

Christian life in *The School of Athens*

My upbringing made me a Platonist. Motherhood made me an Aristotelian. I never left either behind.

by [Caroline J. Simon](#) in the [March 2024](#) issue



(Illustration by Martha Park)

I grew up in churches where the focal point was an unadorned, backlit cross high above the pulpit. Baptists are not big on images, but some do have a river scene painted above their baptistry in remembrance of Jesus' baptism. Not ours. In our church, pictures were for Sunday school coloring pages and flannelgraphs. In the sanctuary, our imaginations subsisted on the Word and its echo in the words of hymns and sermons.

As a child, I went to my friend's church from time to time. In her church, colorful statues and stained-glass windows depicted not just Bible stories but saints and martyrs. Though the cross in her church showed Christ perpetually suffering, I envied my friend. So many sights to puzzle over while puzzling words flowed from behind the altar. Something in me wanted to be fed through my eyes, not just my ears.

That hunger is no small part of why the Room of the Segnatura struck me forcefully when I first visited the Vatican in my late 40s. Such a feast for the eyes. The room was designed as a papal library where frequenters would read and reflect as their imaginations were saturated with its images. Now thousands of tourists pass through it, giving Raphael's frescoes only a passing glance.

Its most famous fresco is *The School of Athens*, which takes up the long wall across from Raphael's tribute to theology. Literature and law face one another on the room's shorter walls. Painted archways link the four frescoes into a visual whole which depicts reason, revelation, and imagination as collaborators—a conviction shared by most educated Christians for millennia. For me, the room functions as a compelling visual counterargument to what my Baptist upbringing and academic training had both assumed about the triviality of human imagination and the irreconcilability of Christianity with philosophy.

Raphael's homage to classical philosophy puts humans in their place—central, but dwarfed by the context. Visually, *The School of Athens* presents philosophy as a large-scale communal enterprise carried on within a vastly larger world. In the painting's focal center, Raphael shows Plato and Aristotle striding toward the viewer as they argue. Plato carries his *Timaeus*, one of the many books in which he says the temporal world is always perishing and thus less than fully real. He points upward, gesturing toward perfect, eternal, immaterial, unchanging Reality.

Aristotle, carrying his *Nicomachean Ethics*, points his extended arm in front of him toward the world humans inhabit and know through our senses. Aristotle argued that the very world that Plato thought unreal is the reality that matters most to us. Raphael shows Plato and Aristotle relishing their debate, for their disagreements, though profound, are undergirded with a deeper common ground of hope—the hope that philosophical disputation can lead to fuller understanding and converge on truth.

When teaching, I often used a slide of a detail from Raphael's *The School of Athens* showing Plato and Aristotle to emphasize that philosophy is an ongoing dialogue. What I did not tell my students is that, for me, the image is also autobiographical. My upbringing made me a Platonist. Motherhood made me an Aristotelian. I never left either behind.

My upbringing taught me that bodies betray you, shame you, hold you hostage, pull you down. My dad would come home, tired and brooding, and drink tumblers of scotch and water unless he was on the wagon. When Dad was off the wagon, he would have a beer with his coffee in lieu of breakfast—hair of the dog for his hangover. During my lifetime, my mother was never less than a hundred pounds overweight, though she tried every slimming fad from Metrecal meal replacement shakes to the grapefruit diet.

Mom's spurts of dieting and Dad's stretches of sobriety roughly coincided. During times of greatest tension between them, Mom gained extra weight. For both my parents, excess alternated with deprivation. Moderation was a rarity.

In my senior year of high school, I took a literature course in which my teacher assigned excerpts from Plato's *Republic*. One selection we read contained an allegory that Plato gives for the soul. Our souls, Plato claims, behave as if they are composed of three parts: one resembling a many-headed monster, one a lion, and one a man. The many-headed monster, unless it is held in check, will torment the lion, devour the man, and pull us willy-nilly in opposing directions. Plato claimed that when reason (the man) becomes wise enough to tame our will (the lion) and enlist its aid in pacifying our unruly desires (the monster), our violent internal chaos is transformed into harmony. Philosophy, love of wisdom, thus brings peace to our souls.

My parents' struggles with their appetites for food and drink, along with the conflicts among my own adolescent desires, made Plato's psychology compelling. Reason's promise to provide internal harmony as well as external guidance partly explains my attraction to philosophy. Plato and his ilk, I thought, knew more about how to live a flourishing human life than those whom I would learn in college to call the *hoi polloi*.

Yet there was little talk of wisdom and human flourishing in my college and postgraduate education. In their own ways, contemporary philosophers were as anti-body, at least from the neck down, as the Baptists of my upbringing. Philosophers like to create brief schematic stories that they call "thought experiments." Sometimes they're used to shake up common assumptions.

Here's a thought experiment borrowed by Stanford philosopher John Perry from a Barbara Harris novel called *Who Is Julia?*: imagine that you wake up in a hospital in a body that looks nothing like your own. You are told that you were in a terrible car accident but, fortunately for you, you have become the recipient of the first successful brain-body transplant. Perry used this scenario to probe a philosophical question. Who survived the operation: the brain donor, the body-minus-the-brain donor, or some third person who did not exist before the operation? From the late 1970s this thought experiment became a common paper prompt in introductory philosophy courses.

In a similar mode, Harvard philosopher Hilary Putnam's "brains in a vat" thought experiment started a craze in the 1980s of making Intro to Philosophy students ponder how they could prove that they were not a brain in a vat having all their experiences produced by neural manipulation. Two decades later these ideas trickled down to popular culture through the movie *The Matrix*.

Such flimsy stories represent materialists' bad-faith version of dualism, denying the existence of the human soul while treating the brain as if it were a soul-capsule. I saw the Platonic dualism I both lived and espoused as more honest. From the time I undertook philosophy as a formal pursuit, unless I was making love or cuddling with my husband, I spent my time being "a thing that thinks," as Descartes characterized himself in his *Meditations*. I pursued life as a mind gazing out of the windows of my visual field, piloting my body as if it were a container ship. Even when I was cooking, showering, or walking, I was often pondering philosophical questions.

My first serious encounter with Aristotle was like a disastrous blind date. It took place in a seminar during my first fall as a graduate student. Within a month of starting grad school, I woke up to see smoke floating near the ceiling of the apartment that my husband and I had lived in for less than two months.

I showed up bleary-eyed to my Aristotle seminar the next day with a good excuse for not turning in my weekly paper. It was several days before we were allowed access to our smoke-damaged apartment. My almost-new copy of *The Basic Works of Aristotle* was on the table where I had left it, looking like an antique, its cover darkened and the edges of its 1,500 white pages now gray.

I have kept that volume, though it smelled of smoke for years. The “No!” I wrote in the margin next to where Aristotle sneers at Plato’s idea of Form of the Good is still visible.

Initially, I liked Aristotle’s writing style no better than his ideas. There’s a certain rhythm to Aristotle’s long, meandering sentences full of abstract nouns and vague adjectives, but, as with the vodka and tonics that my in-laws drank, it took me several exposures to appreciate their dryness. This is what Aristotle says about ethics and politics in the *Nicomachean Ethics*: “We must be content, then, in speaking of such subjects and with such premises to indicate the truth roughly and in outline, and in speaking about things which are only for the most part true and with premises of the same kind to reach conclusions that are no better.” “What?!” someone might appropriately scrawl in the margin.

I muddled through my first graduate seminars while my husband and I dealt with the aftermath of the fire. One large area of disagreement between Plato and Aristotle is over whether a truly good person can be harmed. Plato thinks humans are eternal souls only temporarily and loosely connected with bodies. This means that only corruption of the soul really matters. Plato tells us our souls cannot be corrupted without our complicity. I may be beleaguered, beggared, banished, tempted, and killed, but unless I let myself become angered, embittered, distracted, seduced, or cowed, I remain unscathed. That’s why Socrates can so calmly drink his cup of hemlock.

Aristotle, in contrast, thinks it makes no sense to say that Priam, the virtuous Trojan king who loses both his beloved son, Hector, and his kingdom, is unharmed. Great misfortune, says Aristotle, can crush the virtuous.

I do not find it hard to guess with whom those people injured or impoverished by our apartment fire would side on this issue. For style and imagery, I take Plato hands down over Aristotle. For navigating life's complexities, Aristotle is the better guide.

But it would be years before I would become grateful for Aristotle's wisdom concerning human nature. To admire how he admits at the very beginning of his book on virtue that reading books cannot make us virtuous. To value how he probes the mysterious gap that Plato refused to see between knowing what is good and doing the good. To cherish how he recognizes friendship's paramount place in a virtuous life. To be grateful for how he urges us to drag ourselves toward the contrary extreme of our entrenched bad habits "as people do in straightening a stick that is bent." To understand what he means about ethical maxims being only mostly true. To see all that is rooted in Aristotle's convictions about human interdependency—the wisdom of which motherhood helped me grasp.

I was at the dissertation stage of my philosophy PhD program when I became pregnant with my first child. Pregnancy shifted the focus of my interior life from abstract thought to attunement with my body, which whispered its secrets if I paused to listen to the subtle changes prompted by what was happening in my uterus. Another's growing body was doing more than sheltering inside me; our lives were enmeshed. My breasts swelled; my nipples turned brown. By the time I could watch an elbow or kneecap make a lump that traced its path across the taut skin of my belly, I looked forward to meeting the person to whom it belonged. That person emerged as warm, squirming, needy, and endlessly fascinating, bearing no resemblance to "a thing that thinks."

The shower I took the morning after my oldest son was born turned my body into a tuning fork, every skin cell sending reverberations through layers of muscle down to my bones. How odd, I thought, that no one had mentioned this in childbirth classes. Why warn of postpartum depression but not prepare women for postpartum ecstasy? No doubt my nether regions were sore, but I have no memory of noticing that during that shower.

The many long days of the short years of being a mother of infants passed for me as a blur, punctuated with isolated vivid memories. I remember nursing's unhurriable timelessness, which I relished at home and endured while sitting in a public restroom stall. I remember the untimely filling of my breasts and my gratitude for a blazer's ability to hide the leakage while I taught or met with a student. I remember

the surprisingly pleasant smell of a nursing baby's poop, the sour smell of baby spit-up, the astonishing volume of baby vomit. I remember watching my infant sons' first encounters with creatures great and small. I remember being pulled along by my sons' many shades of wonderment. I often worked on my dissertation sitting on the living room floor, using our coffee table as a desk while my baby, lying on a blanket beside me, played with toys or his hands.

Two years after my second son was born, I had the opportunity to attend a workshop at the University of Wisconsin on the history of the relationship between science and religion. I recall very little about that conference except learning the word *hylomorphism* for the first time and finding out something about the history of Christianity that surprised me very much. Hylomorphism is the view, championed by Aristotle, that the soul is not a separate substance from the body but is in fact the form of a living body. Scholars are still debating what Aristotle meant by that, but it means at least that human souls are dependent on bodies and cannot function without them. I had read that in Aristotle but had not been able to make much sense of it. Hylomorphism, I learned at that conference, was the majority view among Christian thinkers until the time of Descartes.

For years, I had been reciting the Apostles' Creed's "I believe in . . . the resurrection of the body" without it even occurring to me to ask why: Why resurrect the body if it is superfluous to being human? Aristotle's anthropology was more compatible with Christianity than Plato's was. After a lifetime of Christian teaching and many years of philosophical education, how could this have been news to me? Now that I had a term for what motherhood had taught me, I found hylomorphism to be good news, not just regarding my relationship to my own body and my sons but in how it transformed my mourning.

I had been a 21-year-old Baptist Platonist when my father died of a heart attack while raking leaves in his backyard. My mother went along with my idea to keep Dad's casket closed. "That body is not Dad," I insisted. I thought I was denying death its sting. On the contrary, death stung so much that I could not look it in the face.

In August 2020, a chaplain called from the hospital where my brother, unmarried and childless, had been admitted. She wanted to talk about moving him to palliative care. Though COVID was raging, a direct conversation with my brother's doctor put me on a cross-country flight. "What's the point?" my brother had asked when I told

him I was coming.

My brother died less than 24 hours after I got there. I was holding his hand as it turned cold. Holding my brother's hand was the point.

In Plato's *Symposium*, he imagines Socrates learning about the connections among love, knowledge, and beauty from a wise woman he calls Diotima, whom Plato likely made up. Diotima teaches Socrates that to love is to give birth in beauty.

Motherhood taught me to cherish beautiful, fragile bodies. Fine as a start, Diotima would tell me, but better by far to give birth to ideas—true and beautiful ideas, unsullied by mortal taint. The greatness of the *Symposium* lies in its power to stir the human imagination toward the quest for wisdom, but it got mortality wrong.

Christianity teaches that mortality is not a taint, but a portal—that Wisdom seeks us out by becoming flesh and dwelling among us. From birth to death, wisdom often finds us when one body holds another until we must let go.