative to that environment. I discuss life at greater length in Chapter Three.

‘Let the complex be a single form resulting from the combination of the several elements when they fit together; and let this hold both of language and of things in general... If the complex is both many elements and a whole, with them as its parts, then both complexes and elements are equally capable of being known and expressed.’

[Plato “Theaetetus” (204a-205d)]

Hence, different forms manifest in physical reality in different ways and to different extents; just as any physical object participates imperfectly and variously in all those forms that characterize what it is. The forms give significance, intelligibility, order, particularity – that is, *actuality* – to inchoate matter-energy; which is of itself nothing but *pure possibility*. The most basic form (the ground of all being) is “the good”, “goodness” or “being-in-itself”. This gives reality, significance, coherence and intelligibility to all the other ideals. It is the ultimate principle of explanation or *rationale*; the basic story or *account* of reality, the “Logos”.

Plurality

According to the theory of forms, individuation of similar entities is explained on the basis that each distinct physical thing shares in a particular combination of various forms. This is called its “plurality”. No two distinguishable things share in the same forms in the same manner or degree – according to the same *account*. It is

8 If the only form of intelligent life in the Cosmos was the Dalek, there would be no chairs or ladders, and the “Chair” and “Ladder” would be fleeting possibilities among a myriad of others in the inscrutable mind of God. While they would still exist, they would be of no practical application, and so have little significance to an engineer.

this very fact that makes them different things. For example, a certain thing is male, four-limbed, warm-blooded, stub-nosed, conscious, wise and so on. It is the man called Socrates. So it is for every thing. It is the very fact that every example of each elementary particle of Physics – such as the neutrino and photon – participates in *precisely* the same form that makes them “identical” and gives rise to the counter-intuitive “statistics” associated with fermions and bosons.

Change

Change occurs by a continuous variation of the degree of participation in the range of forms from which a particular thing is constituted, and which together account for what it is. An acorn has the potential to develop into an oak tree; a stick of wood has the potential to degrade to charcoal or ash; liquid water can become steam or ice. As change occurs in an object, the degree to which it participates in its constitutive forms – the account of its plurality – varies.⁹ One state of matter becomes another by a steady process of continuous transformation.

Teleology

Plato’s limited interest in physical nature is dominated by a conviction that the Cosmos is organized and intelligible.¹⁰ He is sure that all things and all processes tends towards the optimum – morally, intellectually, and aesthetically.

‘If then one wished to know the cause of each thing – why it comes to be, or perishes or exists – one had to find out what was the best way for it to be, or to be acted upon, or to act.’ [Plato “Phaedo” (97c-d)]

This theory is a prefiguration of Darwinism, in which the optimum is understood as “the most able to survive, flourish and reproduce”. It also anticipates the “The Principle of Least Action” in

9 This is a foreshadowing of genetic, atomic and quantum theory. In mathematical terms, its state vector moves about in the Hilbert space spanned by the set of forms in which it participates.

10 Plato “Gorgias” (508a)

Physics, where the optimum is understood as the outcome that is “least trouble” for a Classical system, or “most representative of all possibilities” for one described by Quantum Mechanics. On the scientific view, these processes do not seem to be motivated aesthetically; nor are they obviously conscious. However, they are certainly ordered towards the optimum – evaluated in terms of persistence, durability, coherence and adaptability – and, in Plato’s view, this is the same as beauty.

‘It is foolish to take seriously any standard of what is fine and beautiful other than what is the good.’
[Plato “Republic” (Book V 452e)]

Politics

Plato taught that the State should aim to cultivate virtue in its members. It should do so by providing a system of education and the social organization necessary to facilitate it. In his book “Republic” Plato sketches an ideal state. This blue print reflects both Plato’s disdain of the democracy then prevalent in Athens, and his own aristocratic parentage. It advocates government by the wise.

Plato’s ideal state consists of three classes: rulers, warriors, and producers.¹¹ The characteristic virtue of the producers is thrift or temperance, that of the soldiers bravery or courage, and that of the rulers (whom he names “guardians”) wisdom. Since philosophy is the love of wisdom, it should be the dominant force in the state. Justice, the greatest virtue, relates to society as a whole rather than any particular class. The just society is one in which everyone performs their own function well without impeding the proper activities of any-one else.¹²

There is little role for private property in this state. What is more, the family unit is to be dismantled; and monogamy and

11 “This is not original to Plato, though. The proto-Indoeuropean society, from which most European societies are derived was based upon a tripartite division of Priests, Warriors (from which derive the landed aristocracy), and Farmers.”

[A. deFriest “Private Communication” (2006)]

12 Plato “Republic” (Book IV 433a)

marriage done away with. Children are to be taken from their mothers as soon as they are born, educated by wise teachers and directed by the guardians to that place in society judged most appropriate to their aptitudes. The popular unacceptability of this proposal must have been obvious to Plato himself, and in his last work “Laws” he sketches a modified and more practical scheme of government.

Theism

Plato was a convinced theist. He was equivocal as to monotheism, sometimes referring to “The Creator” or “God” in the singular,¹³ but on other occasions recognising the standard Greek pantheon. He believed that final communion with God was the ultimate motivator in ethics, teaching that it was possible for human beings to become intimate with God, through the appreciation of beauty.

‘But what... if man had eyes to see true beauty – divine beauty, I mean, pure and clear and unalloyed, not clogged with the pollutions of mortality and all the colours and vanities of human life – thither looking, and holding converse with true beauty simple and divine? Do you think it would be a poor life for a human being to look there and to behold it by that which he ought, and be with it? Remember how... in that communion only, beholding beauty with the eye of the soul, he will be enabled to bring forth, not images of beauty, but realities (for he has hold not of an image but of a reality), and bringing forth and nourishing true virtue to become the friend of God and be immortal, if mortal man may.’

[Plato “Symposium” (211e-212a)]

Plato believed that religion was the necessary foundation of any stable society,¹⁴ and argued in favour of God’s being from the

13 Plato “Timaeus” (69c); “Theaetetus” (150c, 176b-e); “Republic” (Book IV 716d); “Laws” (Book VII 803c)

14 “It’s vital that somehow or other we should make out a plausible case for supposing that gods do exist, that they are good, and that they respect justice more than men do.” [Plato “Laws” (Book X 887b)]

idea of causality.¹⁵ That is, from our expectation (based on unvarying experience of physical reality) that every phenomenon we encounter is contingent – that it always makes sense to ask of a thing: “Why is it what it is?” or “How does it come to be what it is?” or “What makes this what it is?”¹⁶

The physicist presumes that everything he experiences or observes requires explanation; and that an account can always be given of why it is what it is, and why it is doing what it is doing. It is never good enough to say that “It is what it is just because it is so.” Physics does not deal with “Just So Stories”, but looks for an explanation of any particular event in terms of *general* laws and other events – its efficient causes. Now the laws of Physics are themselves facts, and are not self evident. Furthermore, the efficient causes themselves require explanation. It is apparent that no extension of this kind of rational account can ever remove the basic metaphysical deficit of being. Once this is clearly understood, it would seem that the whole Cosmos must also be contingent, and itself require explanation.

‘[It] is a work of craft, modelled after that which is changeless and is grasped by a rational account, that is by wisdom.’ [Plato “Timaeus” (29a)]

The cause of the Cosmos, which from now-on I shall denote by “God”, can neither be a part of nature nor even the Cosmos as a collective whole, for in either case it would have to be contingent. God must be *of necessity*. If it is to be any help in our dilemma, God must be an *uncaused* cause. God brings all Cosmic events into being via a metaphysical dependence. This is not at all the same as the dependence of one state of affairs on another one that physically causes it.

15 “Everything that comes to be must – of necessity – come to be by the agency of some cause; for it is impossible for anything to come to be without a cause.” [Plato “Timaeus” (28a)]

16 “It is difficult – or rather impossible – for something to be moved without something to set it in motion, or something to set a thing in motion without something to be moved by it.”
[Plato “Timaeus” (57e)]

‘When we find one thing producing a change in another... will there ever be in such a sequence, an original cause of change? How could anything whose motion is transmitted to it from something else be the first thing to effect an alteration?... The entire sequence of their movements must surely spring from some initial principle; which can hardly be anything except the change effected by self-generated motion.’ [Plato “Laws” (Book X 895a)]

Our expectation that all things are contingent cannot extend to include God. This is because God is outside the Universe. Although God may be the foundation of all that physically is, *God does not physically exist*. Whereas God underwrites the laws of Physics that all things obey, God is not governed by them. *God is no thing*, and these laws simply do not apply to God. Indeed, we can have no legitimate expectations of God – except that God is. Unlike all physical things, one can legitimately presume that “God is what God is, simply because God is unavoidably so,” and not because of any circumstances. It is crucial to realize that if God were not necessary being, then there would be no point in conceiving of God.

Polytheism is the idea that a number of non-contingent things exist within the Cosmos. These would be sources of being (the laws of Physics; space and time; energy and momentum – all in all behaving rather like “inverse black-holes”) and the uncaused causes of everything else. In this way, rather than postulating one transcendent God, one postulates an indeterminate number of local deities. This is much less satisfactory than the hypothesis of monotheism. In particular, one would have to explain why these gods shouldn’t themselves be accounted as things, and so be in need of explanation. Moreover, why is it that reality seems to be uniform? If Apollo, Ares, Aphrodite and Dionysus are diverse and independent sources of being, why is it that all being is of a oneness?¹⁷ It is important to appreciate that monotheism is not just the special case of “polytheism with one god”, but an altogether more radical account of reality.

17 Plato “Gorgias” (508a)