

Platonism and Transcendence
Handout
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Cambridge Center for Platonism, November 7, 2023

I. Introduction:

I.1 The story of the meeting of Odysseus and Penelope
[facts and subtle truths; recognition]

I.2 Although Plato never commented on that wonderful episode, it somehow sounds
“Platonic,” and it still resonates with us, despite the anti-Platonist and anti-metaphysical
tenor of our age

I.3 The question of the rejection or modification of Platonism: Is it possible to preserve a
Platonist orientation while also acknowledging that our reality – and our way of thinking
about reality – has radically changed?

II. The main body of the argument:

II.1 Recognition: [together with remembrance, insight, divine inspiration, intuition,
revelation]: there is more to the world and more to each one of us than meets the eye.
[Ec-centric view, rather than ego-centric.]

Plato’s *Theaetetus* and the Gettier problem (1963). The modern turn [Bacon and
Descartes] toward justification and away from truth. We have lost faith in the truth –
unless it is a logically derived or fact-supported truth. [Recognition of our true calling, or
of our true love, of our most loyal friend.] [We need to recognize a deep tie between
recognition and truth, the genuine, the authentic.]

II.2 The ordinary and the extraordinary [the intrusion of the extraordinary into the
ordinary, of the timeless into the temporal]. Platonism is aligned with anti-egalitarianism:
not every quality should be reduced to quantity; mechanical routine; temporality and
subjectivity of all there is. Distinction. Nobility. Reaching the Beautiful, the True, and the
Good. Becoming the best we could be.

II.3a The Transcendence vs. immanence [this-worldly and the other-worldly; the natural
vs. the super-natural; the visible and the invisible; the attached and the detached]

II.3b C.S. Lewis: Transcendence = Tao. The sunrise and the seagulls.

II.3.c Roger Scruton: the “transcendental bond” [deeper than the social contract,
convention; what I want/desire; going against our detachment, separation, isolation;
perhaps also against OUR human rights? Scruton emphasizes contact, closeness, personal
perspective and connection, and human intimacy.

III. Concluding Remarks:

-These three elements, which Platonism and Transcendence share [recognition, the extraordinary, and the ultimate commitment] enable us to preserve the main thrust of Platonism and adjust it – not so much to our time and the existing paradigm, but for the future – for a new and much healthier orientation in reality.

-What we need to associate with Platonism most of all is not the image of the cave but that of a temple: Is not Penelope's bed chamber not only her cave but her most sacred space [ground] as well?

Additions:

Introduction:

Cf. Eva Brann, *Homeric Moments*, [283-6]

Difference between “mere fact” and “in truth” – when Penelope and Odysseus [dressed as a beggar] sit face-to-face: “he is in mere *fact*, unquestionably, the master of the house, but is he in *truth* her husband still?

Similarly, Brann, 286: a distinction between “gross fact and subtle truth”

Brann: that is “Homer’s deepest distinction” – and it should be ours as well.

Recognition: [not necessarily Anamnesis; in our age remembering seems to deal with facts: “remembering your password”]

- a. Like Odysseus, our entire civilization has been drifting for a while.
Like Penelope, we have to recognize who we are and what our calling is.
[the Iliad – a bloody war, destruction; force
- b. Odysseus dressed as a beggar: we are not intentionally dressed as beggars; we have become beggars; we have stripped our world of gods, of any numinosity ... sheer and exclusive materialism; instrumental rationality; we have become barely recognizable and definitely disoriented...
- c. “In tragedy, the pivotal moment is the Recognition, the revelation of identity ... What she needs to learn is something far beyond that mere fact.”
[C: so do we need to learn about our humanity; not a mere fact of whether someone or something is human, but what it means to be human in truth?

The intrusion of the extraordinary into the ordinary:

That extraordinary may but need not be otherworldly.

For instance, the life of Socrates and his presence and influence in Athens were extraordinary. What the intrusion of the extraordinary does is turn us away from our routinely taken and well-trodden paths; it takes us out of our comfort zone and enables us to confront something special – like the Beauty itself or the Good itself.

Two fundamental questions:

1. Do the ordinary and the extraordinary operate on the same level of existence and based on the same principles? Or are they built on mutually irreducible principles [like facts and values]?

2. How to make the extraordinary – say in the form of the Good – a compelling force in our lives?

How to make the experience of that intrusion be a transformative [not just informative] experience?

Transcendental Bonds

-Penelope: Can I trust this man? Is he still my husband, in truth, not just in terms of a vow that we gave to each other [a social contract we signed]? Is our bond, our marriage, still something sacred – for me and for him? Transcendence as our deepest commitment.

Scruton: Facing each other: a personal approach to things.

[C: And we may need the face of others, the eyes of others, not only for our recognition of identity, but for more subtle truths about our nature and destiny.

Conclusion:

A bed chamber – both a cave [prison] and a sacred ground [temple].

If Platonism is to be a force in our lives, it has to operate on the same level, rather than in two different worlds.

Transcendence

C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, 17 and passim: transcendence = Tao

Relativists reject the Tao.

[41] “If the Tao falls, all other conceptions of values fall with it.”

Trans- going beyond the usual limits, reaching out, connecting with what is not necessarily or usually connected.

Could transcendence be a precondition of truth, as interaction is a precondition of meaning?

The order of eternity validates the order of temporality [or the order in time], not the other way around – this may be the key insight of Platonism. [and Christianity as well? And all other religions?]