

Plato and the Easter Bunny

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Had we never seen the stars, and the sun, and the heaven, none of the words which we have spoken about the universe would ever have been uttered. But now the light of day and night, and the months and the revolutions of the years, have created number, and have given us a conception of time, and the power of enquiring about the nature of the universe; and from this source we have derived philosophy,

shared by the later Stoics, Arcesilaus and Carneades. The method of dialectic was indeed actually invented by Protagoras, or perhaps even by Zeno of Elea, according to the ancients and most modern authorities. Finally, we recall that the ancients did refer to Plato as ‘the great plagiarizer.’

Even so, if not for Plato’s inspiration, would we have the incomparable treasure that is the Confessions of Augustine? Wasn’t the Renaissance a heckuva success, partly because of the recovery of much of Plato’s work? Is it not clear that the reading of the dialogues enriches and benefits everyone and that this has been true for many centuries? Surely, Plato was a genius beyond compare and his works will remain forever a treasure beyond price.

Even those who seem most distant from agreement with Plato’s intuitions are captured by them. John Stuart Mill, the man responsible for the fact that no one has heard of Sir William Hamilton, wrote in his autobiography that his dad, James Mill, was a fan of Plato. Not only was he a fan, but he thought that there was no writer to compare with Plato—he was the elder Mill’s favorite author! John Stuart agreed with his father’s assessment and, like him, recommended Plato to pupils, colleagues, and even to casual acquaintances. Yet, both Mills were firmly against the theory of intuition; John Stuart even considered it his calling to destroy intuitionist theory. So, while neither would tolerate Descartes, Kant, Reid, or Hamilton, both seemed captured by the eternal wisdom of Plato. Plato seems all wool and a yard wide.

1. Reconsidering Plato

Or is all of the above a fabrication? Is Plato’s work actually part of the inferior stuff that Frank Bacon warned is carried on the river of time—because it floats? Is it no more profound than the most recent television commercial? Are his fundamental ideas good ones, or do they pander to the dearest wishes of uninformed common sense? Further, was Plato a great writer, or the creation of translators? At bottom, is Platonism on the

same intellectual level that features the Easter Bunny?

First, are any of Plato’s ideas original, or were they all plagiarized from Pythagoras and Democritus? The method of dialectic, used in virtually all dialogues, ‘the Socratic method’, was definitely not original. And everyone knows that Empedocles of Agrigentum first told the allegory of the cave—he jumped into Etna around the time that Plato was born. Was the doctrine of forms all that was original, or is even that awful notion the brainchild of some ancient author known to Plato but not to his contemporaries? Even if that doctrine were technically original, the theory of forms or Ideas follows closely from teachings of

dialogues—it is instructive to ask oneself to which of Plato's dialogues did Aristotle refer when he discussed the theory of forms/ideas? The answer is, 'to none of them', for reasons given by the authoritative nineteenth century scholar, Eduard Zeller³:

The dialogues, which in their form imitate the Socratic conversations, are therefore not mere philosophic expositions, but works of literary art, and should not be put on the same plane as the writings of the pre-Socratic philosophers. It is noteworthy that Aristotle uses the *Republic* and the *Laws* as sources for Plato's educational, sociological and political views, but never quotes a dialogue as an authority for the theory of ideas. For the main doctrines of Plato, the authorities were his lectures in the Academy and the discussions connected with them. Of these only one, *On the Good*, which he delivered in his old age, is expressly mentioned in the ancient tradition.

It appears that Plato's good ideas, such as they were, did not appear in the dialogues and that these written treasures are best viewed as 'literary art', as are Shakespeare's writings.

But this assumes that Plato was a great literary figure, if not a philosopher. But perhaps he was neither! Could it be that Plato promoted rubbishy ideas that appealed to the lowest natures, and that this easily accounts for his popularity? Perhaps gifted translators made him appear to be a prose master, but in fact his writing was probably not even very good. Consider the following poem, attributed to Plato⁴:

Thou wert the morning star among the living,
Ere thy fair light had fled;
Now, having died, thou art as Hesperus, giving
New splendor to the dead.

That is a lovely four lines, isn't it? And why shouldn't it be, since it was written (perhaps) by Plato himself. Or was it? Something was (perhaps) written by Plato in some form, but the lines above were translated by Percy Shelley, husband of the author of *Frankenstein* and a great poet, according to some tastes. What if someone else translated, say Peter Jay?

You were the morning star among the living;
But now in death your evening lights the dead.

I don't know who Peter Jay is either, but I do know that his translation, though it may well be more accurate, lacks much of the beauty of Shelley's lines. Is either of the translations a fair reflection of Plato's writing, or are both mere appearances, only vaguely resembling the form in heaven that is Plato's prose, knowable to us only if it were hermeneutically revealed?

3. How good was Plato's writing—really?

Translation appears to be crucial in assessing Plato, more than is the case for truly great writers, like Francis Bacon, Sig Freud, and G. B. Shaw, all of whom wrote eloquently but simply and so translate well in any age. Plato wrote badly and is thus wholly dependent on the vagaries (and miracles) of translation⁵.

Consider this simple thought in Cornford's translation of *The Republic* (438 D):

This, then, if you understand me now, is what I meant by saying that, of two correlative terms, the one is qualified if, and only

Now then, if I have made myself clear, you will understand my original meaning in which what I said about relatives. My meaning was, that if one term of a relation is taken alone, the other is taken alone; if one term is qualified, the other is also qualified.

That is no pleasure to read, but was Plato's prose even that good? Here is the same passage as Plato seemed to have written it, presented in the Loeb translation, to be read by no one but other translators. Cornford thoughtfully included it in his preface, presumably to show the difficulties in translation arising from Plato's awful writing:

'This then', said I 'if haply you now understand, is what you must say I then meant, by the statement that of all things that are such as to be of something those that are just themselves only are of things just themselves only, but things of a certain kind are of things of a certain kind.'

Most readers would not want to read much more of such stuff, both because it is so badly put and because it is such a commonplace idea. All that Plato means to say is that the definition of a word like 'science' changes when used with 'correlative terms', like medical-, physical-, social-, library-, chiropractic-, and so on. Needless to say, the definition of the correlate changes as a function of the word that is modified. Deep thought, dude.

I was first struck by the overriding influence of translation skill when I spotted a footnote in a 1944 article by Merlan, comparing Plato and Freud⁶.

While that comparison is—ho hum—hardly startling news, Merlan pointed out that literal translation makes Plato even more Freudian. For example, in Plato's *The Republic*, the description of the 'beast' that comes out to frisk while we sleep includes this passage:

Which appetites do you mean? I mean those which are awake when the reasoning and human and ruling power is asleep; then the wild beast within us, gorged with meat or drink, starts up and having shaken off sleep, goes forth to satisfy his desires; and there is no conceivable folly or crime—not excepting incest or any other unnatural union, or parricide, or the eating of forbidden food—which at such a time, when he has parted company with all shame and sense, a man may not be ready to commit.

That was the Jowett translation (571), authoritative until the 1940s. But Plato was unaware of nineteenth-century sensibilities and used more graphic words, if Merlan is to be credited. For example, Plato did not refer to 'incest'⁷:

But here also I must observe that where Jowett speaks of 'incest' and 'any other unnatural union' Plato speaks in much less abstract terms and literally of one's sexual intercourse with his mother, or anyone else, be it man, a god, or a beast.

I don't know what words Plato actually used, but it appears that Cornford reported matters more accurately in his translation of 1945, where he wrote that 'In phantasy it will not shrink from intercourse with a mother or anyone else, man, god, or brute...'

Merlan's comment on the then-authoritative Jowett translation set me off on other comparisons. For example, one passage was extraordinarily well put by Cornford. In it, Plato described those who lack the understanding requisite to appreciating material on the lofty level of the *Theory of Ideas*⁸:

A thing, then, that every soul pursues as the end of all her actions, dimly divining its existence, but perplexed and unable to grasp its

⁶ Actually passed to me by an undergraduate student in 1994.

⁷ Merlan, P., 1944. An Idea of Freud's in Plato. *The Personalist*, 25: 54–63 (p. 55).

⁸ Or of Malonews, for that matter.

nature with the same clearness and assurance as in dealing with other things, and so missing whatever value those other things might have....

Wow! According to the passage, there is some greater truth behind appearances and we have only a dim divination of it. Unable to know it, but sure that it is there, we struggle as did Augustine, who tried so hard to see God's eternal presence in the transient, mundane world. Plato put it so well, eh? Or did Cornford put it so well? Let us check Jowett's translation—

Of this then, which every soul of man pursues and makes the end of all his actions, having a presentiment that there is such an end, and yet hesitating because neither knowing the nature nor having the same assurance of this as of other things, and therefore losing whatever good there is in other things.

The same thought, considerably less lovely and memorable, conveying the same profound message. Again, the translator adds the profundity. Or is it profound? What were the actual teachings of Plato? They are, after all, the foundation for whatever fame he deserves. Was Plato ever profound⁹? Perhaps he was merely the best pop fiction writer of his time.

4. Basic Tenets of Plato's philosophy

Unlike the naturalists who immediately preceded him, Plato accepted the preposterous concept of the dualism of mind and body, largely as conceived by the mystic, Pythagoras. Of course, every religion assumed that the soul was independent of the body and most religions posited some kind of more or less attractive afterlife. Is the possibility of an afterlife sufficient justification for inventing a noncorporeal mind? Or is the soul merely the fictional entity dear to uninformed popular belief?

Timaeus features a Pythagorean who described to Socrates a view of the universe and of soul and body that came straight from Pythagoras himself¹⁰. According to this view, the soul uses some of the body's features, like the equipment allowing vision, audition, and the other senses, but it is trapped in the body—in an unclean and inappropriate vessel—and yearns to escape.

Oh, brother, shades of Plotinus and Augustine and Romanticism. At least Descartes had better reason for his dualism; his mind was the only thing clear to him. And at least Descartes did not believe in the recycling of souls. That was a key feature of Plato's (Pythagorean) philosophy—the doctrine of metempsychosis—which held that souls cross the plain of oblivion and drink from the river/fountain of forgetfulness/unmindfulness before they are reborn and the soul is shot like a rocket up from hades! Now, Hindus and Buddhists are welcome to believe in all of the reincarnations necessary and no one criticizes them for it. Those are religions and religions do not have to make sense. But no one ever refers to someone as 'the greatest philosopher since Gautama Siddharta', either.

Metempsychosis is necessary, in Plato's view, since if souls were not used repeatedly, we would have long ago run out of them. This is because things are never created from nothing, and God 'created' the universe out of preexisting material. If souls ceased to exist at death, whatever supply of souls existed at creation would eventually be

to awaken forgotten Truths, the only real knowledge we can have? What nonsense¹²!

Just check out the excerpt beginning this essay. It was taken from *Timaeus*, called Plato's 'scientific' dialogue by some, such as Thomas Hardy Leahey. What a pretty piece of science, eh? Great stuff until you read it and wonder whether the rising sun was really created so that animals would learn to count¹³!

ture, than Plato, or whom he more frequently recommended to young students. I can bear similar testimony in regard to myself.

It is difficult to believe that the clear-thinking

5. What accounts for Plato's popularity?

What accounts for the enduring and widespread popularity of everything that is banal and primitive and that appeals to humankind's lowest nature and shortest-ranged goals? Why does Las Vegas exist as a vacation resort for many people? Why are elections won by candidates who appeal to voters' fears and greed? Why would anyone pay for a ticket to watch the 'Brady Bunch' movie or attend a Rod Stewart concert? Why do people buy Pontiacs? Why do they pay more and buy Volvos? Why is baseball such a popular spectator sport? Why do people with mental illness¹⁴ sometimes consult clinical psychologists, rather than physicians? Why do people watch Oprah and Phil and their kind? Why do they watch Benny Hill? All of these baffling aspects of human behavior reflect the mindless vagaries of popular culture.

And did the Mills really adore Plato? Were even they fans of popular culture? The younger¹⁵ did indeed write:

There is no author to whom my father thought himself more indebted for his own mental cul-