

Plato was wrong: John 1:(1-9), 10-18

John is trying to describe an event, an advent, an epiphany without parallel.

December 28, 2004

Friedrich Nietzsche once remarked that “Plato was a bore,” but this snooty remark merely confirms the madman’s madness. Alfred North Whitehead concluded, boring or not, that “the safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato.”

In the voice of his master Socrates, Plato bestowed upon his intellectual descendants the branches of speculative philosophy. In the *Phaedo*, his great discourse on the immortality of the soul, Socrates asserts (while slowly dying of poison), “I cannot imagine anything more self-evident than the fact that absolute beauty and goodness and all the rest . . . exist in the fullest possible sense.” Ever since, Westerners have pondered whether these absolute things do exist—and what that could possibly mean. In the same dialogue, Socrates wonders, “Is there any certainty in human sight and hearing, or is it true, as the poets are always dinning into our ears, that we neither hear nor see anything accurately?” Philosophers have argued ever after whether sensory input aids or arrests the quest for knowledge.

Socrates has no doubts about what puts the distance between him and the pure knowledge of pure being for which he longs. It’s his body. His soul is always being led astray in its search for truth, because his body attracts distractions. Socrates lists them: “diseases which attack and hinder us in our quest for reality. . . . The body fills us with loves and desires and fears and all sorts of fancies and a great deal of nonsense. . . . Wars and revolutions and battles are due simply and solely to the body and its desires.”

The prospect of gaining anything like true knowledge of absolute things is pretty meager. Reflection, the pure thought of the soul, might get us there. But it means that “we must get rid of the body.” Such an effort in this life will be partial at best, as long as we are “contaminated with this imperfection.” Whether we like it or not,

“the wisdom which we desire and upon which we profess to have set our hearts will be attainable only when we are dead.” This is the optimistic view, by the way—that the soul released upon death will be able to acquire knowledge—because the alternative is that we’ll never know anything really real at all.

Meanwhile, we should “avoid . . . all contact and association with the body, except when they are absolutely necessary, and instead of allowing ourselves to become infected with its nature, purify ourselves from it until God gives us deliverance.” Purity of life secures access to purity of truth. Socrates insists: there is no other way.

Enter John the evangelist. He is trying to describe an event, an advent, an epiphany without parallel in the history of the cosmos. A being of absolute beauty and goodness has been made manifest upon the earth. He could be seen—heard—touched. He spoke directly of the singular truth. He was indeed pure: a spotless lamb. How to describe such a being? To call him simply a man is to fail to recognize him for who he truly is. There’s no other word for it: he is the Logos.

As any philosophically educated Greek of the time knew, “Logos” doesn’t just mean “word” in a literal or even in a lively metaphorical sense. It’s more along the lines of “the rational principle of the universe.” It’s the underlying pattern of the cosmic fabric, the warp and weft by which all things hang together. It’s why things make sense—the reason cause follows effect—the law of noncontradiction—the creative mind that accounts for why there is something rather than nothing. Because the Logos is, everything else is too. Above change, beyond time, outside of space: prepositions break down in the face of the Logos. It’s the first and final cause of the whole created world.

Now John describes this unique person of his as the Logos. More specifically, he claims that “the Logos became flesh and dwelt among us.” If anyone ever wanted to dream up something that would be foolishness to the Greeks, John has outdone him. What he is saying is preposterous. It’s like saying “the circle became square” or “infinity became zero.” It can’t become the latter while still remaining the former. More to the point, it’s like saying, “Purity became filth and dwelt among us.” It’s not only absurd; it’s offensive. The Logos would never, ever saddle itself with a distracting, misleading body. That would defeat the whole purpose of being the Logos, and would permanently destroy any chance at true knowledge. By Plato’s standards, John couldn’t possibly be right.

Of course, John isn't the only one to disagree with Plato. A certain student by the name of Aristotle did too. Lacking his master's certainty in absolute forms without any substance, delighted with all the things he could discover by his senses, Aristotle became the first empiricist, by and large indifferent to anything he couldn't hear, smell or feel. The body is the real house of the soul, he insisted, and nothing gets to the soul—not pure knowledge and not anything else—without the vital mediation of the flesh. If you can't see it, how do you know it's really there?

Proposing a solution that neither Plato nor Aristotle could have foreseen, John the evangelist agreed with them both. Knowing requires seeing (and the disciple Thomas in John's Gospel knew that better than anyone else). The knowledge of absolute beauty, goodness and truth—in other words, knowledge of the person of God—is difficult because “no one has ever seen God.” So how do we know God's out there? Because the Logos became flesh. “It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.” Now we've seen him; now we know.