

REASONING WITHIN THE GOOD: An Interview with David C. Schindler

Paul Tyson

PAUL TYSON [PT]: It seems to me that the Plato you give us is fully committed to the reality of transcendence as encountered within the context of immanent lived reality. Thus, your Plato could be cast as a somewhat Hamannean/Kierkegaardian counter-enlightenment figure affirming the two way truth of transcendence and immanence in lived reality, all of which denies the Kantian phenomenological ceiling, denies Humean pure immanentism, and denies high abstract Hegelian idealism. If this is a fair reading, can you unpack the Kantian allusion of your title for us? That is, if Kant critiques pure reason and Plato critiques impure reason, what type of relationship between the task of Kant and the task of Plato, in our post-Kantian context, is your title alluding to?

DAVID C SCHINDLER [DCS]: This is indeed a fair reading of one of the book's central concerns. A reviewer, I believe, wrote that he was disappointed not to find an engagement with Kant, which the title seems to promise. In fact, the entire book could arguably be read as an engagement with Kant, though it was intended to be in the first place an interpretation of Plato rather than a comparative study. The title was meant to reverberate in several different directions: first, it is intended to suggest that the *Republic* is "Plato's version," if you will, of the attempt to work out the foundation and scope of reason, just like Kant's first Critique, though of course in a radically different manner. Second, in

contrast to Kant's aim to isolate the essence of reason, as it were, the phrase "impure reason" indicates that human reason is always "more than itself" in its very essence; it is embodied and exercised within a tradition, and so has a positive dependence on images, mythology, authority, and the like. In other words, its autonomy is essentially coincident with a basic heteronomy, which becomes especially evident once we see the convergence between reason and eros. The key difference between Kant and Plato, it seems to me, turns on the good that Plato sees as the basis of reason. The foundation of reason for Plato, in this case, is not purely formal as it is for Kant, but is a "pure form" that necessarily *includes* all content. Finally, and perhaps most directly, the title proposes that Plato's founding of truth and reason on the idea of the good entails a "critique of impure reason" in the most colloquial meaning of the phrase, namely, it is a criticism of reason that is not ordered to the good. It ultimately seeks to show that, without being so ordered, reason finally loses its rationality. Reason cannot be reason proper outside of a love of the good.

PT: The first chapter of your book situates your exploration of Plato's understanding of The Good within the context of contemporary misogyny in the academy. Can you briefly unpack why it is that reason has so little authority in the contemporary academy and modern society, and how Plato addresses that problem and makes it possible for us to recover Logos today?

DCS: The main problem, it seems to me, is that we have inherited an impoverished notion of reason. We find this impoverished notion not only among those who reduce reason to politics or psychology or biology—that is fairly obvious—but also among those who defend the importance of rationality. I recall a classmate of mine in graduate school who believed that all the world's problems stemmed from the fact that students are no longer required to study logic. But if logic represents the essence of reason, then basic commitments and ultimate beliefs become non-rational, i.e., arbitrary. Rationalists are always also sentimentalists—Bertrand Russell is a great example. One cannot overcome misogyny, therefore, simply by insisting on the importance of reason; it is first

necessary to rethink its nature. This makes the problem both more subtle than one might think, and also more urgent.

I don't wish to claim, of course, that this book addresses the problem adequately, or even that a recovery of Plato is a sufficient response. But it does seem to me the case that at least part of the cause of the impoverishment of reason is the dissociation of the transcendentals from one another, specifically in this context the separation of truth from the good. The intrinsic connection between the two, and their reciprocal dependence on one another, is nowhere more evident than in Plato. At some point in the history of Western thought the relationship was effectively sundered; I hope someday to understand better how and why this happened. For now, it seemed to me to be helpful to begin by going back to the origin, and thinking through the implications as far as possible of the good as cause of knowledge and truth. Interpreted in relation to the good as its ground, reason becomes at once more ample *and* inherently attractive or compelling. An indispensable part of the response to misology is thus reconnecting truth and goodness.

PT: I confess I was seduced into reading your remarkable book by its enigmatic dedication: "For Nick Healy and Andy Matt, who were there when the "third Plato" first came to light." For I was looking for a "third Plato" myself. I know your dedication is a personal comment, but I wonder, can you let us in on who the three Plato's are and why the third Plato is so much more satisfying than the first two?

DCS: This is another line that has several meanings. Like you, I have always been intrigued whenever I have heard talk of a "third way" in Plato interpretation, because Plato seems beset perhaps more than other philosophers by unsatisfying extremes, which go all the way back to the beginning. There is, for example, a "skeptical" approach, and a "dogmatic" approach; because there is truth on each side here in spite of their opposition, one is prompted to look more profoundly to discover a conception that would do justice to both sides. And so forth.

But the dedication also has a specific meaning. In a study he wrote on Origen, Hans Urs von Balthasar observes that there are in fact “three Origenes”: the first is the “heretical” Origen, the cartoonish “Platonist” who speculated irresponsibly on theological matters because of dubious philosophical influences, and who ended up a dualist and despiser of the flesh. This version of Origen is the “vulgar” one that manages to survive despite its superficiality. The second Origen is the metaphysical thinker. If one penetrates beyond the vulgar interpretation, one encounters Origen’s incomparable speculative power, and sees the profound unity of thought, the uncompromising desire for God and so the great mystical ascent. This is the essential Origen. However, there is also a third: beyond even the ascent, one can catch sight of a quieter theme in his thought, which is less obviously on the surface only because it is so central. This is the theme of the descent, the kenosis, the gift of self. Balthasar describes it as the wave that, having crashed against the shore, now silently sinks into the sand. This is the true Christian heart of Origen. It remains mostly unspoken, but it is what ties everything together. My friends and I, who had read this text together, realized that something similar could be said about every major thinker in history, and indeed in some sense about every person simply: there is the popular reputation a thinker has, then the “true” thought of the person, and, finally, even behind this there is the center, the secret heart that has to be perceived as it were “inside” what is thought. Heidegger has made a similar observation about the importance of the “unsaid” in what is said.

With respect to Plato, the first is the “dualist,” the second is the Plato that comes to view when one realizes that the forms are not “things” floating somehow (!) in space, but are the essential truth of the things in the world. This is philosophy as erotic ascent. The third Plato, however, is the philosopher of the return to the cave, the reversal, the philosopher that Socrates embodies in his “going down.” It seems to me that this dramatic moment expresses the inner meaning of the good, which cannot be adequately articulated in logical argument alone, but which “ties everything together” in the *Republic*. The second chapter of my book is meant to present the “second Plato,” if you will, while the “third Plato” makes his appearance in the third chapter, which is the central one. The rest of the book turns on this.

PT: The hermeneutic key that you use to open *The Republic* to us is the manner in which Plato places Socrates as the performative embodiment of The Good in the dramatic structure of the dialogues. I think you justify that interpretive stance very credibly and it does seem to beautifully unlock many of the persistent interpretive difficulties of *The Republic*. I wonder, can you say something about the importance of non-propositional knowledge to Plato and how he dramatically and performatively conveys transcendence within immanence via a kind of incarnational treatment of Socrates? Can you also comment on how the absence of non-propositional knowledge from the epistemological foundations of Modernity has made it difficult for us to read Plato well and has, perhaps, produced modern Platonisms that seriously miss the subtlety and point of Plato's dialogues?

DCS: To say that reason is grounded in the good means that reason has its proper place within a context that exceeds it. The implications of this are endless. One of them is that we cannot limit reason to its formal aspect. I tried to avoid speaking simply of "non-propositional" knowledge in the book, because it is crucial not to impoverish reason in the other direction, by dialectically opposing something like "pre-conceptual" intuition to propositional knowledge. The key is, rather, to affirm "never-merely-propositional-but-always-also-propositional knowledge," though of course that is not a very elegant phrase. Wittgenstein said that some things can be said; other things can only be shown. My argument with respect to Plato is that what is most fundamental must simultaneously be said *and* shown. It is not of course possible to offer a rational argument on behalf of the necessity of reason. On the other hand, one cannot show the necessity by refusing to argue or dismissing the importance of such argument. Instead, one must both make arguments *and* bear witness to the ground of truth in the order of one's life. In other words, as Maurice Blondel saw, action is always, willy-nilly, a kind of claim regarding ultimacy: every choice, every deed is as it were an existential claim regarding the nature of the good. When speaking about the truth, Kierkegaard once said, one must gesticulate with one's entire existence. One's life as a whole must become an argument on behalf of reason. If the good is the ground of truth and reason, the order of the good – i.e., the order of action – is intrinsic to the truth of truth and

the rationality of reason. I said that reason has its proper place in a context that exceeds it; in this case, that context is the life ordered to the good.

You are quite right to say that the absence of a place for “non- propositional” knowledge in modern epistemologies has distorted interpretations of Plato. That is an insightful observation. It seems to me that the separation of the true from the good that I mentioned earlier lies behind this absence. Without an appreciation of the transcendent context that is proper to reason as reason, one ends up fragmenting subject and object, universal and particular, and so forth. Thus, to take the earlier example, “skeptical” readings of Plato tend to isolate the existential from the essential, if I may use this language, while “dogmatic” readings isolate the essential from the existential. But they are simply flip sides of the same coin, as far as I can see.

PT: Francis A Grabowski III talks of two broad interpretive schools of Plato scholarship; the analytic and the literary or continental.¹ Put simply, Grabowski’s interpretive schema looks like this: the analytical approach extracts the logical and properly philosophical kernel from the dramatic husk of Plato’s writings, whereas the literary approach finds formal logic and rigorous analytical philosophy to have no relevance to Plato’s writings. Grabowski notes that whilst there used to be sharp divisions between these interpretive schools in the 1950s and 60s, a mingling of approaches is now quite unremarkable. Even so, he then goes on to write a book about Plato’s metaphysics that is exclusively analytic. So, three questions: can you see a future for exclusively analytic Plato scholarship; how do you understand the relationship of the “literary” school to philosophical rigor; and how do you read the current state of Plato scholarship and where it is going?

DCS: The problem is that these sorts of things tend to be taken simply as a question of method, or, even worse, a question of style. But we have to see that these questions are secondary to the more substantial question regarding the nature of truth as Plato conceives it. (This is not to say that one can address the

¹ Francis A. Grabowski, *Plato, Metaphysics, and the Forms* (London: Continuum, 2008), 11-12.

substantial question without also addressing the methodological one; rather, these are both addressed together, though the substantial question has primacy.) One can appreciate the literary adornments of the dialogues and perhaps even discuss these at length, and still be bound to an impoverished conception of reason, or one can work through arguments with diligence but still ultimately understand these as merely another “mythos” and so interpret them as a form of rhetorical manipulation. It seems to me that an integration is possible only if we see the significance of the good as cause of truth: this produces the paradox of a reason that is absolute precisely because it is subordinate to what exceeds it as its proper ground. On this basis, both analysis of argument and interpretation of the dramatic elements have their proper place.

We sometimes identify the precise analysis of arguments with philosophical rigor—this is the pride of Anglo-American philosophy—but in fact rigor means adequacy to the object, i.e., not the a priori imposition of a method but the discovery of the suitable approach that comes with an understanding of the object. In this sense, an exclusively analytic approach to Plato lacks philosophical rigor. These approaches, one finds, constantly “beg the question” in their judgments—their method makes this inevitable. To answer your specific questions, I think we will always have exclusively analytic approaches to Plato because of the assumptions guiding the contemporary academy, but I don’t think this approach, when made exclusive, has ever had a future. On the other hand, there is quite a bit of interesting work being done on Plato in our age, perhaps in part because of increasing dissatisfaction with the assumptions governing the academy. Two contemporary scholars that I have found especially helpful in understanding Plato—apart from my teacher in neoplatonism, Eric Perl—are Francisco Gonzalez and Rafael Ferber.

A QUESTION FROM ERIC LEE: In both your book on Plato and your *Balthasar and the Dramatic Structure of Truth*,² a part of your philosophical argument hinges upon the articulation of the relationship between the absolute and the particular within the whole. And you couch the notion of the absolute within the notion of

² D. C. Schindler, *Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Dramatic Structure of Truth: A Philosophical Investigation* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004).

truth being defenseless when you say, 'It is the very nature of what is ultimate to be ultimately defenseless'.³ In light of this, what role do argument, dialogue, and apology (i.e. 'defense') play in philosophical and theological engagement where an *apologia* is upheld as a good thing in both philosophical (Platonic) and theological traditions? (i.e. *apologian* in 1 Peter 3:15).

DCS: The point here is not that *apologia* is not essential. Quite the contrary: I am trying to suggest it is even more important than typically thought, because the argument one is required to make is not simply with words but with actions, to put it over simply. The book makes much of Socrates' protest at 368a-c both that he is incapable of defending justice and that he is obliged to do everything possible—and indeed more than possible—to try. The paradox is that concrete circumstances might require one to fall silent *precisely* in one's defense of truth. To make everything turn on "winning the argument" is both to absolutize propositional reason and at the same time to absolutize persuasion. This is the attitude that characterizes the sophists, according to Plato. By contrast, to forego winning the argument when circumstances require can be a gesture whereby one affirms the objectivity, the absoluteness of truth, beyond persuasion. One thereby says, as it were, "more" than it is possible to say. Again, the proper place of reason is inside the order of the good, which exceeds it. Plato's Socrates was extraordinary in this respect: he was both tireless in his willingness to argue, and at the same time demonstrated a noble freedom in turning away from arguments with those who were simply playing games, ultimately at the cost of losing his life. So, in a word, the point I tried to make is not to relativize *apologia* but to understand it in its most comprehensive sense, which is what I take to be the original Christian understanding and—though perhaps less obviously—the perspective offered in the *Republic*. The book tries to capture the paradox of the whole by talking, not just about the ultimate "defenselessness" of truth, but about an "indefensible defense of the defenseless," i.e., a vulnerable witness to what is greater than oneself as the context within which one constructs arguments.

³ D. C. Schindler, *Plato's Critique of Impure Reason: On Goodness and Truth in the Republic* (Washington, D. C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2008), 237.

PT: This is a bit of a machine gun set of questions. How does being a Christian shape the way you approach philosophy? Do you have an integrative understanding of theology and philosophy, and if so, how do you (currently) understand the relationship between faith and reason? Does Plato have an integrative understanding of theology and philosophy? Do you think Christian Platonism is due for another revival, and if so, what could it look like (what is your best hope) this time around?

DCS: These are all very big questions! To give only the beginnings of answers: carrying on the theme that reason has its proper place within a context that exceeds it, I would say that a Christian's intellectual vocation has its place within the more fundamental vocation to follow Christ. For Catholics, the following of Christ occurs most basically in the states of life: the single-hearted commitment to the good that Socrates describes in the *Republic* has its Christian analogue in the vowing of one's freedom to Christ either in marriage or in consecration. As difficult as this may be to work out in practice, this means that, for me, the "philosophical life" will have its integrity in its relative subordination to the responsibilities of being a husband and father. As for the content of philosophy, I have always accepted the idea that faith informs thinking, and I have found this idea constantly confirmed in practice. Chesterton once explained that dogma, far from shutting down thought, in fact is a goad that vigilantly keeps thought from shutting down itself, and this has been true in my own experience.

Regarding the relationship between theology and philosophy, faith and reason, I've actually started to think about these in a new way, and I am currently trying to work these ideas out at the moment. Without going into too much detail, it occurred to me that it is important to distinguish the two relationships. For obvious reasons, we typically associate faith with theology and reason with philosophy. But in fact we have to recognize that faith and reason are operating in both disciplines, though differently in each case. I've come to think that, properly speaking, faith can be explicit even in philosophy, without philosophy for all that simply turning into theology. Reading the work of the profound Thomist thinker Ferdinand Ulrich, and having had the blessing of several opportunities to converse with him, opened my eyes to many things on this score. A lot of qualifiers and explanations are necessary, of course, but there

is no room to work it out here. Suffice it to say, in a nutshell, that I believe that faith and reason are distinct but inseparable, and this distinctness-in-unity plays a role in both disciplines.

Does Plato have an integrative understanding of theology and philosophy? Strictly speaking, theology requires revelation, so the word is not relevant with respect to Plato. On the other hand, I would say that he has a sense of reason as operating simultaneously “from above” and “from below,” and so being inherently open to the transcendent. Moreover, logos has its place, in a certain respect, inside of mythos (and, arguably, in another respect mythos lies inside of logos). If this is a proper reading of Plato, his philosophy is particularly apt for being taken up into a context of a Christian unity-in- distinctness of faith and reason. In response to the question whether we are due for another revival of Christian Platonism: I certainly hope so, because in fact I don’t think there is any other kind of genuine revival possible in the end. I am increasingly convinced that Christian Platonism is the heart of our tradition.

PT: I understand your current research interests center around Schiller, Schelling and Hegel. Can you tell us why you are interested in these thinkers and where you think you are going with them in terms of what I take to be your ongoing interest in finding adequate responses to contemporary misology?

DCS: To give things a context: the themes that interest me the most are the nature of the transcendentals (beauty, goodness, and truth) and what we might call their anthropological correlates (love, freedom, and reason). It seems to me that each of these must be interpreted in light of all the rest, and that all of these notions have become impoverished in our age because they have been sundered from each other. There are an infinite number of questions and problems that arise here, and—God willing—I plan to spend the rest of my life reflecting on them. There will never be a shortage of things to think about! In addition to the problem of contemporary misology, there are also related problems with reductive notions of freedom and love. Last year I finished a manuscript on the notion of freedom in Schiller, Schelling, and Hegel (which Wipf and Stock will be publishing this fall under the title *The Perfection of Freedom: Schiller, Schelling*

and Hegel between the Ancients and the Moderns). What struck me about these thinkers is that each of them attempted to articulate a substantial notion of freedom (as actuality, i.e., essentially related to the perfection of form), which is such a marked contrast to the interpretation of freedom as potentiality (choice, power, possibility) in French and English liberalism that it has been almost invariably distorted in English-language interpretations if it has been noticed at all. In Schiller, we have the association of freedom with aesthetic form, in Schelling, organic form, and in Hegel, social form. While I think there are ultimately fundamental problems in this German conception of freedom, I have learned a lot from these thinkers. In fact, I think Hegel's definition of freedom as "being at home in the other" is one of the best in history. He arrives at this because he saw, perhaps better than anyone before him, that the Christian doctrine of the Trinity has profound philosophical implications. The question, of course, is whether in the end its significance for him was *reduced* to these philosophical implications. However that may be, on the basis of some of the insights gained in studying these figures, I hope in the relatively near future to go back to the classical Christian tradition to rethink freedom in light of contemporary concerns. I have just finished a manuscript called *The Catholicity of Reason*, which pulls together a few earlier essays and weaves them in with some new material, once again addressing the problem of misology, but this time from a more explicitly Christian perspective. This book will come out with Eerdmans next year.

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