

It fascinates me how entangled we are in ideas and ways of thinking that we can trace back thousands of years to specific people.

Plato is one of those individuals. He lived and thought and taught in ancient Greece around 400 BCE, and is widely considered one of the pivotal figures – if not THE pivotal figure - in the history of Western philosophy, politics, religion, and spirituality.

The mathematician Alfred North Whitehead once said that: "the safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato."

His most famous philosophical contribution is the theory of Forms, which I will briefly outline here.

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The theory of Forms questions the reality of the material world, considering it only an image or copy of the "real" world.

According to this theory there are at least two worlds: the apparent world of concrete objects, grasped by the senses, which constantly changes, and an unseen and unchanging world of Forms or abstract objects, grasped by pure reason, which ground what is apparent.

Plato's Forms thus represent types of things, as well as properties, patterns, and relations, to which we refer as objects. Just as individual tables, chairs, and cars refer to objects in this world, so do 'tableness', 'chairness', and 'car-ness', - as well as justice, truth, and beauty - refer to objects in another world.

Aside from being immutable, timeless, and changeless, the Forms also provide definitions and the standard against which all apparent instances are measured. There is thus a world of perfect, eternal, and changeless meanings - the Forms - existing in the realm of Being outside of space and time.

This is why they are called transcendentals – they transcend “reality” and exist independently in their pure, ideal Forms, from whence they In-Form the apparent world.

For Plato, the Form of the Good is the ultimate goal of knowledge – the unitary in which other Forms – such as Form of Truth, the Form of Beauty, and the Form of Justice reside.

Over time, these Forms evolved in Western thinking into the Good, the True, and the Beautiful - the three primary transcendent properties of being — properties that both represent the three primary categories of knowledge, as well as the ideal forms within those categories.

Plato’s student, Aristotle, rejects the idea of the Forms. He argues that these properties are intrinsic to the material objects themselves, and cannot exist apart from them, and so must be studied in relation to them.

Since Aristotle, we no longer necessarily see these perfect platonic forms existing somewhere outside of time, but rather as the natural product of the three fundamental perspectives we use to understand reality: ethics, aesthetics, and reason.

But these two different views are still in play. The sociologist Pitirim Sorokin argued that the history of human culture is characterized by a struggle for dominance between materialistic values and ideal values, with the preferred condition being a society that harmonizes both. Let’s bookmark Sorokin, as we’ll return to him later.

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Aristotle was hired as a tutor for the young Alexander the Great and made such an impression that Alexander carried Aristotle’s works with him on campaign and introduced his philosophy to the east when he conquered the Persian Empire. Through Alexander, Aristotle’s works were spread throughout the known world of the time, influencing other philosophies and providing a foundation for the development of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim theology. And of course, Plato’s ideas come along for the ride. You can’t really separate the two.

The Romans adopt much of Greek philosophy, as well as Greek art, architecture, literature, and religion – although they do adapt them to reflect their own needs and cultural heritage. The Greek influence is spread further with the rise of Rome and the expansion of their empire.

Over the next few centuries, Christianity rises as the dominant religious influence, eventually becoming the official religion of the Roman Empire.

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It's around 400 CE that the philosophy of Neoplatonism enters into Christian theology. It brings with it the monistic idea that all of reality can be derived from a single principle, "the One". The Good, the True, and the Beautiful were transformed into the Trinity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit – and the One God became the substantial unity to which these apparent separate qualities belonged. Their realized unity on Earth was deemed to be in the person of Jesus as the Christ — the Logos. These ideas are with us today.

Let me quote from an essay by Peter Kreeft titled "Lewis's Philosophy of Truth, Goodness, and Beauty,"

There are three things that will never die: truth, goodness, and beauty. These are the three things we all need, and need absolutely, and know we need, and know we need absolutely. Our minds want not only some truth and some falsehood, but all truth, without limit. Our wills want not only some good and some evil, but all good, without limit. Our desires, imaginations, feelings or hearts want not just some beauty and some ugliness, but all beauty, without limit.

For these are the only three things that we never got bored with, and never will, for all eternity, because they are three attributes of God, and therefore all God's creation: three transcendental or absolutely universal properties of all reality. All that exists is true, the proper object of the mind. All that exists is good, the proper object of the will. All that exists is beautiful, the proper object of the heart, or feelings, or desires, or sensibilities, or imagination.

We are head, hands, and heart. We respond to truth, goodness and beauty. We are this because we are images of God. Each of us is one person with three distinct powers.

He is speaking of C.S. Lewis, the British author of *Mere Christianity*, *The Screwtape Letters*, and *The Chronicles of Narnia*. Here we see the clear transmission of Neoplatonic Christian thinking developed some 1500 years earlier by St. Augustine and others.

Let's jump across the Atlantic and back in time to Ralph Waldo Emerson. Emerson is deeply indebted to Plato. While influenced by Vedanta, he was even more influenced by Platonism. In his *Collected Works*, Plato or Platonism are mentioned over 300 times. His personal journals contain over 250 references. He even writes that: "Out of Plato come all things that are still written and debated among men of thought."

Which brings us to American Transcendentalism. Here is John Uebersax on the subject:

Transcendentalism was an explicit reaction against the modern rationalism of philosophers like John Locke and Thomas Hobbes. The effect of these rationalist philosophies was to deny that human beings had innate knowledge and Higher Reason (or Conscience), and that people were divine — made in the 'image and likeness of God.' In short, rationalism led to materialism and loss of higher values.

This rationalist philosophy came just at the time of the Industrial Revolution. Rationalism, by denying transcendent values, justified reducing society to a vast a system of factories and banks where man is nothing but a cog in a machine. By claiming that man is merely a material creature, rationalism led to all the abuses of a radically commercial society. The social problems of modernity we see today actually began around 1790 in Europe and America. The Transcendentalists (and their allies, the Romanticists) saw this problem and tried to counter it.

American Transcendentalism was a revival of the Platonic heritage of the Renaissance.

Transcendentalism is a continuation and extension of a long-standing Western tradition in philosophy and religion, and places considerable emphasis on intellectual and moral self-culture.

One important part of this is the Platonic notion of innate ideas. Locke denied that human beings have innate ideas and his view dominated Enlightenment-era thinking. Immanuel Kant, however, disproved Locke: he showed that our minds are so constructed as to see reality only in terms of pre-existing categories, rules, principles, and relationships. For example, we automatically see the world in moral terms, e.g., constantly evaluating ourselves, other people, and events as good or bad, right or wrong, just or unjust. It's innate, part of human nature.

The core tenets of American Transcendentalism can be seen as these:

(1) all human beings have a higher, spiritual nature; (2) all people have common, innate Ideals (the True, the Beautiful, the Just, and the Good) and this is of vast importance for society; (3) life has definite moral meaning; (4) Nature can help connect us with God/Spirit/Ultimate Reality and with our own higher nature; and (5) we have supra-rational forms of knowledge: intuition, Conscience, higher Reason, inspiration, and creative imagination.

There is a lot of overlap of Transcendentalism with the Unitarians. Emerson was a Unitarian minister before resigning his pulpit. Other famous Unitarians involved in Transcendentalism include William Ellery Channing, William Henry Channing, James Freeman Clarke, John Sullivan Dwight, Convers Francis, Frederic Henry Hedge, and Theodore Parker, to name just a few.

Our journey from ancient Greece bring us at last to Humanism.

Much of modern Humanism is inspired by the principles that animated the Enlightenment: a commitment to reason as a mechanism to change society and a commitment to science as the best way of learning about the world. Humanists believe that people should be free to think and discuss any thought, regardless of the sacred truths that may be questioned by doing so.

The second major influence on Humanism comes from liberal religious movements, including liberal Christian and Jewish movements, Transcendentalism, and Unitarian Universalism. And as we have seen, much of that is deeply influenced by Plato.

Humanists seek to discover what best promotes human flourishing while leaving behind those beliefs and practices that would prevent humanity from achieving its full potential.

This sounds to me like an excellent expression of The Form of the Good.

Earlier I mentioned Pitirim Sorokin. Sorokin saw in human culture two elemental forces or orientations: materialism and idealism. Ultimately, these two cultural principles derive from the fundamental two-fold nature of humanity. A recognition of this dualism is a central feature of the Judeo-Christian-Greco-Roman tradition in the West. On the one hand, humans are material beings. We have a body located in time and space. We have sensations, feelings, emotions, instincts and appetites. We feel, we think, we desire.

On the other hand, humans have a nature that is eternal, spiritual, or, as it might be called in the Platonic tradition, Ideal. We have the ability to see or know the eternal Forms of Beauty, Truth, Justice, Virtue, and so on. This nature and ability is universal and shared by all.

Sorokin, after exhaustive historical study, concluded that all human cultures could be classified according to the extent to which they are organized around the principles of materialism, idealism, or some mixture of both. There is little question that we live in a radically materialist society. In a radically materialistic culture, the principle of life is "eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die." At the other extreme is radical idealism, marked by rigidity of political or religious thought and action. Sometimes these two extremes coexist, like now.

Occasionally in history we see cultures that integrate or harmonize these two principles. Then the guiding attitude is that moral excellence is compatible with, or even the same thing, as pleasure and happiness. The material world becomes transfigured by being united with eternal values.

I think that Humanism, and Unitarian Universalism, seek to balance and integrate this duality, to transfigure the world.

And we are failing miserably at it.

The freedom to think and discuss any thought, the very use of reason itself, is being called into question by voices within our denomination. Science is being ignored by our leadership. The very idea of universality, of shared eternal values of truth, beauty, and justice, is no longer fashionable in our culture, or our denomination, it seems. We are mired in relativism, and no longer seem able to hold the tensions inherent in the duality of human nature. Indeed, the very idea that there is such a thing as human nature is no longer acceptable.

I admit that holding and harmonizing the tension between materialism and idealism is difficult, particularly in a radically materialistic culture that infects everything with its mercantile mentality. But abandoning our Western philosophical heritage of Humanism and Transcendentalism is not the way forward.

If we do so, I do not know what we will be, but we will no longer be Unitarian Universalists.

To be continued....