

RORTY AND POPPER ON THE FOOTNOTES TO PLATO

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1. *Introduction.* Everyone has heard of Whitehead's remark that "the safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato."¹ Since "the train of thought" of Whitehead's philosophy is "Platonic," he is proud to be a part of this series of footnotes which trail off from Plato. Two contemporary philosophers—Richard Rorty and Karl Popper—agree with Whitehead's characterization of the history of philosophy, but they do not appear to share his enthusiasm. Both try to terminate the series and start anew: Rorty by refusing to give in to the "Platonic urge" to think of human knowing in terms of mirror imagery, and Popper by refusing to succumb to the mesmerizing "spell of Plato."

In this paper I claim: (1) that since both Rorty and Popper feel compelled to react against Plato they automatically corroborate, in a way, Whitehead's statement regarding Plato's influence, since they thereby become footnotes to Plato; (2) that Rorty's and Popper's criticisms of Plato's influence are inconsistent with some of the things they have to say about that influence;² and (3) that the extent to which

¹ *Process and Reality*, Part II, Chapter I, Section 1.

² This will not be a full treatment of Rorty's and Popper's views on Plato, which would demand much more space. Rather, I concentrate on their views of Plato's supposed detrimental effect on the history of philosophy. For a fuller treatment of the general relationship between Rorty and Plato see my "Rorty on Plato as an Edifier," *Philosophia* (Athens), 13/14:142 (1983-4). On Popper and Plato see my "Popper's World 3 and Plato," to appear in *Diotima* 12:186 (1981); and the Appendix to my *Plato's Philosophy of History* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1981). A review of this work by Charles Hartshorne (to appear in *Process Studies*, 12:201 (1982)) may also be helpful.

Rorty, and particularly Popper, *do* borrow from Plato they not only corroborate Whitehead's characterization of the history of philosophy, but also unwittingly approximate his approving attitude toward it.

2. *Rorty's Criticisms of Plato's Influence. Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*³ is a complex work that criticizes most of Western philosophy from the time of Plato to the twentieth century, most notably because of the correspondence theory of truth which dominated, explicitly or implicitly, this long period. Dewey, Wittgenstein, and Heidegger emerge as the heroes of the book because of their edifying reactions against the mirror imagery of the philosophic tradition. "Plato," "Platonism," "Platonic," and the "Platonic urge" are constantly used by Rorty as catchwords for what is to be denigrated in philosophy.

Not everything Rorty has to say about Plato is unique. One of his major criticisms of Plato has been made many times before, i.e., Plato's attempt to talk about adjectives as if they were nouns is muddled (33). He offers this description of how a Platonic Form is constructed:

...we simply lift off a single property from something (the property of being red, or painful, or good) and then treat it as if it itself were a subject of predication, and perhaps also a locus of causal efficacy. A Platonic Form is merely a property considered in isolation and considered as capable of sustaining causal relations (32).

Also, because of the inadequacy of Plato's assimilation of *ousia* to *idea* (73), there are few believers in Platonic Forms today (43).⁴

Plato's unpopularity in the history of philosophy is apparent rather than real, however, for Rorty. Relying on George Pitcher, Rorty claims that Plato was the first to articulate the "Platonic Principle"

³ *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979). Numbers in parenthesis in the paper refer to page numbers in the respective works.

⁴ Rorty may be a bit too hasty here. Contemporary philosophy has shown a surprising vitality regarding Plato's Forms or something like them. Although Whitehead's eternal objects immediately come to mind, we should not forget that Husserl, Frege, and Russell went through periods where they talked about non-material, non-subjective, universal objects of thought (see, e.g., Russell's *The Problems of Philosophy*). Popper's Platonism will be treated later. And recently Jerrold Katz has defended a Platonic theory in the philosophy of language in *Language and Other Abstract Objects* (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1981); et.al.

that “differences in certainty must correspond to differences in the objects known” (156). This principle is a natural consequence, Rorty thinks, of the attempt to model knowledge on perception; if it is assumed that we need distinct faculties to “grasp” bricks *and* numbers, then the discovery of geometry will seem to be the discovery of a new faculty called *nous*.

The Forms provided Plato with his “foundations of knowledge.” Rorty’s anti-foundationalism notices that even non-Platonists (including empiricists and linguistic analysts) have traditionally fallen victim to the Platonic Principle by trying to ground knowledge claims on some incorrigible base like clear and distinct ideas, sense perceptions, a logical use of language, etc. This is the danger Plato poses, for if we think of knowledge in this way:

...we will want to get behind reasons to causes, beyond argument to compulsion from the object known, to a situation in which argument would be not just silly but impossible, for anyone gripped by the object in the required way will be *unable* to doubt or to see an alternative.... For Plato that point was reached by escaping from the senses and opening up the faculty of reason—the Eye of the Soul—to the World of Being (159).... The urge to say that assertions and actions must not only cohere with other assertions and actions but “correspond” to something apart from what people are saying and doing has some claim to be called *the* philosophical urge. It is the urge which drove Plato to say that Socrates’ words and deeds, failing as they did to cohere with current theory and practice, nonetheless corresponded to something which the Athenians could barely glimpse (179).

The philosophical tradition since Plato has also, for Rorty, assumed that the algorithm-no algorithm distinction runs together with the reason-passion distinction (339), such that, at least for Plato, the only way to be “edified” is “to know what is out there.” For Rorty, however, the quest for truth is just “one among many ways in which they might be edified” (360). Perhaps because Plato thought otherwise, he defined the philosopher in opposition to the poet (370). Rorty’s final judgment seems, therefore, to be that “the Platonic notion of Truth itself is absurd” (377) since it condemns philosophers (Plato’s footnotes) to a Sisyphean task:

The dilemma created by this Platonic hypostatization is that, on the one hand, the philosopher must attempt to find criteria for picking out these unique referents, whereas, on the other hand, the only hints he has about what these criteria could be are provided by current practice (by, e.g., the

best moral and scientific thought of the day). Philosophers thus condemn themselves to a Sisyphean task (374).

3. *Some of Popper's Criticisms of Plato's Influence.* One of the most vehement attacks on Plato ever written was Popper's first volume of *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, titled *The Spell of Plato*.⁵ The "spell" that Plato has cast on the rest of philosophy is the contention that all social change is corruption (19), leading Plato to desire above all else an escape from the Heraclitean flux (24). Thus, according to Popper, for Plato "change is evil, and... rest is divine" (37). Plato, it is alleged, found the rest he desired in a world of static Forms, which were also the paradigms for an arrested society of men (21). This led to a philosophy of methodological "essentialism," a term of derision used by Popper to characterize the attempt to arrive at the static essence of a thing (31).

In *Conjectures and Refutations*⁶ Popper supports his stance with some examples of Plato's corrupting influence. In addition to his obvious influences, e.g., on medieval theology, Plato "plays a decisive part in the pre-history of Descartes' doctrine of the *veracitas dei*—the doctrine that our intellectual intuition does not deceive us because God is truthful and will not deceive us" (9); further, Descartes' definition of body is essentialist.⁷ But it is not just the rationalists that Plato has influenced for the worse, as Rorty also suggests. Although Bacon drops Plato's divine "essences" or "natures," he puts the goddess *Natura* in their place because he believed that "the sources of knowledge must be kept pure, because any impurity may become a source of ignorance" (15). The idea of the truthfulness of Nature in Bacon is derived from Plato's opposition between nature and merely human convention (18). And Bacon's "knowledge is power" and Plato's "rule of the wise" are both expressions of claims to know this truthfulness, and both are expressions of a claim to power on the basis of one's superior intellectual gifts (363). But perhaps the most dangerous legacy of Plato's philosophy is his historicism, which incalculably

⁵ *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, vol. 1, *The Spell of Plato* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966). This book was first published in 1945.

⁶ *Conjectures and Refutations* (N.Y.: Basic Books, 1963).

⁷ See Popper's "The Aim of Science," in *Objective Knowledge: An Evolutionary Approach* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), p. 195.

defiles such varied thinkers as Hegel, Marx, Comte, and John Stuart Mill (338).⁸

At this point it would seem that Popper and Rorty would be in agreement about Plato's influence, especially when we consider Rorty's remark that the Platonic urge lures us into getting beyond argument to compulsion from the object known. This compulsion, for Popper, is ultimately what made Plato an enemy of the open society.⁹

4. *Rorty's Peculiar Admiration for Plato's Influence.* Rorty's attitude toward Plato's influence is by no means clear, however. Consider the following quotation, which opposes the hermeneutical philosopher as conversationalist (Socrates) with the epistemological philosopher as king of culture (Plato):

I think that the view that epistemology, or some suitable successor-discipline, is necessary to culture confuses two roles which the philosopher might play. The first is that of the informed dilettante, the polypragmatic, Socratic intermediary between various discourses. In his salon, so to speak, hermetic thinkers are charmed out of their self-enclosed practices. Disagreements between disciplines and discourses are compromised or transcended in the course of the conversation. The second role is that of the cultural overseer who knows everyone's common ground—the Platonic philosopher-king who knows what everybody else is really doing whether *they* know it or not, because he knows about the ultimate context (the Forms, the Mind, Language) within which they are doing it. The first role is appropriate to hermeneutics, the second to epistemology (317-318).

This is the distinction between the edifying and the systematic philosopher, respectively; the latter of which could be Plato, a modern philosopher, or a contemporary linguistic analyst. Since it is the edifying philosopher that Rorty defends, it would seem that Socrates receives a reprieve that is denied Plato. Rorty thus assumes a solution to the "Socratic problem" both above and in the following passage:

⁸ The connection between essentialism and historicism is another topic altogether. See volume 2 of *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, titled *The High Tide of Prophecy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966) and Popper's *The Poverty of Historicism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957).

⁹ See "totalitarianism" in the index of the first volume of *The Open Society*, as well as references to Plato's influence on (i.e., corruption of) St. Thomas Aquinas (316), Vico (221), Rousseau (246, 293), Kant (247), Hegel (314), Comte (220), Bergson (314), and Santayana (316).

It is so much a part of “thinking philosophically” to be impressed with the special character of mathematical truth that it is hard to shake off the grip of the Platonic Principle. If, however, we think of “rational certainty” as a matter of victory in argument rather than of relation to an object known, we shall look toward our interlocutors rather than to our faculties for the explanation of the phenomenon (156-157).

The latter sort of rational certainty seems to apply to Socrates and the sophists, who do not see a difference in kind, for Rorty, between “necessary” and “contingent” truths; at most they (along with Rorty) see differences in degree of ease in objecting to our beliefs (157).

Since Plato is our major source of information on Socrates’ thought, he might receive a vicarious reprieve as well. But the matter is more complicated than this. In the following remark Rorty reveals an aperture that would grant Plato himself, not just Socrates, the status of an edifying philosopher:

The permanent fascination of the man who dreamed up the whole idea of Western philosophy—Plato—is that we still do not know which sort of philosopher he was. Even if the *Seventh Letter* is set aside as spurious, the fact that after milleniums of commentary nobody knows which passages in the dialogues are jokes keeps the puzzle fresh (369 n).

In addition to having a sense of humor, what enables Plato to possibly be an edifying philosopher is the fact that he started philosophy’s (written) conversation, which in a free and leisured way allows the sparks of (Kuhnian) abnormal discourse to fly upward (389):

The fact that we can continue the conversation Plato began without discussing the topics Plato wanted discussed, illustrates the difference between treating philosophy as a voice in a conversation and treating it as a subject, a *Fach*, a field of professional inquiry. The conversation Plato began has been enlarged by more voices than Plato would have dreamed possible (391).

In short, although most would instinctively classify Rorty as an opponent to Plato and his influence, it is by no means clear that this is the case.

5. *Popper’s Peculiar Admiration for Plato’s Influence*. Concomitant with the criticisms of Plato’s influence in *Conjectures and Refutations*, Popper also notices the exemplary model Plato provides for others by attempting to explain the known by the unknown (102), thereby expanding the region of the known. Plato’s reconciliation of

atomism with the theory of the *plenum* ("nature abhors the void") is "of the greatest importance" not only for philosophy of science, but for the history of physics as well (88). And the greatest philosophical achievement of Plato, the geometrical theory of the world, including contributions to the development of Euclid's system, has positively affected Copernicus, Galileo, Kepler, Descartes, Newton, and Einstein (89, 92). Popper also emphasizes that the scientist who had such an important effect on Kant's intellectual revolution, Copernicus, was a Platonist who was enamoured of Plato's myth of the sun (187). But most important, perhaps, is the fact that Plato was a part of the Greek tradition which discovered critical discussion (149).

These examples of Popper's admiration for Plato's influence take him a small part of the way toward Whitehead's panegyric. Most significant steps in this direction are taken in two essays in Popper's *Objective Knowledge: "Epistemology Without a Knowing Subject"* and "On the Theory of the Objective Mind."¹⁰ It is also in these essays that we most clearly see that Popper's views on Plato's influence are quite different from Rorty's. Many of Popper's criticisms of Plato rest on his contention that Forms, for Plato, were static, eternal entities. But Popper opposes those like Rorty who want to eliminate objective knowledge altogether just as vehemently as he attacks Plato.

The material world, a "world 1," as Popper calls it, does not exhaust the types of entities which make up the universe, thereby conflicting with Rorty's confusing commitment to materialism.¹¹ In addition, there are thoughts and feelings of human minds which cannot be explained in a material way; indeed, as contemporary physics has made so clear, matter itself must be explained. But this "world 2" of thoughts, feelings, and the like does not exhaust reality either. That is, Popper goes beyond the issue of mind-body dualism into a pluralist universe since his "world 3" is non-material and non-subjective.¹²

Plato was the discoverer of world 3 (122), thereby making Popper, quite ironically after *The Spell of Plato*, a Platonist along with other defenders of world 3: the Stoics and Leibniz, and especially Bolzano

¹⁰ The former essay dates from 1967; the latter from 1968.

¹¹ See Robert Schwartz' review of Rorty's book in *The Journal of Philosophy* (1983): 51-67.

¹² A detailed treatment of these three worlds is not part of my topic, I am only concerned with how Popper's treatment of these three worlds, particularly world 3, affects his view of Plato's influence.

and Frege (126-127, 153). Hegel is a difficult case, sometimes described as a defender of world 3, sometimes as a critic of it; Plotinus is another possible defender of world 3 (124-126, 153, 154 n.).

Most of the remaining figures in the history of philosophy reject world 3, including Aristotle, Locke, Berkeley, Hume, Kant, Mill, Dilthey, and Russell (108, 127-128, 128 n., 158). Some (Rorty?) have rejected world 2 as well. Curiously enough, these figures are also apparently footnotes to Plato. Consider the following words of Popper, in which he suggests that Plato may be responsible for the impoverished history of analysis of world 3 by philosophers:

...Plato envisaged the objects of the third world as something like non-material things or, perhaps, like stars or constellations—to be gazed at, and intuited, though not liable to be touched by our minds. This is why the inmates of the third world—the Forms or Ideas—became concepts of things, or essences or natures of things, rather than theories or arguments or problems. This had the most far-reaching consequences for the history of philosophy. From Plato until today, most philosophers have either been nominalists or else what I have called essentialists. They are more interested in the (essential) meaning of words than in the truth and falsity of theories (123).

That is, even contemporary (linguistic) philosophers are either essentialists, because of Plato, or anti-essentialists, because of Plato.

Plato scared most philosophers off world 3 by making it divine and unchanging, whereas Popper believes it is man-made and changing. Plato, “the great master of dialectical argument” (123), only used dialectic to get to world 3, without making dialectical arguments the most important inmates of world 3. For Popper, this is perhaps why there are philosophers like Rorty. Plato thought that world 3 would give us ultimate explanations, but for Popper we can only hope of conjectures and refutations in world 3. And Plato, unfortunately for Popper, based world 3 objects on perceptual metaphors, particularly the visual ones that Rorty criticizes.

One of the other important defects in Plato’s world 3, according to Popper, that has made defense of world 3 so unpopular in the history of philosophy, is the fact that Plato made the Forms into concepts or things, or essences or natures of things. Thus, for Plato, the number Seven inhabits world 3, but not a proposition or theory about numbers, which is an inhabitant of world 2 (156). Only when we realize that theories and arguments made by human beings, and problems confronted by human beings, take on a partially autonomous life of

their own will we be able to convince philosophers that world 3 does not necessarily share the defects of Plato's Forms.

One of Popper's favorite examples (118) is the sequence of "natural" numbers, which is a human creation; but prime numbers and our inability to count to the highest number are unintended consequences of our creation. Although human language is at the root of our ability to create world 3, world 3 then transcends our ability to talk about it. We must at all times distinguish between: (1) statements, arguments, theories (some of them false) in themselves, which can stand in *logical* relation to each other; and (2) subjective thought processes, which can only stand in *psychological* relation to each other.¹³ This distinction provides the basis for the distinction between world 3 and world 2, respectively.

Speaking of the Platonists and the opponents to world 3 Popper says the following:

I think that it is possible to uphold a position which differs from that of both these groups of philosophers: I suggest *that it is possible to accept the reality or (as it may be called) the autonomy of the third world, and at the same time to admit that the third world originates as a product of human activity. One can even admit that the third world is man-made and, in a very clear sense, superhuman at the same time. It transcends its makers* (159).

6. *Popper the Platonist.* Having one's cake and eating it too is difficult, even for a philosopher as brilliant as Popper. In *The Philosophy of Karl Popper*¹⁴ he tells us precisely what his world 3 is like. World 3 is, in turn, divided into three parts. World 3.1 contains the materialized, stored-up part of world 3, e.g., all of the theories written down in books. But world 3 is larger than just world 3.1, as in the previously cited example of the number system being greater than all of the numbers that have been written down (1050), or the yet to be discovered features of scientific theories already written down.

Therefore, there are world 3 objects which possess no world 3.1 realization at all (1051). Some of these are found in world 3.2, the world of thoughts and theories consciously thought, but not necessar-

¹³ In addition to these two essays, see *Unended Quest* (LaSalle, Ill.: Open Court, 1976), p. 180.

¹⁴ *The Philosophy of Karl Popper*, ed. by Paul Arthur Schilpp (LaSalle, Ill.: Open Court, 1974).

ily written down. However, there is still a leftover part of world 3 that is not exhausted by worlds 3.1 and 3.2. This world 3.3 is a kind of "shadow" world, but as Popper reminds us shadows *do* exist in some sense. Although Popper seems incorrigible here, it is hard to see how he has not dipped into Platonism at this point. He says that world 3 has a history, but he also says that *part* of world 3 is composed of non-temporal, eternally true theories. That is, worlds 3.1 and 3.2 have a history, but not that shadowy world 3.3. Yet this shadowy world exists, being made up of "logically essential forms" (1052). At least with respect to world 3.3 it is hard to see Popper's view as only a "modified essentialism".¹⁵ That is, world 3.3 comes remarkably close to Plato's world 3 with respect to its: (1) eternity; and (2) possession of logical essences.

7. *Conclusion.* It was Emerson who once implied that every time he walked up the path of a new idea he encountered Plato's footprints.¹⁶ Obviously, no general claim for a *philosophia perennis* can be drawn from a consideration of how two particular philosophers have treated the influence of Plato. But when the two philosophers in question happen to be the two most forceful and widely read critics of Plato's influence alive today, we should take notice of the fact that even they, *after* excoriating Plato, we have words of praise.¹⁷

It seems fair to say that the prime object of Rorty's attack is the Platonic Principle, which is adhered to not only by Plato, but also by the medievals, rationalists, empiricists, idealists, and even philosophers who have made the linguistic turn. Yet Plato is also, for Rorty, the father of philosophy's written conversation, and may well be, unlike most of the other great figures in the history of philosophy, one of Rorty's edifying philosophers. Plato either is, or should be, depending on the emphasis one places on those passages where Rorty praises Plato, one of the heroes of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Paradoxical as it may seem, Popper's attack on Plato and his influence is even more trenchant than Rorty's, as any reader of the first volume of *The Open Society* would admit, *and* his debt to Plato more

¹⁵ *Objective Knowledge*, pp. 195-196.

¹⁶ See "Plato: New Readings," in *The Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (N.Y.: Walter J. Black), p. 451. Also see Emerson's "Plato: Or, the Philosopher."

¹⁷ It is because Rorty and Popper seem to be the most forceful and widely read critics of Plato's influence that I have brought them together in this article.

profound. Popper goes to the jugular, yet ends up a Platonist himself. Popper's criticisms of Plato's influence in his more recent works are no longer vitriolic, but remorseful. What makes Popper less than sanguine is the fact that Plato did not do a good enough job convincing the history of philosophy (and Rorty) that world 3 was a great discovery.

On the evidence Rorty and Popper give us, we cannot help but take Whitehead's and Emerson's remarks seriously.

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