Souls in Motion: The Experience of Philosophy in Plato

by

Isabel Fattal
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“To be sure, one thing is necessary above all if one is to practice reading as an art in this way, something that has been unlearned most thoroughly nowadays...something for which one has almost to be a cow and in any case not a ‘modern man’: rumination.”

-Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*
INTRODUCTION

Plato, Rationalist or Romance Novelist?

In a certain book’s opening pages, it’s a hot summer day and two men lay by a cool spring, shoes off, feet in the water, their heads resting on grassy pillows. They start talking about love, waxing poetic, and one of them says he’s going to tell a long story, to try to paint the picture of love in broad strokes. Then suddenly we’re in the sky. The tale has beautiful, perfect winged beings wandering through a heavenly realm, falling to earth, losing their wings, circling through earth as their now half-perfect selves, trying as hard as they can to get back up to that high place. As the men are talking, trees cover them from the heat of the sun, lulling them, if not quite into sleep then into that state of inspired haze that makes everything feel rather dream-like. Between the vivid, gorgeous tales of love and the calm grassy scene, the whole affair has the reader filled with serenity, with a sense of possibility, with pleasure of a most visceral kind. Flip to the cover: this is the work of the man we’re often told is the world’s first rationalist.

The book is a dialogue, and the dialogue is Plato’s Phaedrus.¹ In typical Platonic fashion, the character of Socrates and his interlocutor, the impressionable and excited if not rigorously critical Phaedrus, investigate the topic of love.² But this is just about all that’s typical about the dialogue. Instead of Plato’s usual setting of the city, Socrates and Phaedrus are in the country. Singing cicadas and trees rustling in the wind are their

¹ All quotations from Plato’s dialogues in this thesis will refer to the translations in John M. Cooper and D.S. Hutchinson, eds., Plato: Complete Works (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997). Quotations from the Phaedrus refer to Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff’s translation.
audience, a change from the usual cluster of rhetoricians and philosophers-in-training. The way Socrates and Phaedrus speak, too, is different. Instead of the Socrates who is sometimes accused of being a wet blanket for his unrelenting attempts to get people to think, here we have Socrates on vacation, treating Phaedrus to stories because he can’t help himself. And the stories themselves are lovely, colorful and full of passion. What’s more, these are not just stories about human beings. Socrates tells stories about heaven; intricate cosmologies are being laid out through his pretty metaphors. They are also stories about madness, about the frenzy of erotic love, about the beauty of losing control. What does any of this have to do with philosophy?

And that’s where it begins: the now-centuries-old quest to grapple with what Plato is doing here in this odd, undoubtedly beautiful, bafflingly “non-rational” text. We might go even further to say that trying to piece together this general puzzle, to sort through how this seemingly “erotic” or “mystical” or “non-Platonic” dialogue might fit in with Plato’s other more clearly “rational” dialogues, has been the project of the Western tradition since these texts started to circulate. Reason and passion, religion and philosophy, mind and body: the Phaedrus is a text that seems to defy, and thus ignite centuries of conversation about, each of the central binaries in the history of Western thought.

We might stop here, though, and ask whether Plato’s dialogues themselves gave birth to these questions, or whether Plato became the posthumous inheritor of a tradition of binaries he never asked for. Alfred North Whitehead has famously written: “The safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it
consists of a series of footnotes to Plato.”² He means by this that Plato has been an influence on scholarship in every period since, and this is certainly true. But this statement implies a certain relationship of power and authority that we might need to flip on its head. There are thousands of footnotes to Plato, to be sure, but so too does Plato exist as a footnote, for thousands of main events ranging from narratives of Christian mysticism to memes about the “real.” Each time that Plato is invoked, it is not the invoker who is the footnote. Instead, it is the founder of Western philosophy himself we are finding in small font at the bottom of the metaphorical page.

To trace the history of each of these footnoting acts would, of course, be impossible, so I will only try to do so partially here. First came those who weren’t conditioned to see a contradiction between Plato’s rationalism and apparent eroticism or mysticism or passion, whatever we might want to call what we find in the Phaedrus. Instead they became enthusiastic “footnoters” of Plato, taking and expanding upon the elements of Platonic thought that best fit their own evolving views. These thinkers include, most significantly, the Neoplatonists and early Christian theologians (who were thought to be influenced by the Neoplatonists).³ Such thinkers have taken pieces of

³ To list, briefly, a few of the most significant: The founder of the school of Neoplatonism is thought to be Ammonius Saccas, whose birthdate is unknown but was thought to be lecturing by the time of 231 AD; he was followed by his pupil Plotinus, born ca. 203 AD. These early branches of Neoplatonism were tied to pagan tradition. See Charles Elsee, Neoplatonism in Relation to Christianity: An Essay (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 51-52. Neoplatonic ideas began to be taken up by Christian writers as early as the fifth century AD, with the writings of “Dionysius the Areopagite” (also called Pseudo-Dionysius), although there are questions still unanswered about the level of interchange of ideas between Neoplatonism and Christianity from both directions (Elsee, Neoplatonism in Relation to Christianity, 83-84). It should be noted that Neoplatonism was not an explicit attempt to revive Plato’s texts, and that while Neoplatonists were undoubtedly reading and influenced by Plato’s work, the intellectual tradition was one which incorporated elements of the entire broader Hellenic tradition. See Christian Wildberg, “Neoplatonism,” Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, published Jan 11, 2016, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/neoplatonism/.

Plato’s own thought, from the two-world cosmology that appears in some of his allegories to the divine nature of the Forms, and crafted old-but-new traditions with his influence as blessing. This influence trickled all the way down to the Neoplatonist revival of the Renaissance.4

Then came the Enlightenment, which led to a trend of tracing Plato’s influence—both real and imagined—on thinkers such as Descartes and Rousseau. For selective readers, this linkage has solidified Plato’s place in the canon of rationalist thinkers to this day. This view has lasted in some capacity through Derrida, who places Plato at the start of a rationalist and dualist intellectual tradition. Take the following statement by Derrida: “All metaphysicians, from Plato to Rousseau, Descartes to Husserl, have proceeded in this way, conceiving good to be before evil, the positive before the negative, the pure before the impure, the simple before the complex, the essential before the accidental, the imitated before the imitation, etc.”5 Derrida makes our point for us: here is Plato, the first mention in a long timeline of metaphysicians, in a placement that for all intents and purposes marks him as the father of the binary.

Of course, debates about the veracity of each of these diverse readings of Plato are extensive and ever-evolving. But the range we’ve just identified is telling enough of the interpretive possibilities with which Plato presents any given reader. To go back to our metaphor, Plato gives us a wide range of source material to footnote, some of which may seem contradictory to itself. Working out the apparent contradictions in Plato’s thought has been a project of many. This thesis will be interested in a related project, one which attempts both to iron out apparent contradictions in Plato’s writings on the

4 This revival in the fifteenth century was characterized mainly by the works of Gemistus Plethon, Bessarion, and Marsilio Ficino. See Wildberg, "Neoplatonism."
experience of philosophy and, simultaneously, to call attention to the ways in which these apparent contradictions have themselves been constructed, not by Plato himself but by some of the many later interpretations of his work.

**Platonic Religious Experience: What is at Stake?**

Our point of departure will be the category of religious experience. From either side, one of the key debates for “footnoters” of Plato has been the question of religious experience in the Platonic model of seeking wisdom. The question of whether acquiring wisdom in the Platonic sense is a religious experience looks to many scholars like a particularly convenient hotbed for the tensions we have just walked through. Here we have Plato, father of a thought tradition that many have argued is one of rationalism, with dialogues advocating the seeking of knowledge through rigorous study and proper discourse, and yet we also find in his work imagery of visions of light and heavenly realms and discussions of losing oneself in philosophy as compared to ancient Greek religious rites. As we'll see, Plato scholars use the question of religious experience in Plato’s writing for every possible purpose, from affirming the existence of some sort of all-consuming religious experience to disavowing all of Plato’s religious language. And the in-between is a lot of just that: in-between, with all of the connotations of the phrase. Even the most open-minded thinking among Plato scholarship starts with a binary, with an attempt to bridge some gap that is already accepted as real: how do we combine reason and passion, mysticism and philosophy, religious experience and rational discourse? This construction of the question as one of “combining,” of making some two things that are inherently and unquestionably separate fit together, is already an act of interpretation, perhaps even of misinterpretation.
As I’ve implied above, the obstacles to a serious engagement with a seemingly contentious reason-religion binary run deep, but for our purposes in terms of the question of religious experience, the main challenge is a clear disciplinary divide. Those talking about religious experience from the philosophical standpoint take for granted that they know what religious experience is or must be; they view it as a well-behaved tool that can be used to analyze other issues, rather than a category that is itself contentious and worthy of serious consideration. We will delve into the particular ramifications of these generalizations in our first chapter, but we’ll see, broadly speaking, that scholarship on the question of religious experience in Plato—from those who want to affirm that it is Plato’s highest priority to those who want to run away from it entirely—operates from a definition of religious experience as an entity that marks a departure from all rational or discursive processes.

The scholarship in philosophy has debated these questions ad nauseam, but not one piece of scholarship has yet approached the topic from the point of view of religious studies. Turning to religious studies will enable us to see that the intellectual community has long evolved from a view of religious experience as this totalizing, non-discursive entity and has emphasized the interpretive processes at work in any given described religious experience. By using the new framework that religious studies scholarship offers us for thinking about the category of religious experience, we will find that the stakes to the question of whether we might find a religious experience in Plato have lowered—or, at least, that the stakes are quite different than the scholarship in philosophy seems to suggest. For this reason, I contend that a proper engagement with the question of Plato’s understanding of philosophy as related to religious experience is
impossible until we incorporate the insights of religious studies of the past few decades. This thesis will be an attempt to do just that.

We’ll take a short interlude here to identify what exactly these insights of religious studies are. The section that follows will offer a sort of thumbnail history of the major shift in the discussion on religious experience in recent decades. We will start with William James, whose series of lectures at the start of the twentieth century would become the canonical text on the subject of religious experience for most of the century that followed. James, who identified himself as a sort of philosopher-psychologist, gave a series of lectures at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland between 1901 and 1902 called *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature.* James attempted to bring psychology to the study of religion, which to him meant studying first-hand accounts of religious experience, with a focus on narrated experiences. We will delve into one example of such a narrated experience and James’ interpretation of it, and then we will trace the rigorous critique of James’ work that has persisted in religious studies scholarship for the last four decades and continues to dominate the field today.

**A Jamesian Conversion: “I Could Not Have Believed It”**

James arrives at his conception of a classic conversion experience from the narrative of a man named Stephen H. Bradley, whose testimony James finds on a pamphlet. We will use Bradley’s narrative to guide us through James’ views on religious

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7 James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 2-3.
8 While popular usage of the term “Jamesian” implies reference to Henry James, I will be using the term sporadically throughout this thesis in reference to William James.
9 James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 189.
experience, mainly because he offers us a detailed account that will be useful for picking out key elements of this narrated experience, and also because we will soon read a piece of Plato scholarship that uses the example of Bradley in its arguments for religious experience in Plato.

Bradley begins by stating the fact that he had thought himself converted at fourteen years old. 10 Nine years later, though, when confronted by some young people active in a “revival of religion that had begun in his neighborhood” and asked if he “had religion,” he realized that perhaps he wasn’t so sure. 11 Bradley states in his account: “…my reply generally was, I hope I have.” 12 By contrast, he says, these young converts “said they knew they had it.” 13 Bradley asks them to pray for him, since, as he puts it, “if I had not got religion now, after so long a time professing to be a Christian…it was time I had.” 14

The narrative moves to Bradley’s description of his “second”—or, to him, likely his first full or genuine—conversion experience. But it will take him a while to get to a description of what he sees as the actual conversion experience. First, Bradley describes sitting in church and listening to “the Methodist” speak. 15 He is viscerally affected by the preaching to which he listens, but it still does not have the effect that he seems to know would be necessary for a conversion experience. Bradley describes this halfhearted experience:

[The Methodist at the Academy] spoke of the ushering in of the day of general judgment…The scene of that day appeared to be taking place, and so awakened were all the powers of my mind that, like Felix, I trembled involuntarily on the

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10 Ibid.
11 Ibid., 190.
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid.
15 Ibid.
bench where I was sitting, though I felt nothing at heart. The next day evening I went to hear him again... When he finished his discourse, an old gentleman turned to me and said ‘This is what I call preaching.’ I thought the same, but my feelings were still unmoved by what he said...\textsuperscript{16}

Bradley tells us that he has been impacted by the power of the narrative; the “powers” of his “mind” are “awakened,” and he “tremble[s] involuntarily.” But he makes sure to distinguish this trembling from an experience of full feeling. He states, “I trembled... though I felt nothing at heart.”

Bradley moves directly from this lackluster experience in church to a statement that sets up the conversion experience he is about to narrate:

I will now relate my experience of the power of the Holy Spirit which took place on the same night. Had any person told me previous to this that I could have experienced the power of the Holy Spirit in the manner which I did, I could not have believed it, and should have thought the person deluded that told me so.\textsuperscript{17}

We should note here that Bradley establishes as one of the qualifying aspects of his experience the fact that he did not see it coming. In other words, no rational process or conversation with another human being would have prepared him for this experience. On this model, the experience is fully internal, and it is also sudden. Bradley had just described at length how the preaching he was hearing did not affect him fully, and this leads him well into his emphasis here on the fact that no sheer listening or engaging in conversation will do the trick in the way that this next narrated experience does. Bradley tells us that when he gets home, his mental state is still consistent with the lack of genuine feeling he experienced in church. He states, “I retired to rest soon after I got home, and felt indifferent to the things of religion until I began to be exercised by the

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 190-191.
Holy Spirit, which began in about five minutes after.”  

Bradley describes what this experience felt like:

>At first, I began to feel my heart beat very quick all on a sudden, which made me at first think that perhaps something is going to ail me, though I was not alarmed, for I felt no pain. My heart increased in its beating, which soon convinced me that it was the Holy Spirit from the effect it had on me. I began to feel exceedingly happy and humble…

The construction of the narrative here reaffirms what Bradley has been hinting at throughout: that his use of reason is not helpful or at all constitutive of this conversion experience. His mind tells him—mistakenly—that the “sudden” quickening of his heartbeat might be a physical ailment, but then a continuation of this physical response “convince[s]” him of an external cause. Bradley’s language gives us a sense that it is his rapid heartbeat, not any rational or cognitive process, that persuades him of the proper cause of the experience. Bradley’s experience culminates in a described sense of unity and lack of conflict. He opens up a Bible to Romans and finds that “every verse seemed to almost speak and to confirm it to be truly the Word of God, and as if my feelings corresponded with the meaning of the word.”

Bradley ends this account of his past experience with a current claim, letting us know that he stands steadfast in his belief. He states, “I now defy all the Deists and Atheists in the world to shake my faith in Christ.”

James lets Bradley’s narrative stand on his own, and at its conclusion he jumps in with an account of the psychological processes he sees at work in this narrated experience. James introduces his analysis with a theory on the internal makeup of the individual. He states,
If you open the chapter on Association, of any treatise on Psychology, you will read that a man's ideas, aims, and objects form diverse internal groups and systems, relatively independent of one another. Each ‘aim’ which he follows awakens a certain specific kind of interested excitement, and gathers a certain group of ideas together in subordination to it as its associates; and if the aims and excitements are distinct in kind, their groups of ideas may have little in common.22

James goes on to say that at certain moments or periods of time, one of these “groups” of “ideas, aims and objects” usurps the others. He states, “When one group is present and engrosses the interest, all the ideas connected with other groups may be excluded from the mental field.”23

James offers an example of such a shift:

The President of the United States when, with paddle, gun, and fishing-rod, he goes camping in the wilderness for a vacation, changes his system of ideas from top to bottom. The presidential anxieties have lapsed into the background entirely; the official habits are replaced by the habits of a son of nature…If now he should never go back, and never again suffer political interests to gain dominion over him, he would be for practical intents and purposes a permanently transformed being.24

James endows certain kinds of experiences with this status of providing complete “transformation”:

Our ordinary alterations of character, as we pass from one of our aims to another, are not commonly called transformations, because each of them is so rapidly succeeded by another in the reverse direction; but whenever one aim grows so stable as to expel definitively its previous rivals from the individual’s life, we tend to speak of the phenomenon, and perhaps to wonder at it, as a ‘transformation.’25

James’ use of time is important here: this case of “transformation” is not the ever-evolving speedy interchange between conflicting “aims,” but is instead something which occurs with a sort of strength that marks a “new” period of time and which is permanent.

22 Ibid.
23 Ibid.
24 Ibid., 193-194.
25 Ibid., 194.
in its unification of the individual. As James says, other “aims” are “expelled definitively…from the individual’s life.”

When the “aim” that takes over for all the others is religious, James labels the experience a conversion experience. He states, “…the point of view from which the aim is taken… may come to lie permanently within a certain system; and then, if the change be a religious one, we call it a Conversion, especially if it be by crisis, or sudden.”

James’ final definition of a conversion experience establishes a new orientation both of time and of an individual’s internal makeup—in other words, suddenly the self is transformed and unified, and from that temporal moment on, nothing is the same. We will find resonances of this image of conversion as a rupture both in time and in an individual’s sense of self in the Plato scholarship to which we’ll soon turn.

**Undoing the James Model**

In his book *Religious Experience*, published in 1985, Wayne Proudfoot offers a careful critique of James’ work, one which has come to define the field of religious studies scholarship on experience ever since. Proudfoot returns to Bradley’s narrated experience and probes his description of how his rapid heartbeat led him to define his experience as the work of the Holy Spirit. Proudfoot argues that Bradley’s particular context and prior knowledge must have enabled him to assign this particular cause to his experience. Proudfoot writes,

Bradley, like so many prospective devotees before and since, could not understand his feelings in naturalistic terms. Religious symbols offered him an explanation that was compatible both with his experience and with his antecedent beliefs. He did not consider explanations involving Krishna, Zeus, or

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26 Ibid., 196.
the Qur'an. The content of the scripture and the experience of being moved or physiologically aroused were confidently linked.28

Proudfoot argues here that Bradley’s chosen explanation for the cause of his experience was necessarily based upon preexisting commitments and beliefs. This analysis complicates the sense that James just gave us of the conversion experience as a sudden, separate sort of moment in time that is unrelated to interpretive processes. Robert Sharf offers another helpful description of this critique when summarizing recent scholarly views on mystical experience:

[T]he very notion that one can separate an unmediated experience from a culturally determined description of that experience is philosophically suspect…In other words, mystical experience is wholly shaped by a mystic’s cultural environment, personal history, doctrinal commitments, religious training, expectations, aspirations, and so on.29

The intervention of Proudfoot and Sharf here can allow us to look at Bradley’s narrative with new eyes. As I argued above, Bradley repeatedly affirms in his narrative that his religious experience was not at all related to rational processes. According to his narrative, he had a physical experience, his brain tried to deter him by telling him it was an ailment, and then he somehow became persuaded that the Holy Spirit must be the cause. Proudfoot and Sharf remind us, though, that such a timeline is possible only in a narrated experience; it is impossible in reality. Bradley’s rational or interpretive abilities may have tried to convince him that his quickening heartbeat was the sign of a physical ailment, but these interpretive abilities were also present in his delineation of the experience as an effect of the Holy Spirit. In other words, he pulled from his available languages and contexts to mark his experience in a particular way. By extension, this

28 Proudfoot, Religious Experience, 104.
means that Bradley’s religious experience itself was not entirely free of rational processes; his active, interpretive decision to frame his experience in this way was essential for making the experience possible. Proudfoot summarizes this concept: “Beliefs about the causes of one's experience are themselves constitutive of the experience.”

This new understanding means several things for our conception of religious experience, both generally and in relation to the readings of Plato that will follow in this thesis. First, this understanding allows that religious experience is always somehow mediated by interpretation and rational or discursive processes. Second, it allows us to understand that religious experiencing is always the product of particular contexts and preexisting conditions that make these experiences possible. We will bring these understandings to our readings of Plato as we ask: how can we think about religious experiencing for Plato not as something which is necessarily separate from interpretive processes? How can we use this understanding of religious experience to offer an account of the necessary preconditions for the experience of philosophy in Plato? How can we trace the narrated experiences of Plato’s characters, particularly those that appear most “religious” or non-rational, to identify the particular contexts of these experiences?

Structure

Chapter One will work through the landscape of scholarship on questions of religious experience in Plato, keeping in mind the questions and concerns we’ve just raised about the category of religious experience. Chapters Two and Three will approach several Platonic dialogues as philosophical and literary texts. While these chapters will

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30 Proudfoot, Religious Experience, 115.
largely consist in detailed analysis of the dialogues themselves—particularly the Phaedrus, the Symposium, the Theaetetus, and the Republic—we will be reading these texts through the lens of the issues that we have seen the religious studies scholarship raise. Together, these two chapters will attempt to provide an account of the experience of philosophy in the Platonic dialogues, with particular attention to its temporal structure. Chapter Two will lay out the preconditions of the experience of philosophy for Plato, and it will trace three narrated experiences of philosophy in process as they play out among Plato’s characters. Chapter Three will explore Plato’s descriptions of the highest stages of the experience of philosophy, which the scholarship has long used to ask questions about the presence of a Jamesian sort of religious experience at the climax of the philosophical process. I argue that by placing the language of vision that we will explore in Chapter Three in the context of the preconditions that Plato lays out and the narrated experiences with which he provides us, we can understand this highest experience not as a rupture that breaks with the rest of the Platonic experience of philosophy, but instead as a consistent next step in the Platonic model of the human quest for wisdom.

**Comments on Methodology**

We will do our best in this project not to fall into the same traps that we’ll soon see popping up in the existing field of scholarship. We won’t start by picking out the language that Plato uses that sounds most “religious” to our modern (and, usually, James-trained) ears, such as comparisons to Greek religious rituals or descriptions of powerful vision experiences. Instead, we will focus on tracing the preconditions and the narrated experiences of philosophy in several Platonic dialogues, and in the process we will pay close attention to where and in what ways these seemingly “religious” forms of
language pop up within the structure of the experience. We will read with the hope of understanding these forms of language not as aberrations within the broader Platonic worldview but instead as comprehensible, and even significant, aspects of Plato’s descriptions of the experience of questing for wisdom.

We also will not be undertaking our reading with a mission of classifying Plato’s experience as religious or non-religious. Our reason is simple. Proudfoot reminds us that the category of religious experience is itself constructed and has its ties in eighteenth-century Western conceptions of religion.\(^31\) What this implies, of course, is that Plato was not thinking in terms of this conception of “religious experience,” especially not in terms of the kind of model presented by James. With this in mind, we will try to avoid reading Plato through later contexts. This applies to the interventions of Proudfoot and Sharf in the debate on religious experience, too. We will not attempt to place these contemporary models onto Platonic experience in a way that alters it, but instead we will use the recent religious studies scholarship as a framework that opens up new possibilities for conceptualizing an experience that can be both destabilizing and affecting while also tied into interpretive processes. The religious studies scholarship will also do the basic work.

\(^{31}\) Proudfoot traces the use of the category of religious experience to the writings of Friedrich Schleiermacher in the eighteenth century (Proudfoot, Religious Experience, xii). He argues that Schleiermacher’s focus on religious experience was propelled by the fact that the metaphysical arguments that once served as acceptable legitimation for religion were being challenged by thinkers such as Descartes, Kant and Hume; at the same time, legitimation of religion by scripture or ecclesiastical authority was also being challenged by, as Proudfoot states, “the study of the historical development of scripture and the early church” (Ibid., xii-xiii). Proudfoot argues that Schleiermacher entered the scene in this particular context: “The turn to religious experience was motivated in large measure by an interest in freeing religious doctrine and practice from dependence on metaphysical beliefs and ecclesiastical institutions and grounding it in human experience. This was the explicit aim of Schleiermacher's On Religion, the most influential statement and defense of the autonomy of religious experience...Religion could now be appreciated as an autonomous moment in human experience which ought not to be reduced to science, metaphysics, or morality” (Ibid., xiii).
of giving us the tools to pinpoint how the Jamesian notion of religious experience clouds the scholarship’s ability to properly deal with questions about Plato’s uses of the language of frenzy or vision.

Our main goal is to listen to the text itself as best we can, to try and figure out what Plato may have been getting at with his use of particular metaphors, especially those that the scholarship has used to identify the presence of some sort of religious experience in Plato’s writing. The necessity of our method will become clear in the next chapter, where we will see the scholarship more often than not base its exploration of these questions around a preconceived notion of religious experience that usually has very little to do with Plato’s own descriptions of the experience of philosophy.

I insert a disclaimer here to say that in the following chapters I will occasionally use the phrase “religious language” as a shorthand signifier for the types of language that the scholarship has utilized to advocate a Jamesian sort of religious experience in Plato. The forms of language to which I refer with this phrase include the language of physical visceral reaction, the related language of frenzy, and the language of vision to describe the individual’s experience with truth. The scholarship has described these forms of language as “religious,” “mystical,” and “conversional” in turn, and often it has used several of these terms together without distinguishing between them. An exploration of the particular historical contexts of each of these terms would be beyond our scope here, but given the variety of names we will see given to Plato’s language, it is important to note here that my delineation of these forms of language as “religious” is not an attempt to classify them under any particular rubric but rather simply to identify them in an abbreviated way.
Before we begin our reading of Plato’s dialogues, we must get a better idea of the existing landscape of scholarship. The next chapter will serve as a brief interlude before we begin our own reading to help familiarize us with the contours of the field of scholarship on religious experience in Plato and to situate our reading accordingly.
CHAPTER ONE

THE SHADOW OF THE JAMES MODEL ON PLATO SCHOLARSHIP

Bradley’s Conversion: A Platonic Experience?

Our point of departure is a scholar who explicitly appeals to the James model of religious experience in his discussion of Plato. J.V. Luce, writing an article called “Plato’s Religious Experience,” undertakes an exploration of what he calls “religious experience” in Plato’s dialogues through a comparison between James’ account of Mr. Bradley’s conversion experience and several passages from the Phaedrus. He offers up several similarities, the first being the consistency of descriptions of physical, visceral reaction in both Bradley’s narrative and Plato’s description of the experience of the philosopher in the Phaedrus. Luce writes, “Mr. Bradley's preliminary symptom was a fit of involuntary trembling as he listened to the preacher's description of the last judgment. Plato says of a man newly experiencing the power of Eros: ‘Intense shuddering passes over him and something of those former terrors returns to his soul.'”

While Luce is correct about the existence of overlapping imagery, his choice of imagery is selective and not constitutive of either of the experiences that he compares. We might remember that in Bradley’s narrative, his initial experience of trembling was

33 We should note that Luce’s argument about the Phaedrus is tied into an argument about Plato himself; Luce argues that Plato himself underwent a religious conversion experience and that the Phaedrus is a case of Plato weaving his own personal experience into his writing. Our analysis here will not be dealing with Luce’s arguments on Plato’s own conversion experience, but for further discussion see Luce, “Plato’s Religious Experience,” 74-79, 82-91.
34 Ibid., 81.
decidedly not a part of his “religious experience”; listening to the sermon in church was used in the narrative to identify a distinction between the lack of emotion he felt before his conversion experience and the sudden shift in his outlook after the conversion experience. It will turn out in our later chapters that for Plato, this language of shuddering is similarly not constitutive of the full experience of philosophy. We will see Plato use similar descriptions of physical reactions even for narrated experiences that are not experiences of philosophy, such as the experience of an individual reacting to a beautiful but ultimately insubstantial speech. We’ll also see that while Plato does include this imagery of “shuddering” in his descriptions of the experience of philosophy, he accompanies this image with a host of other metaphors which help the reader to identify exactly the role that this language of shuddering does and does not play in Plato’s account of the overall experience.

Luce’s next point of comparison is particularly important to our questions in this thesis. Luce uses the parallel imagery of a “stream” entering the individual to strengthen his argument for the similarity of the two experiences. He writes,

> For a parallel to the stream which flowed into Mr. Bradley’s mouth and heart, consider the following: 'The soul receives the effluences of beauty which flow in a stream towards it, and is watered and warmed thereby and finds relief from pain and rejoices.' The sudden clearing of Mr. Bradley’s memory, and the vision of the verses of scripture recall the emphasis which Plato places on recollection and memory as essential disciplines for the soul seeking to recover its lost wings.  

Luce’s words seem to imply that he does in fact understand the distinction between these two experiences. He refers to the Platonic processes of “recollection and memory” as “disciplines,” while he refers to Bradley’s experience as a “sudden clearing
of…memory.”  

Even so, he takes the repeated imagery of the individual receiving some kind of content as though by a stream to identify a similarity in these experiences. The danger of this comparison is that an experience of reception can take many forms. As Luce himself identifies, Bradley’s experience of the reception of an unidentified “stream” during his conversion is narrated as a “sudden” sort of reception, or a passive taking in of outside content. Bradley describes the stream as an external force that, in his words, “took completely possession of my soul.”  

We’ll see that for Plato, the process of proper reception is not at all sudden, and that it includes an active relationship between the receiver and the received which diverges significantly from Bradley’s language of possession here.

It is clear that the Jamesian model of experience has clouded Luce’s understanding of religious experience in both Bradley’s narration and in Plato’s text. The elements of Bradley’s narrated experience that Luce chooses to focus on are the same elements that James has trained us to focus on; Luce emphasizes Bradley’s “sudden clearing of…memory” and his experience of trembling while in church. He does not acknowledge, as we have seen Proudfoot do, that Bradley’s experience is in fact more complex than this combination of “sudden” reception and visceral physical reactions. We should note here that Luce is writing in 1962, long before critiques of the Jamesian model became dominant in the field of religious studies. In this way, Luce serves as a rather extreme model of the James-influenced traps that we will soon see at play even in more recent Plato scholarship.

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36 Ibid.
37 James, The Varieties of Religious Experience, 191.
Luce’s argument provides an opportunity to identify some of the pitfalls that our readings of Plato in this thesis will try to avoid. As we’ve seen, Luce begins with a framework for religious experience which is removed from Plato’s text itself, and then he selectively chooses imagery from Plato’s text that matches up with this framework. In addition, the metaphors that Luce uses to offer an account of “religious experience” in Platonic texts are themselves only one aspect of the account of the experience of philosophy that Plato offers in the *Phaedrus*; these metaphors only make full sense in the context of Plato’s broader outline of the structure of the experience of philosophy. We can only hope to gain an understanding of the character of the Platonic experience of philosophy by looking at these forms of language that Luce finds explicitly “religious,” particularly the language of physical reactions and reception of external content, not on their own in the selective way that Luce has done, but rather with attention to where these forms of language fit into Plato’s descriptions of the experience of philosophy. This will be our task in the chapters that follow.

**The “Just Metaphor” View**

A significant amount of the Plato scholarship on the seemingly “religious” language in Plato’s writing veers toward the other extreme: many scholars argue that

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38 For the sake of moving along toward forms of scholarship that will be more interesting to our particular analysis in this thesis, we will not be delving in this chapter into a comprehensive list of the scholarship that argues for a totalizing, self-surrendering sort of religious experience in Plato. For related views, see David J. Yount, *Plato and Plotinus on Mysticism Epistemology, and Ethics* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 69: “Plato and Plotinus…describe the experience of the Good as a vision (and/or touching) and not merely knowledge, which lends credence to the view that they believe that the experience is non-discursive.” See also Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition: From Plato to Denys* (London: Oxford University Press, 1981), 13: “The final vision of the Beautiful is not attained, or discovered: it comes upon the soul, it is revealed to the soul.”
because Plato’s most “religious”-sounding forms of language tend to appear as
metaphors, they are not fully necessary for a reader’s attempt to understand the
experience of philosophy in Plato’s writings. Andrea Nightingale summarizes this trend
in Spectacles of Truth in Classical Greek Philosophy: Theoria in its Cultural Context, writing, “In
recent decades, scholars have become uncomfortable with what they take to be a
‘mystical’ interpretation of Plato—the notion of a nonverbal ‘vision’ of truth smacks of an
‘unphilosophical’ religiosity. According to these interpreters, Plato conceived of the
pursuit and attainment of knowledge as a fully discursive enterprise.”39 Nightingale offers
one example of such an attitude, quoting C.H. Kahn:

It is a mistake to suppose...that the etymological connections of the terms idea
and eidos with the verb idein, “to see,” are in any way essential or decisive for
Plato’s conception of the Forms. The metaphor of vision for intellectual access
to the Forms is useful but altogether dispensable. The expressions for “hunting,”
“grasping,” “hitting upon,” or simply “thinking” and “recognizing”…will do as
well. The fundamental conception of the Forms is, from the beginning, linguistic
rather than visual in its orientation.40
Kahn starts from an argument about Plato’s views of the Forms and moves from there
to an analysis of which of Plato’s metaphors best fit with this view. Kahn makes this
logical move clear when he states that the metaphor of sight is not “in any way essential
or decisive for Plato’s conception of the Forms” and returns at the end of the quoted
statement to an argument about “the fundamental conception of the forms.” This
argument does not account for the ways in which Plato’s metaphors might be “essential”
for something other than an understanding of the Forms. More particularly, we will find
that these metaphors are quite helpful in construing the individual’s experience of

39 Andrea Wilson Nightingale, Spectacles of Truth in Classical Greek Philosophy: Theoria in its Cultural
40 Charles H. Kahn, Plato and the Socratic Dialogue: The Philosophical Use of a Literary Form
relating to the Forms, which is a different issue than that of Plato’s conception of the Forms themselves.41

Kahn’s argument that Plato’s metaphors must be “essential or decisive” for some broader conception of the Forms also seems to fly in the face of the stated uses of metaphor in Plato’s texts. In *Myth and Philosophy in Plato’s Phaedrus*, Werner argues that Plato’s use of metaphor establishes a sort of limitation for the explanatory ability of language around a given issue. Werner writes of Plato’s use of myth and imagery to describe the soul in the *Phaedrus*:

> By embedding a discussion of soul in a myth (the palinode), Plato is alerting us to the fact that there is something unusual or noteworthy about the subject matter—namely, that in discussing the soul, we find ourselves confronted with a limit…. In this sense, the mode of discourse (myth) symbolizes methodological problems that are inherent in the inquiry.42

However, Werner cautions that the reader should not see myth as offering any comprehensive “truth” about the soul. As Werner identifies, Socrates tells Phaedrus that he will have to use myth to describe the soul, because the human being is incapable of offering a more comprehensive account. Socrates states: “To describe what the soul actually is would require a very long account, altogether a task for a god in every way; but to say what it is like is humanly possible and takes less time” (*Phaedrus* 246a). Werner identifies that in this line,

> Socrates explicitly states that he will not offer the full-fledged account of soul, and indeed that such an account is altogether impossible….only a god could offer such [an account]. Consequently, Socrates must satisfy himself with an account of what the soul is like, an account that is fitting for human capabilities. He does

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41 The character of the Forms will be beyond the scope of our exploration in this thesis, but it is worth noting that the Forms are, as Nightingale writes, construed by Plato as “eternal and changeless” entities, whereas the human soul “exists in time”; this should further emphasize the need to distinguish Plato’s descriptions of the human experience of the Forms from the character of the Forms themselves (Nightingale, *Spectacles of Truth in Classical Greek Philosophy*, 95).
so by making use of an *image*...a second-best mode of exposition that is neither comprehensive nor fully truthful.\(^{43}\)

This understanding of the role of metaphorical forms of language for Plato can help us challenge Kahn’s argument further. Plato’s metaphors are not actually intended to directly match up with his broader metaphysical views. However, this does not imply that Plato’s metaphors are entirely random or, to use Kahn’s words, “dispensable.” While Plato’s metaphors are not intended as indications of some sort of full truth, they are in fact selected carefully, and therefore we can assume that they are not entirely arbitrary. Nightingale offers a helpful example of Plato’s decision to choose imagery related to the fourth-century Greek ritual of theoria, which she identifies as “pilgrimages to oracles and religious festivals” in search of a sort of religious experience of vision.\(^{44}\) A non-religious form of theoria was also popular in fourth-century Greece; in this version, an individual travels to new places simply for the sake of sightseeing.\(^{45}\) Nightingale argues that Plato’s choice of the religious ritual over the secular one should mean something to the reader in understanding Plato’s broader conception of the experience of philosophy. She writes, “Like traditional theoria at religious sanctuaries and festivals, philosophic theoria has a religious orientation. Indeed, this is one of the main reasons why Plato takes as his primary model the theoria to religious festivals…”\(^{46}\) We will delve more into what exactly this “religious orientation” might entail in later chapters, but at this point it is important to note that Plato did have a choice between the available metaphors of the Greek culture in which he was writing. It therefore seems that Plato’s


\(^{44}\) Nightingale, *Spectacles of Truth in Classical Greek Philosophy*, 4.

\(^{45}\) Ibid., 63.

\(^{46}\) Ibid., 82.
choice of metaphor is somewhat intentional, or at least intentional enough that we as
readers owe these metaphors the respect of reading them as carefully as we can.\footnote{This thesis will dedicate itself to exploring how Plato’s metaphor choices fit into his broader narratives of the experience of philosophy, but one should note that these metaphors of Greek ritual were also practically useful to Plato in legitimating his views in Greek society and persuading readers through the use of familiar contexts. I acknowledge that this practical purpose was likely at work in Plato’s writing, but I maintain that this argument does not take the place of an analysis of how these metaphors are used by Plato to say something about the experience of philosophy itself. On Plato’s use of Greek ritual as a rhetorical device, see Edward G. Ballard, “On Ritual and Persuasion in Plato,” \textit{Southern Journal of Philosophy} 2, no. 2 (1964): 49-55.}

## The Jamesian Shadow on Timelines of Experience

Thus far we’ve looked at rather extreme examples of problems in the scholarship
from either end. There is a layer of Plato scholarship that approaches questions of
religious experience in a subtler way, but even this layer succumbs to what we might call
Jamesian slippages. While some Plato scholars acknowledge the relationship between
rational processes and what they see as religious experience, this acknowledgment often
does not follow through in their analyses of how religious experiencing factors into the
temporal structure of the Platonic experience.

In \textit{The Education of Desire: Plato and the Philosophy of Religion}, Michel Despland offers
one example of an oversimplified account of the way in which religious experiencing
interacts with interpretive processes in the process of philosophy. Despland frames his
argument around Socrates’ statements in the \textit{Phaedrus} about the benefits of madness.\footnote{Michel Despland, \textit{The Education of Desire: Plato and the Philosophy of Religion} (Toronto, CA: University of Toronto Press, 1985), 155.}

Some brief context on this section of the dialogue will be useful before we dive into
Despland’s arguments. In short, Socrates starts by describing three forms of madness
that he views as god-given and beneficial: the divination of prophetesses and priestesses
who were tellers of the future in Greek society, the use of “mystic rites and purifications” as relief for the individual in times of trouble, and the inspiration of the muses on a poet (244a-245a). Socrates uses these examples to support his claim that madness itself cannot be thought of as wrong or inappropriate if these god-sent and beneficial forms of madness exist; this argument sets the stage for his defense of the madness of love (244a, 245b). Despland notes that this fourth sort of madness, the madness of interpersonal love, involves a level of activity and communication on the part of the human soul which these other examples of madness do not seem to include. Despland describes the distinction, writing, “…Plato keeps his warmest praise for the fourth, the most personal, the only sociable madness…The highest form of madness is that which most intimately involves—rather than suspends—the talkative soul.”

What Despland goes on to say reveals a particular kind of temporal argument that we will want to subject to serious examination in the chapters that follow. Despland argues that Plato views religious experience as a sort of catalyst for action. He writes that Plato “could not accept as divine an experience in which nothing is offered except the experience itself. Religious experiencing gives a nudge or a jolt; it also gives something to talk about, to interpret….” This timeline of “experience first, interpretation second” gives the sense that experience is not itself characterized by interpretation. This should perk up our ears after the critique we’ve seen of this framing of religious experience in James. But before we throw Despland out entirely, let’s let him finish his sentence. He goes on to write,

Plato never used religious experience to appeal to the unsayable or to suggest that the last word in knowledge is to be found above language. But he was aware that there are experiences that make us talk in novel ways, with a powerful

49 Despland, The Education of Desire, 156.
50 Ibid., 156-157.
impact that apparently leaves us helpless at first. And he considered erotic love to be the most moving example of that.  

Here we can get a better sense of how Despland’s timeline is working: the experience of love is one that “make[s]” the individual “talk in novel ways.” But what happened to what Despland had just told us a few lines ago, that the experience of the madness of love is itself an experience of talking, the kind that “involves…the talkative soul”? How does this timeline actually play out among those engaged in this kind of “experience?”

We should be wary of the way in which Despland’s construction of the timeline as “experience first, interpretation second” ends up doing exactly what he believes Plato is moving away from in this fourth form of madness: to put it in Despland’s words, this temporal construction “suspends…the talkative soul.” Our goal in the next chapter will be to figure out where the “talkative soul” is during the most frenzied experiences for which Plato offers us narratives, what this “talkative soul” is doing, and how these destabilizing experiences of “madness” factor into the broader experience of philosophy.

We should also note Despland’s second generalization, which leads us well to the guiding questions of our third chapter. Despland’s view of religious experience as a “nudge” which leads to new ways of talking also has a sort of temporal “end.” On his view, the dialectical elements of the experience of Platonic love are instrumental to the experience of acquiring truth, but they are not the experience itself. Despland writes of the conversations between lover and beloved: “We do not talk or argue for the sheer pleasure of it; we are after something that is not verbal. A unitive vision of the forms is the culmination of a philosopher’s desire to know the truth.”

51 Ibid., 157.
52 Ibid.
53 Ibid., 160.
third step in Despland’s timeline. The timeline now seems to read: experience, followed by interpretation, followed by experience. In other words, the most “experiential” or “non-rational” moments of the philosophical process are primers for a shift to the right sort of discourse which, in turn, is preparation for another non-discursive experience, this time some sort of ultimate “vision” experience. Many questions abound: what is “unitive vision,” and is this the language that Plato himself uses? Are we sure that this vision is non-verbal or that it exists in a separate timeframe from verbal processes? These questions will be our guiding ones in Chapter Three.

Timothy Chappell introduces another temporal model for the experience of philosophy which we will return to throughout our analysis. In “Conversion or Conversation? A Note on Plato’s Philosophical Methods,” Chappell identifies what he sees as a problematic binary in Plato’s texts between the “conversional” and “conversational” models of philosophy.54 Chappell refers to the conversional model as follows: “The point of philosophy, on this view, is to grasp a mystical vision, a transcendent insight into the Cause of Things.”55 Chappell writes of this model,

On this conception of philosophy, conversation – dialectic – can have only instrumental value. It leads you up, if all goes well, to the point where you are rightly oriented, and ready for the vision of truth. But once you climb to this point, you might as well kick away the ladder that brought you there; for without the transforming vision of the transcendent truth, nothing else can go right.56

This sounds a bit like what Despland may have been referring to in his description of the goal of philosophy as a “unitive vision of the forms.” Chappell contrasts this conversional model with the conversational model, in which “philosophy…consist[s] in

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55 Chappell, “Conversion or Conversation?,” 321.
56 Ibid.
the back-and-forth of conversation, in the social and intellectual interchange…”

Chappell fears that attempts to combine these two models will “reduce one of these models (the conversional) to the other (the conversational).” For Chappell, this fear is based on what he sees as the tremendous difference between the two models. He writes, “I am reasonably sure that the gap between the conversional and conversational models of philosophy is deep, unbridgeable and historically perennial.” This statement is an example of a case in which thinking in terms of binaries may be clouding an attempt to make sense of the diverse descriptors that Plato uses for the experience of philosophy. Does Chappell view the “gap” between these two models as “historically perennial” because this gap exists in Plato’s text itself, or because he has seen this gap assert itself in the more recent history of Western thought? We can’t know for sure, but it is worth noting that Chappell is basing his argument around a sense of these gaps as ultimately “unbridgeable,” and it is unclear to us at this point if this clear inability to bridge the gap is present in Plato’s texts themselves.

Despite Chappell’s fears about combining the two models, he ends his argument with an attempt to reconcile the conversional with the conversational. He writes, “I do think that Plato recognises and makes room for both models.” This potential combination of the two models turns out to be a structure of experience in which one model is a preparation for the other. Chappell describes this structure: “You cannot…kick away the ladder once you’re up; for human nature being what it is, you won’t stay up. We go on needing the rational discipline of the conversational model,

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57 Ibid., 321.
58 Ibid., 325.
59 Ibid., 326.
60 Ibid.
even once initiated into the conversational model.” We should note that in this statement, Chappell moves from his question about which aspect of the experience is more valuable or important to an argument about which element of the experience comes first and which comes second. His hypothetical combination of the conversational and conversational models establishes, as Despland’s model did, a particular temporal relationship that separates the discursive experience of philosophy from a non-discursive “end” to the experience. In other words, in Chappell’s view, if discourse is a ladder then it cannot also be the place you land when you reach the top.

It is interesting to note that this temporal model looks quite different from Despland’s, although both scholars establish clear bifurcations between discourse and some sort of “religious experiencing.” Despland’s timeline was best described as “experience-discourse-experience,” and here, Chappell’s timeline seems to run as “discourse-experience-discourse.” In simpler terms, Chappell sees the discursive practice of philosophy as preparation for a non-discursive culmination, after which the individual returns to the practical day-to-day of discursive processes. These two different timelines should prime us for the fact that the distinctions between experience and discourse are not very easy to establish in Plato’s text. By looking at these two timelines side by side, we can begin to understand that the temporal structure of the philosophical experience in Plato is not so simple as to be condensed into a clear linear model that distinguishes between religious experiencing and rational discourse.

As we’ve seen in this chapter, the scholarship on the “religious”-sounding language of the Platonic experience has been almost entirely clouded by generalizations from either end. Our survey of debates in religious studies around the category of

61 Ibid.
religious experience has shown us that the scholarship has generally relied on outdated conceptions of the “requirements” for religious experiences, assuming that they must cast the Platonic experience in a Jamesian light and argue for a passive experience of union in order to account for the seemingly “religious” forms of language that Plato uses. From the other side, we’ve seen scholarship argue that certain metaphors are simply not to be paid attention to given that they don’t fit in with what these scholars see as Plato’s broader metaphysical or epistemological framework. This other extreme seems equally founded in misconceptions about the stakes of taking Plato’s “religious” language seriously.

In all of this scholarship, we have not yet seen an analysis that attempts to take Plato’s forms of “religious” language, both the in-process language of madness or frenzy and the language of vision at the highest stages of philosophy, together at face value and to identify how they might be factoring into Plato’s broader conception of the experience of philosophy. We should note that there have been several attempts amongst the scholarship to account for an imbricated relationship between the rational and seemingly non-rational elements of the Platonic experience, and this thesis is indebted to these scholars for forging a path through which to conceptualize the possibilities of a Platonic experience that is both active and receptive, both frenzied and intellectual. Our readings in the following chapters will attempt to build upon the work of these scholars and to provide a comprehensive account of Plato’s uses of seemingly

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62 We will return to these scholars in later chapters; the works to which this statement refers include M.F. Burnyeat, “The Passion of Reason in Plato’s Phaedrus,” in Explorations in Ancient and Modern Philosophy (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 238-58; Mary Margaret McCabe, Platonic Conversations (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); Catherine Pickstock, After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 1998).
“religious” language both in the process of the philosophical experience and in his
descriptions of the highest stages of this experience. Through this account, we will seek
to identify how these forms of language work together to provide a fuller understanding
of the experience of philosophy at all of its stages.
CHAPTER TWO

THE ACTIVE SOUL-RECEPTRACLE:

PHILOSOPHY IN PROCESS

In order to debate any of the temporal models that we have seen the scholarship set up for the relationship between religious experience and interpretation in Plato, we will need to offer our own outline of the temporal structure of the experience of philosophy, tracing the experience at every point and stage from which we can see it. We will start by laying out the structure of the soul with which Plato provides us in the *Phaedrus.* This structure will prove helpful when we turn in the second part of this chapter to narrated accounts of the experience of philosophy in process as it plays out among Plato’s characters.

The Preconditions of the Experience of Philosophy

In *Religious Experience,* Wayne Proudfoot articulates the sense in which experience is always structured by a certain set of preconditions. He writes about mystical experience in particular that it is “shaped by a complex pattern of concepts, commitments and expectations which the mystic brings to it. These beliefs and attitudes are formative of, rather than consequent upon, the experience. They define in advance what experiences are possible.” 63 What Proudfoot is getting at here is that there is no such a thing as a truly unmediated experience. There are particular contexts, often specific to the culture or tradition most familiar to the experiencer, which predetermine

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63 Proudfoot, *Religious Experience,* 121.
the kind of experience that this experiencer will claim to have. We saw this with William James’ example case of Bradley’s conversion. Proudfoot had argued, we might remember, that “Bradley…could not understand his feelings in naturalistic terms… He did not consider explanations involving Krishna, Zeus, or the Qur'an.” So for Bradley it was not a heart attack or an alien invasion. It was a Christian conversion, because these were the tools he had; these were the references that were available to him prior to and during his “experience” of rapid heartbeat. This implies that in order for any kind of religious experience—or, for our purposes as readers, the narration of such an experience by the experiencer—to be possible, particular systems need to have been in place. Proudfoot emphasizes this point, writing: “One cannot attain nirvana by accident…Nirvana is identified by reference to the rules that govern the behavior required to achieve it, and to the doctrines assumed by those rules. The rules that govern the practice and goals of mystics in particular religious traditions condition the experiences that are available to them.”

So too, for Plato, one does not come upon the experience of attaining truth by accident. Plato spends much of his dialogues articulating, both in broad strokes and through particular character examples, the kind of priorities that the philosopher must retain and cultivate if he hopes to acquire wisdom. These “rules” range from the particular—for example, studying math—to a more general view of the preliminary prioritizations the human soul must cultivate in order to properly prepare for the experience of philosophy. The structure of the narrated experience is slightly different in Platonic dialogue than it is in a narrative like Bradley’s; the final stages of the

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64 Proudfoot, *Religious Experience*, 104.
65 Ibid., 124.
66 On the usefulness of mathematics to the process of philosophy, see *Republic* 537c.
experience of philosophical questing are presented to us only in metaphor, and so we do not have a narrated description of an experiencer stating what it is they have gone through when they have grasped wisdom. But we do have several descriptions of narrated experience throughout the process of philosophy, and we will see that these narrations often give us a good idea of what would be necessary for these characters to continue on the right path and to reach the final stages of the philosophical experience.

If we hope to understand how exactly the experience of acquiring wisdom works and whether it really does culminate in the sort of all-consuming, non-discursive “mystical vision” that some scholars assign to it, we must try first to get a sense of what exactly the structures and aids are which allow for the possibility of the human experience of philosophy. Proudfoot’s model is a helpful framework for us as we attempt to read the *Phaedrus* with an eye toward answering this question. Our reading of some of the metaphors that Plato uses in the chariot allegory will lead us to see that Plato views the reception and integration of proper discursive content as the essential shaping device and necessary precondition for reaching the highest rungs of the experience of philosophy.

**The Soul as Self-Moving and Moved**

The stage is set for the basic structure of the experience of philosophy in Socrates’ proof of the immortality of the soul in the *Phaedrus*. Thus far in the dialogue, Socrates and his interlocutor, the titular Phaedrus, have been lounging along the water outside the city, exchanging speeches on love. Phaedrus excitedly recites a speech about the dangers of love that he heard from the popular rhetorician Lysias, which Socrates dismisses as a feat of style but not of content (*Phaedrus* 227c; 235a). Socrates counters
Lysias’ speech with his own speech about the harms caused by love, but he soon becomes anxious, feeling that he owes the god of Love a speech in its defense (242c-243a). And so he sets off on a palinode, or a sort of recantation of his previous speech (243b).

Socrates begins the palinode by arguing that before attempting to understand love, one must attempt to gain an understanding of the soul (245c). He starts with a proof about the soul’s immortality in which he introduces the concept of the soul as a self-moving being. Socrates states, “...every bodily object that is moved from outside has no soul, while a body whose motion comes from within, from itself, does have a soul…” (245c). Under this definition, the soul is always moving; in fact, the soul’s identity is inherently tied to movement. The question then becomes how, or through what means, a given soul moves. Socrates answers this question through an allegory, which he hopes will be helpful in understanding what he calls the “structure” of the soul (246a). He describes the soul as follows:

Let us then liken the soul to the natural union of a team of winged horses and their charioteer. The gods have horses and charioteers that are themselves all good and come from good stock besides, while everyone else has a mixture. To begin with, our driver is in charge of a pair of horses; second, one of his horses is beautiful and good and from stock of the same sort, while the other is the opposite and has the opposite sort of bloodline (246a-b).  

In the allegory, there is a perfect heavenly realm in which “all soul” exists (246c).  

Staying in this realm is not a given, though. Many souls have wings that shed, leading

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67 The scholarship generally agrees that the chariot metaphor maps onto Plato’s argument for the tripartite soul in the Republic, with the charioteer representing reason, the good horse the spirited part of the soul, and the bad horse the appetitive. See Harvey Yunis, Plato: Phaedrus (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 138.

68 The singular language of “all soul” leaves open the question of whether Plato is referring to a group of individual souls or to a cohesive kind of mass. For further discussion, see G.R.F. Ferrari, Listening to the Cicadas (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 124.
them to fall down to earth. Socrates explains the process as follows: “…a soul that sheds its wings wanders until it lights on something solid, where it settles and takes on an earthly body, which then, owing to the power of this soul, seems to move itself. The whole combination of soul and body is called a living thing…” (256c).

Socrates makes clear that this fall to earth does not occur irrespective of the external surroundings to which the soul is exposed. The health of the soul’s wings is predicated on the existence of several important factors. Socrates describes the mechanics behind the difference between which souls stay in heaven and which shed their wings and fall to earth:

By their nature wings have the power to lift up heavy things and raise them aloft where the gods all dwell, and so, more than anything that pertains to the body, they are akin to the divine, which has beauty, wisdom, goodness, and everything of that sort. These nourish the soul’s wings, which grow best in their presence; but foulness and ugliness make the wings shrink and disappear (246e).

This use of the language of nourishment and growth is helpful in demonstrating the kind of assisted movement that seems to be happening to the souls in the allegory. There is something healthy for the soul in witnessing what Socrates calls “beauty, wisdom, goodness, and everything of that sort,” which allows them to remain at a higher realm of this allegorical cosmology. Socrates elaborates on this concept throughout his descriptions of the various layers of truth that are accessible to the soul at different levels of heaven and earth. In his description of the souls of the gods who exist on a plane higher than heaven and are able to witness the purest level of truth, Socrates states, “Now a god’s mind is nourished by intelligence and pure knowledge, as is the mind of any soul that is concerned to take in what is appropriate to it” (246e, 247d). This concept of “tak[ing] in what is appropriate to it” builds upon the language of nourishment and growth. The soul is absorbing content that is healthy for it, whereas absorbing unhealthy
or unsuitable content contributes to the soul’s demise. Witnessing truth in “the place beyond heaven” is an experience not just of health but of genuine satisfaction for the soul. Socrates uses the word ‘feast’ to describe this experience, stating, “And when the soul has seen all the things that are as they are and feasted on them…” (247e). This sense of pleasure is enhanced by Socrates’ description of the “feast” being finished off with the godly sustenance of ambrosia and nectar; Socrates writes of the soul in return, “On its arrival, the charioteer stables the horses by the manger, throws in ambrosia, and gives them nectar to drink besides” (247e).

These themes of nourishment are rounded off with Socrates’ explanation of nourishment’s link to desire and safety. Socrates states,

The reason there is so much eagerness to see the plain where truth stands is that this pasture has the grass that is the right food for the best part of the soul, and it is the nature of the wings that lift up the soul to be nourished by it…If any soul becomes a companion to a god and catches sight of any true thing, it will be unharmed until the next circuit (248c).

The need for truth is urgent: souls desire this nourishment because it feeds them in the healthiest, best way, and on a more basic level, it keeps them safe from harm. So here we see that the “right” kind of nourishment of the soul is one that includes both pleasure and health.

The language of nourishment and food thus far in the chariot allegory establishes souls as being in need of a form of care. While Socrates had argued that all souls are self-moving, it now becomes clear that souls are in need of certain forms of aid in order to

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69 Werner makes a related argument here, pointing out that the descriptions of the Forms as nourishment or food for the soul serve to take physical desires that would appeal to the bad horse and elevate them: “…Plato attempts to ‘re-write’ the bad horse’s desires on a different plane, in the hope that by using some common language— ‘food,’ ‘pleasure,’ and so forth—the charioteer may have some persuasive effect on the bad horse” (Werner, Myth and Philosophy in Plato’s Phaedrus, 72).
move in the right direction. This leads us back to Proudfoot’s emphasis on the structures that make any experience possible: we are left wondering, how exactly is the soul assisted in its motion? What kind of nourishment does the soul take in, and how does this nourishment process work? We can start to answer this question by turning to the language used to describe the reception of speech throughout the *Phaedrus*.

Plato uses similar imagery to describe the acts of receiving both proper philosophical content and the surface-level speeches that he will deem ultimately unhealthy for the soul. The language of “feast” and the physical act of digestion are used to describe both the experience of acquiring truth beyond the heavenly realm, as we explored above, and the experience of hearing Lysias’ beautiful but surface-level speeches; Socrates calls Phaedrus’ recitation of Lysias’ speech a “feast of eloquence” (227b). The Greek root for both the description of “feast[ing]” on truth in the realm beyond heaven and the “feast of eloquence” is the same (*hestia*), and its meaning matches well with the English translation.70 We also find that descriptions of the soul being filled up with a type of liquid are consistent in the cases of both “healthy” and “unhealthy” forms of content. The language of watering is used both in Socrates’ description of the soul of the lover witnessing a reminder of true beauty in the beloved—which, as we’ll see in Chapter Three, is identified in the allegory as part of the experience of proper philosophy—and in his description of enjoying physical and material pleasures. Socrates describes the experience of the lover being reminded of beauty in the beloved as follows: “Once he has looked at him, his chill gives way to sweating and a high fever, because the stream of beauty that pours into him through his eyes warms him up and waters the

70 All Greek text from Plato’s dialogues, here and in what follows, refers to *Platonis Opera*, edited by John Burnet (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1900–7).
growth of his wings” (251b). The water imagery returns at the end of the dialogue, when Socrates describes the priorities of the masses: “…others turn to different amusements, watering themselves with drinking parties and everything else that goes along with them…” (276d). We see here that even the base material pleasures that Socrates sees as worthless are described as a type of “watering” (in Greek  ἀλήθος, an agricultural term used to describe giving drink to cattle). The consistency of these metaphors of food and liquid to describe the taking in of very different types of content give us the image of a soul that can be “filled” by everything from wrong or ultimately insubstantial content to the best kinds of content.

We might remember that Luce had used the imagery of a stream to identify a similarly “religious” experience for both Stephen H. Bradley and the allegorical soul in Plato. He had compared “the stream which flowed into Mr. Bradley’s mouth and heart” with the description in the Phaedrus that we have just looked at, in which the soul of the lover is watered and healed by the beauty of the beloved (251d). However, we have now seen that this process of “watering” can occur for the soul in a variety of different ways and with a variety of content, some healthy and some damaging. It is therefore clear at this point that the experience of receiving or taking in content which the image of the stream conveys is not necessarily characteristic of the proper experience of philosophy, or at least that it is not the only aspect of this experience.

**Speechmaking, or Pouring Proper Water into the Soul**

Later in the dialogue, Socrates argues that when it comes to matters of goodness and truth, the reception of verbal content can affect souls powerfully and in divergent ways. He asks Phaedrus, “When someone utters the word “iron” or “silver,” don’t we all
think of the same thing?” (263a). Phaedrus responds, “Certainly” (263a). Socrates continues, “But what happens when we say “just” or “good”? Doesn’t each one of us go in a different direction? Don’t we differ with one another and even with ourselves?” (263a). Phaedrus confirms, “We certainly do” (263a). Socrates asks, “Now in which of these two cases are we more easily deceived? And when does rhetoric have greater power?” (263b). Phaedrus responds, “Clearly, when we wander in different directions” (253b). This conversation further emphasizes that the individual can be “watered” or “fed” by a variety of compelling forms of content, both correct and incorrect, particularly where issues of the good or the true are concerned.

Socrates argues here that the fact that the soul is “easily deceived” in matters of the “just or good” gives rhetoric “greater power,” both for better and for worse. This susceptibility to deception offers a point of connection between the palinode on the soul in the first part of the dialogue and the discussion of proper speechmaking in the second part. The framework that Plato has given us in the palinode, in which the soul is fed or watered by both right and wrong forms of content, necessitates the existence of a proper method of nourishing, or of assisting the motion of these souls toward the right kind of content. So what exactly is needed for this successful nourishment to occur? Socrates identifies that the right kind of speechmaking uses its power by identifying the type of soul to which it is appealing, and then crafting a speech accordingly. In discussing the best forms of speech with Phaedrus, Socrates argues, “Well, isn’t the method of medicine in a way the same as the method of rhetoric? ... In both cases we need to determine the nature of something – of the body of medicine, of the soul in rhetoric” (270b). The metaphor of medicine ties well into the language of nourishment and safety
that we have seen earlier in the dialogue. The soul is in need of care, as a sick body is in need of a doctor, and therefore the right medicine must be ingested.

This medicine analogy is a bit more complex than the mere act of ingestion, though, which makes sense given that we’ve seen that passive reception can happen even with the wrong kinds of content. Socrates emphasizes that the taking in of medicine is not a passive or arbitrary sort of ingestion; instead, the soul must orient itself so that it is capable of actively taking in the right kind of content in the right way. Socrates says that the right kind of medicine, and in a similar way the right kind of speeches, must “supply…a body with the medicines and diet that will make it healthy and strong, or a soul with the reasons and customary rules for conduct that will impart to it the convictions and virtues we want” (270b). It is interesting to note here that the doctor’s prescription is not merely medicine but a diet, or, in a more faithful translation of the Greek, a regimen (trophē) to which the individual must actively, and likely independently, keep. So too, the right kind of speechmaking “suppl[ies]” the soul with “the reasons and customary rules for conduct that will impart to it the convictions and virtues we want” (270b-c). It seems from this statement that only once the soul has implemented particular “rules for conduct” can the right “virtues” be “impart[ed].” Here we have the opposite of passive ingestion; in fact, it seems that the “rules for conduct” are themselves what “impart” these proper values onto the soul. The soul ingests the proper medicine not through passive swallowing, it seems, but through some sort of regimen which allows for the proper taking in of this right content.
We might wonder at this point what kind of speech serves as the proper medicine for the soul. Socrates tells us that this best form of nourishment is dialectic. He states: “The dialectician chooses a proper soul and plants and sows within it discourse accompanied by knowledge…Such discourse makes the seed forever immortal and renders the man who has it happy as any human being can be” (277a). Dialectic, it seems, is the form of nourishment that plants a permanent seed—or, in other words, instills the proper regimen in the soul, which it seems from this statement must include a form of “discourse.”

We can now start to form an answer to our Proudfoot-inspired question about the preconditions for the experience of proper philosophy. It seems that the basic precondition for the experience of philosophy is an ability to take in and properly integrate the right kind of content, or dialectic, in a way that is active and consistent. This means that what is required for the successful experience of philosophy is both the right kind of speech and the right kind of integration on the part of the recipient. We will delve in our third chapter into the question of whether this combination is an instrumental sort of precondition for another type of experience at the highest stages of philosophy, or whether this precondition is itself constitutive of every stage of the philosophical experience. For now, we should simply note Plato’s emphasis on this combination as necessary for any type of successful philosophical journey.

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71 Plato’s explanations of the term “dialectic” are notoriously vague throughout the dialogues, but we do know that the term generally conveys a collaborative conversation between two people, as is made clear by the Greek prefix “dia,” which means “between.” For a discussion of dialectic in the *Phaedrus*, see Oscar L. Brownstein, “Plato’s *Phaedrus*: Dialectic as the Genuine Art of Speaking,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 51, no. 4 (1965): 392-398.
Plato’s Characters as Active Soul-Receptacles

Given that the Platonic corpus is a collection of dialogues, all of which paint the picture of the collaborative experience of philosophical discourse, the reader is presented with many opportunities to probe what the experience of philosophy looks like according to the narratives of those who are “experiencing” it. We will use the preconditions that we have just identified as a framework for our study of four different characters and their narrated experiences of the process of taking in different forms of verbal content. We will work with three dialogues in which Plato provides us with detailed narratives from characters about their personal experiences undergoing philosophy in its varying stages: the Phaedrus, the Symposium, and the Theaetetus.

This exploration will serve a dual function: in the process of parsing through these narrated experiences of philosophy, we will pay special attention to the use of forms of descriptive language that we’ve seen the scholarship appeal to in making claims about the “religious” elements of the Platonic experience of philosophy. All of the characters we will look at use the language of awe, destabilization, or loss of self-control in reference to very different experiences of reception of speech or engagement in discourse. What, if anything, does this common use of language tell us about the narrated experiences of these characters as they adopt different methods for integrating outside content? What might we learn through these characters about the placement of “religious” language within Plato’s broader outline of the experience of philosophy, particularly in relation to the timelines of experience and interpretation that saw the scholarship lay out in Chapter One? These will be our guiding questions in the analysis that follows.
Critical Frenzy: Reactions to Beautiful Speeches in the

*Phaedrus*

The conversations between Socrates and Phaedrus as they exchange speeches in the *Phaedrus* serve as a useful case study of two very different forms of reception of the same type of content. The two men have retreated from the city and settled in the countryside so that Phaedrus can recite a speech he has just heard (230c–e). After Phaedrus recites a speech on love by the popular rhetorician Lysias, Socrates describes his experience with it in enthusiastic and descriptive terms:

[I’m in ecstasy. And it’s all your doing, Phaedrus: I was looking at you while you were reading and it seemed to me the speech had made you radiant with delight; and since I believe you understand these matters better than I do, I followed your lead, and following you I shared your Bacchic frenzy (234d).

When Phaedrus pushes Socrates on this reaction, though, Socrates clarifies that his appreciation of the speech was related only to its style and not to its content: he states, “I paid attention only to the speech’s style. As for the other part, I wouldn’t even think that Lysias himself could be satisfied with it” (235a). Some scholars have viewed Socrates’ use of the language of “Bacchic frenzy” here as merely ironic. Whether Socrates is seriously enjoying the style of the speech or completely joking, his reaction here emphasizes the distinction between reception of content and full integration of it. We see that Socrates will “share” in Phaedrus’ frenzy, but we do not know if he will internalize the speech or see it as consistent with his own values. Socrates’ descriptions of his own experience

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72 An example of this view of Socrates’ language as ironic can be found in Werner, *Myth and Philosophy in Plato’s Phaedrus*, 219. For context on the role of the Bacchic rites in Greek society, see Susan G. Cole, “Finding Dionysus,” in *A Companion to Greek Religion*, ed. Daniel Ogden (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2010), 327-341. Bacchants were worshippers of Dionysus who were said to experience possession at the hands of the god, and so the reader can assume that Socrates’ intention is to use the phrase to imply possession at the hands of speech, be this usage ironic or not.
connote a surface-level sort of engagement with content, which emphasizes the
distinction between receiving content and engaging with it fully.73

We should not take this to mean that Socrates’ reactions throughout the dialogue
are entirely unfeeling or detached, though. Socrates expresses his own susceptibility to
speeches at the start of the dialogue, telling Phaedrus, “…you can lead me all over Attica
or anywhere else you like simply by waving in front of me the leaves of a book
containing a speech” (230e). He also calls himself “a man who is sick with passion for
hearing speeches” (228b). The source of Socrates’ passion becomes clear when he tells
Phaedrus, “I am devoted to learning…” (230e). This statement puts us in a better
position to understand Socrates’ critical distance from the speeches that he hears. His
passion for hearing speeches seems to stem from a desire to “learn,” and when he finds
that Lysias’ speech does not hold much in the way of substantial content, he realizes that
this desire will not be fulfilled.

Phaedrus’ descriptions of his own experiences with speeches offer an example
of the opposite sort of reception of content. He exhibits a wholehearted consumption of
content without the critical engagement that we have seen in Socrates’ case. At the start
of the dialogue, we see Phaedrus basking in the experience of beautiful speech; after
reciting Lysias’ speech, Phaedrus asks Socrates: “Don’t you think it’s simply superb,

73 It is worth noting that Socrates does express a seemingly passive, or at least fully receptive,
mode of experience when attributing his own speeches in the Phaedrus to an external source of
divine inspiration (see Phaedrus 235c-d, 237a, 238c-d, 241e). There is lively debate about this issue
in the scholarship; some argue that Socrates is being sarcastic in the same way that his
descriptions of reacting to Lysias’ speech seem sarcastic, while others argue that Socrates’ divine
inspiration is actually something like an internal conscience which does not provide him with
positive advice but instead simply acts as a kind of “check,” telling him what not to do (see
Apology 31d). For a conversation on Socrates’ divine sign in the Phaedrus, see J. Partridge,
“Socrates’ Daimonion in Plato’s Phaedrus,” Skepsis: A Journal for Philosophy and Interdisciplinary
Research 13-14 (2002-2003): 75-92. Partridge argues that the appearance of the divine sign is
always accompanied by some sort of interpretive or decision-making process on Socrates’ part.

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especially in its choice of words?” (234c). Socrates’ response helps the reader envision what Phaedrus’ experience must have looked like; he says to Phaedrus, “I was looking at you while you were reading and it seemed to me the speech had made you radiant with delight” (234d). The type of enjoyment Phaedrus gets from listening to beautiful speeches is made even clearer when he reacts to Socrates’ intention to give a palinode to love by saying, “No words could be sweeter to my ears…” (243b). The Greek for “sweeter” actually connotes “most pleasant”; it seems that Phaedrus listens to speeches with the sole intention of seeking pleasure.

Phaedrus’ emphasis on the pleasant and the pleasurable indicates that he does not yet hold the type of disposition that is necessary for the pursuit of philosophy.74 While Socrates maintains a critical distance from the content he takes in once he finds that it does not satisfy his desire for genuine learning, Phaedrus seems to succumb entirely to the mere beauty of the speeches. Socrates makes clear that Phaedrus’ personality renders him still incapable of properly participating in philosophy. He offers a prayer to Love, asking Love to “convert” both Lysias and Phaedrus to philosophy:

If Phaedrus and I said anything that shocked you in our earlier speech, blame it on Lysias, who was its father, and put a stop to his making speeches of this sort; convert him to philosophy like his brother Polemarchus so that his love here may no longer play both sides as he does now, but simply devote his life to Love through philosophical discussions (257b).

Here, Socrates describes Phaedrus as “playing both sides,” an interesting choice of words considering that Phaedrus has seemed fairly single-minded in his love of beautiful speeches, but perhaps Socrates is acknowledging a latent capability in Phaedrus that we will see become more active by the end of the dialogue. At this point, Phaedrus responds

74 Werner emphasizes this point: “A Phaedrus-type of individual simply is not disposed to be receptive to a purely rational or dialectical argument, making it impossible for this kind of approach to get off the ground” (Werner, Myth and Philosophy in Plato’s Phaedrus, 123).
by saying, “I join you in your prayer, Socrates. If this is really best for us, may it come to pass” (257c). It is clear from this statement that Phaedrus is not yet convinced that the philosophical life is the best life.\(^7\)

But as the dialogue progresses, we do see Phaedrus show at least the potential of expanding his ability to critically take in content. Socrates engages him in discourse about what good speechmaking entails, and while at first Phaedrus remains focused on the pleasure of speeches, the end of the dialogue connotes at least a minor shift. When Socrates prays at the end of the dialogue for a moderate, well-ordered sort of soul, Phaedrus asks to be included in the prayer as well (279c). Harvey Yunis writes of this statement in his commentary on the *Phaedrus*: “…joining the prayer reiterates [Phaedrus’] conversion to philosophy (278b4). [Phaedrus] quotes the well-known proverb not for the sake of sharing material goods but to join [Socrates] as a partner in the pursuit of wisdom, which is the one occupation that S. shares with his friends…”\(^7\) Phaedrus’ “conversion” here, to use the language of Socrates’ prayer for Lysias, entails a sort of shifting of orientation. We have not yet seen him actively engage in philosophical discourse or critically engage with content, but he has gotten to the point of desiring a life of philosophy and recognizing that it is the path that ought to be sought. To use the language that we set up at the start of this chapter, at the start of the dialogue Phaedrus had been watered or fed by the wrong type of content, but now he recognizes what the right nourishment is. It is not yet clear, though, whether he has adopted the right regimen in order to properly and consistently take this right nourishment in.

\(^7\) In his commentary on the *Phaedrus*, Yunis argues that Phaedrus’ response of “If this is really best” indicates that he still has a way to go in his conversion to philosophy (Yunis, *Plato: Phaedrus*, 170).

\(^7\) Ibid., 248.
Socrates and Phaedrus provide us with a model of two very different experiences of reception to the exact same form of content. This has helped us see Plato’s structure of the human soul in action. We have seen how the soul works as a receptacle to take in content, choosing from several options of reception and hopefully achieving a proper reception of good content. We have seen Socrates perform a sort of right reception to wrong content, maintaining a level of distance from the speeches he hears, and we have seen Phaedrus start out with the wrong reception to this same wrong content, but then slowly move from his orientation toward pleasure to an acknowledgment of the necessity of shifting his orientation toward philosophy. Phaedrus now seems capable of the right reception, but we haven’t yet seen him engage in this process. We will learn more about how this process works by turning in our next study to someone a bit farther along in the process of philosophy.

**Alcibiades and the Silenus Statue: Frenzied Conflict**

The examples of Socrates and Phaedrus helped to set the stage for how the conditions of the philosophical experience play out among Plato’s characters, but we haven’t yet fully achieved our second goal, which was to trace the language of frenzy or loss of control throughout these narrated experiences and discover what role this sort of language might play. Thus far, the examples of Socrates and Phaedrus have provided us with an image of frenzy as a sort of lower-level visceral reaction to beautiful but ultimately valueless speeches, be it through the type of full commitment we see in Phaedrus or the ironic descriptions that Socrates provides of his own experience. On this basis we might be tempted to chalk Plato’s use of the language of frenzy up to a warning about what not to do in the proper philosophical experience, or, in other words,
to a mode of reception that is only used in relation to the wrong sort of content. But this question becomes more complicated as we trace a similar use of language in Alcibiades’ articulation of his experience of hearing Socrates speak in the *Symposium*.77

The *Symposium* is Plato’s most seemingly lighthearted dialogue. It is set at a party, where various men of Athens gather to drink and exchange speeches. Toward the end of the dialogue, Alcibiades, who identifies himself as Socrates’ beloved, arrives at the party and drunkenly gives a speech about Socrates to the group. The speech is about Alcibiades’ experience with Socrates as a beloved engaging with a lover, but since for Plato love and philosophy are inextricably linked (as we’ll see in our next chapter), Alcibiades’ speech also touches on his experience of philosophy in progress.

Alcibiades begins by comparing Socrates to the satyr Marsyas, a musician who legend held was able to affect listeners viscerally.78 Alcibiades states of Marsyas, “…his melodies have in themselves the power to possess and so reveal those people who are ready for the god and his mysteries. That’s because his melodies are themselves divine” (215c). He goes on to compare Socrates to this figure: “The only difference between you and Marsyas is that you need no instruments; you do exactly what he does, but with words alone…let anyone—man, woman, or child—listen to you or even to a poor account of what you say—and we are all transported, completely possessed” (215c-d). Alcibiades elaborates on the affecting quality of Socrates’ words: “If I were to describe for you what an extraordinary effect his words have always had on me (I can feel it this moment even as I’m speaking), you might actually suspect that I’m drunk!” (215c).

Between the language of possession and of drunkenness in these few lines, we find

77 Quotations from the *Symposium* refer to Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff’s translation in Cooper and Hutchinson, *Plato: Complete Works*.
78 Cooper and Hutchinson, *Plato: Complete Works*, 497n51.
ourselves with a description of passionate, consuming experience that reminds us of the language of “Bacchic frenzy” that Socrates and Phaedrus had exchanged in the *Phaedrus*. Alcibiades further emphasizes the “frenzied” nature of his experience hearing Socrates speak: “Still, I swear to you, the moment he starts to speak, I am beside myself: my heart starts leaping in my chest, the tears come streaming down my face, even the frenzied Corybantes seem sane compared to me” (215c).

At this point, it seems like Alcibiades’ frenzy might resemble Phaedrus’ experience of hearing beautiful speeches. However, it soon becomes clear that in Alcibiades’ case, his “frenzied” reaction is actually caused by the internal conflict he feels when listening to Socrates. Alcibiades states,

> I have heard Pericles and many other great orators, and I have admired their speeches. But nothing like this ever happened to me: they never upset me so deeply that my very own soul started protesting that my life—*my* life!—was no better than the most miserable slave’s. And yet that is exactly how this Marsyas here at my side makes me feel all the time: he makes it seem that my life isn’t worth living! (215e-216a).

Here, Alcibiades describes his experience as a “protest” in the “soul.” He elaborates on what this experience feels like, saying of Socrates:

> He always traps me, you see, and he makes me admit that my political career is a waste of time, while all that matters is just what I most neglect: my personal shortcomings, which cry out for the closest attention. So I refuse to listen to him; I stop my ears and tear myself away from him, for like the Sirens, he could make me stay by his side till I die. Socrates is the only man in the world who has made me feel shame…I know perfectly well that I can’t prove he’s wrong when he tells me what I should do; yet, the moment I leave his side, I go back to my old ways: I cave in my desire to please the crowd (216a-b).

This experience is starting to sound very different from the kind of frenzy we saw in Phaedrus, which seemed to consist in a wholehearted “following” after aesthetic pleasure without much critical analysis of the words that he was taking in. Alcibiades seems to be a bit farther along than Phaedrus on his philosophical journey; we might imagine
Alcibiades’ experience here as what might happen to Phaedrus after his acknowledgment of philosophy as the proper path at the end of the dialogue. Here, we see that Alcibiades takes in and recognizes the truth and relevance of Socrates’ arguments; after all, he claims that his “very own soul” is “protesting” in agreement with Socrates that his life of public pleasure is not worth living. In this way, he has started to climb the ladder that we have been building throughout this chapter from reception of proper content to fully active integration, but he has not yet reached the top. He recognizes and receives the proper nourishment, but he still does not have the proper regimen in order to incorporate this nourishment into his life and to overcome what he calls his “desire to please the crowd”; as he says of what happens when he parts with Socrates, “the moment I leave his side, I go back to my old ways.”

We see now that Alcibiades’ experience of frenzy comes not from blind following or reception of content, as Phaedrus’ did. Instead, his frenzy comes from a true understanding, “deep” within his “soul,” that Socrates is speaking the truth.\(^7\) This understanding leads Alcibiades to feel the worthlessness of his current way of life and to experience “shame” at the fact that he is unable to take this understanding of truth and integrate it into his actions. Alcibiades’ achievement of a sort of first-level understanding of the truth of Socrates’ arguments is made clear when Alcibiades describes his experience of seeing “inside” Socrates. Alcibiades starts his speech by comparing Socrates to a layered statue. He states, “Look at him! Isn’t he just like a statue of Silenus?

\(^7\) While the intricacies of the relationship between Alcibiades and Socrates is beyond our scope in this chapter, it is worth noting that Alcibiades’ frenzied reaction to seeing Socrates’ “true self” does have its ties to the fact that he views Socrates as an object of love, even if not the right kind of love. Martha Nussbaum argues that Alcibiades’ failure lies in his inability to move beyond a physical love for Socrates and toward the right, non-physical kind of love that we will discuss in Chapter Three. For further discussion, see Martha Nussbaum, “The Speech of Alcibiades: A Reading of Plato’s Symposium,” Philosophy and Literature 3, no 2 (1979): 131-172.
You know the kind of statue I mean; you’ll find them in any shop in town. It’s a Silenus sitting, his flute or his pipes in his hands, and it’s hollow. It’s split right down the middle, and inside it’s full of tiny statues of the gods” (215a-b). Alcibiades returns to this metaphor later, when he describes his experience seeing a side of Socrates that he views as most genuine. Alcibiades argues that Socrates’ exterior is far different from what one finds within. He describes Socrates exterior, stating, “To begin with, he’s crazy about beautiful boys; he constantly follows them around in a perpetual daze. Also, he likes to say he’s ignorant and knows nothing…” (217a). These traits are not Socrates’ most real, according to Alcibiades; he states that “all this is just on the surface, like the outsides of those statues of Silenus” (217a). He tries to give his listeners an idea of what the “real” Socrates looks like, stating, “I wonder…if you have any idea what a sober and temperate man he proves to be once you have looked inside…In public, I tell you, his whole life is one big game—a game of irony. I don’t know if any of you have seen him when he’s really serious” (217a).

Alcibiades claims that he has in fact seen Socrates this way, just once: “But I once caught him when he was open like Silenus’ statues, and I had a glimpse of the figures he keeps hidden within: they were so godlike—so bright and beautiful, so utterly amazing—that I no longer had a choice—I just had to do whatever he told me” (217a). Here, Alcibiades describes an experience of seeing what he believes to be Socrates’ genuine self. Alcibiades’ contrast of this real self with Socrates’ claims that “he’s ignorant and knows nothing” implies that seeing this real self involves seeing something akin to Socrates’ knowledge. Alcibiades looks at these parts of Socrates and feels as though he has no option but to follow Socrates’ directions. Here we have the language of blind following which seems to connote a passive experience of reception, but as we’ve seen
from Alcibiades’ other statements, this yearning to follow Socrates is only preliminary; Alcibiades is ultimately unable to integrate this desire to follow Socrates’ advice into his own life when he is not in Socrates’ presence. Alcibiades’ failure in this regard is likely due to the fact that, like Phaedrus, he is not yet the proper recipient for the experience of philosophy. Socrates makes this clear when he responds to Alcibiades’ request to take Socrates as a lover. He states, “…my dear boy, you should think twice, because you could be wrong, and I may be of no use to you. The mind’s sight becomes sharp only when the body’s eyes go past their prime—and you are still a good long time away from that” (219a).

Alcibiades does seem to have taken the first step in this process of sharpening his mind’s sight, to use Socrates’ phrasing. As we have been gathering, it seems that Alcibiades is able to penetrate the first layer of understanding Socrates’ arguments. He makes this even clearer when he returns to the metaphor of Silenus later in the dialogue, saying of Socrates:

[Even his ideas and arguments, at first they’d strike you as totally ridiculous; they’re clothed in words as coarse as the hides worn by the most vulgar satyrs...If you are foolish, or simply unfamiliar with him, you’d find it impossible not to laugh at his arguments. But if you see them when they open up like the statues, if you go behind their surface, you’ll realize that no other arguments make any sense. They’re truly worthy of a god, bursting with figures of virtue inside. They’re of great—no, of the greatest—importance for anyone who wants to become a truly good man (221e-222a).

The metaphor of the Silenus statue is an apt one for understanding the multi-layered process of integrating philosophical truth into one’s soul. Here we see that Alcibiades has penetrated the first layer of truth. The philosophical process has begun; as Alcibiades himself states, his “heart, or my soul, or whatever you want to call it… has been struck and bitten by philosophy” (218a-b). However, he does not yet hold the proper
disposition for the full philosophical experience, and therefore is unable to reach beyond this first layer of the experience.

Alcibiades’ experience affirms for us that at least in the in-process stages of the experience of philosophy, we do not see anything like the passive sort of reception that James’ Bradley had described. While Bradley had avowed repeatedly that his religious experience was in no way tied to his experience of hearing the sermon, here we have a character explicitly stating that an experience of discourse is the cause of his destabilizing or “frenzied” experience. We must remember that Alcibiades’ experience of “glimpsing” Socrates’ truths does not happen as some physical process of vision: it is a metaphor for Alcibiades’ experience of hearing Socrates make his arguments in a moment of discourse.

This brings us back to Despland’s timeline, in which the Platonic experience of interpersonal love served as an example of religious experiencing that offers a “nudge” or a “jolt” and leads to new methods of discussion and interpretation. We will find out in Chapter Three whether this argument holds for the experience of “proper” or complete Platonic love, but at this point we can see that in the early or middle stages of the process of philosophy, it is not “religious experiencing” that causes a nudge and leads to interpretation, but rather it is the very experience of interpretation in which the experiencing consists. Alcibiades’ frenzied and destabilizing experience is happening during, and due to, his understanding and taking in the truth of Socrates’ claims, which in turn leads to his state of conflict. Despland’s timeline already starts to fall apart here. We saw him introduce a timeline of experiencing, followed by interpretation, which in turn leads to more experiencing. But here we see that even in those first stages of interpersonal communication or erotic love, which Despland sees as providers of some
sort of “nudge,” we already have levels of active interpretation embedded in the experience. In fact, it is this sort of active interpretation which in the case of Alcibiades leads him to the very having of his frenzied experience. Even Alcibiades’ most seemingly passive yearning to do whatever Socrates tells him is only possible after he peels back the first “layer” of interpretation of Socrates’ arguments.

Thus far, Phaedrus’ experience of enjoying beautiful speeches seems closest to Despland’s idea of “religious experiencing” as separate from interpretation, although of course Phaedrus’ listening to speeches is by definition an active process, and his appreciation of their beauty is also an interpretive move. Even if we are willing to take Phaedrus’ love of beautiful speeches as a fully passive kind of “experiencing,” though, it is not this form of experiencing that leads Phaedrus to any new form of speech or interpretation. This most “passive” form of experiencing has no bearing on the proper experience of philosophy; it is only through engaging in dialogue with Socrates that Phaedrus slowly begins his process of “conversion” to philosophy.

**Theaetetus: Wonder as the Opening of Opportunity**

So far we have seen Phaedrus as an example of passion directed toward the wrong type of content (at least at the start of the dialogue), and we have seen in the case of Alcibiades a kind of passion that is directed toward the right content but is missing an ability to fully integrate these truths and live life in accordance with them. Now we are left wondering how this process of reception and integration plays out with an individual who is capable of full integration of philosophic truths into his life. We find a useful example of this kind of individual in the *Theaetetus.*
At the start of the dialogue, the mathematics teacher Theodorus tells Socrates about a promising student named Theaetetus (143d-e). In describing this student’s temperament, he outlines two types of engagement with philosophical discourse. He states, “People as acute and keen and retentive as he is are apt to be very unbalanced. They get swept along with a rush, like ships without ballast; what stands for courage in their makeup is a kind of mad excitement; while, on the other hand, the steadier sort of people are apt to come to their studies with minds that are sluggish, somehow—freighted with a bad memory” (144a-b). Theaetetus, we learn, manages to avoid this “mad excitement” while also being a student of remarkable caliber. Theodorus says, “But this boy approaches his studies in a smooth, sure, effective way, and with great good temper; it reminds one of the quiet flow of a stream of oil” (144a-b). This might remind us of what Chappell had referred to as the “studied sobriety, rationality, and restraint” of the conversational model.

As Socrates and Theaetetus start their discussion, however, the reader starts to wonder whether Theaetetus just hadn’t yet met his match. When Socrates asks Theaetetus if he is familiar with a few puzzles about being and becoming that they are discussing, Theaetetus says, “Oh yes, indeed, Socrates, I often wonder like mad what these things can mean; sometimes when I’m looking at them I begin to feel quite giddy” (155c). It looks as though Theaetetus is devolving into the type of “mad excitement” that Theodorus had said he was immune to earlier. The Greek term here, skotodiniaō, is associated with the experience of dizziness or vertigo. This is not a “rational” sort of wonder; it consists in an experience of destabilization. Theaetetus’ descriptions of his

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80 Quotations from the *Theaetetus* refer to the translation by M.J. Levett, rev. Myles F. Burnyeat, in Cooper and Hutchinson, *Plato: Complete Works.*
81 Chappell, “Conversion or Conversation?,” 326.
experience have moved us away from the “restraint” that Chappell had assigned to the conversational model of philosophy. Like Alcibiades’ frenzy, Theaetetus’ wonder is an example of an experience happening within the context of engagement in discourse or hearing some form of verbal content. We now see that even in an experience of right reception of right content, we find language that conveys a sort of unmooring for the individual involved. Theaetetus’ experience also consists in the language of sight, just as Alcibiades’ did. While Alcibiades had a “glimpse” of Socrates’ truths, Theaetetus feels “giddy” while “looking” at the logical puzzle with which Socrates presents him (the Greek root, b lépōn, is related to eyesight). The difference seems to be that Theaetetus’ experience of sight does not lead him to a sense of inner conflict; instead, his experience is tinged with excitement. Theaetetus’ wonder seems destabilizing in a similar way as Alcibiades’ frenzy, but their particular dispositions—Alcibiades as a human being still incapable of proper philosophy, Theaetetus as the ideal candidate for philosophy—seem to dictate the internal state that this destabilizing experience produces, be it conflict or excitement at what lies ahead.

Socrates’ response to Theaetetus’ description of his experience is telling. He says, “For this is an experience which is characteristic of a philosopher, this wondering: this is where philosophy begins and nowhere else” (155d). It seems that this sense of wonder is a requirement for the proper philosophical experience. Socrates emphasizes that this experience of wonder involves a sort of giving oneself over to philosophy. He tells Theaetetus later in their discussion,

If we find what we’re after, and become free men, then we will turn round and talk about how these things happen to other people…While if we can’t find any way of extricating ourselves, then I suppose we shall be laid low, like seasick passengers, and give ourselves into the hands of the argument and let it trample all over us and do what it likes with us. (191a).
This language brings us back to the description that Theodorus gave earlier in the text about the easily excited sort of individual that he opposed to Theaetetus’ personality. Theodorus had stated that many students of Theaetetus’ caliber “get swept along with a rush, like ships without ballast” (144a). Theodorus had argued that this was not Theaetetus’ personality, but here we see Socrates advising Theaetetus to adopt an attitude toward the process of dialectic which looks a lot more like this excitable version that Theodorus had cast aside. We can make sense of this by identifying that there might be a difference between the wrong kind of “rush,” to use Theodorus’ word, and the right kind.

Socrates tells Theaetetus that wonder is only the beginning; he seems to imply that the experience of wonder can go in more than one direction. In her analysis of the *Theaetetus*, Mary-Jane Rubenstein astutely notes that the term “wonder” is also used by Socrates to describe the possibility of Theaetetus being led by false wisdom.82 Socrates says of teachers who may appear to hold wisdom at first but are actually spreaders of false knowledge, “He…would keep on refuting you and not let you go till you had been struck with wonder at his wisdom—that ‘answer to many prayers’—and had got yourself thoroughly tied up by him. Then, when he had you tamed and bound, he would set you free for a ransom—whatever price seemed appropriate to the two of you” (165e). We should note the difference between Socrates’ description of the destabilization of the philosopher and his description of this “wrong” sort of wonder. The right kind of wonder involves, as Socrates puts it, “giving ourselves into the hands of the argument”; the philosopher is not free, but he has made a choice to surrender his freedom. The

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wrong sort of wonder involves a kind of violence at the hands of another person; it is not the argument to which the person succumbs, but another human being who actively “ties[s] up” the wonderer.

Even so, both experiences begin with the same sensation or state of wonder. Rubenstein articulates the two types of possibility to which wonder seems to lead: “So the thaumazein that opens philosophy can lead either to tireless critical inquiry or to unquestioning discipleship…the very tendency toward wondering that makes Theaetetus a philosopher also leaves him vulnerable to manipulation by false teachers…”83

Rubenstein concedes that this second type turns out to be not wonder itself, but rather a sort of hiding from the helplessness to which wonder might lead; it seems, though, that both of these experiences become possible only through this initial sense of wonder.84

The dual possibility of wonder brings us back to the distinction we have been crafting between reception and integration of content. Even the wonder of Theaetetus, an individual most suited to philosophy, is only a preliminary experience. We might compare Theaetetus’ wonder to the kind of frenzy for learning through speeches we saw Socrates exhibit in the *Phaedrus*. Socrates had followed Phaedrus in the hope of learning from a good speech, but he soon found that the content he was receiving was the wrong kind, and he seemed to have the proper disposition or discipline to realize this and achieve a critical distance from it. Phaedrus, on the other hand, seems to experience the sort of wonder that easily gives itself over to temptation by false teachers (or, in the *Phaedrus*, rhetoricians). So it seems yet again that there is something else that the

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84 Ibid.
individual must do in order to ensure that these initial or in-process experiences of wonder or frenzy lead to the right place and not the dangerous one.

It is to this doing that we will turn in the next chapter, but we should note at this point that what we’ve identified in the language of frenzy and wonder through Plato’s descriptions of four diverse human experiences might best be summarized as an opening of possibility. In each of these experiences, frenzy or wonder is the beginning. For Phaedrus, an early frenzy becomes morphed into the seeds of an entirely different fervor, the fervor of philosophy. The other three characters start with the right kind of fervor, but we see them struggle in different ways to turn this fervor into proper integration of proper content. Even so, the experience of wonder or frenzy is a necessary beginning on which the process of proper integration can begin to build.

We can see the language of frenzy and wonder in these experiences as connoting a sort of in-process sense of the possibilities—and even the impossibilities—that await. As Socrates says to Theaetetus right after telling him that they must passively follow the argument where it takes them: “And now let me tell you where I see a way still open to this inquiry” (191a). It is this sense of opening, of the possibility of what might come out of the process of dialogue, which excites Theaetetus and Socrates, and which excites Alcibiades when he sees Socrates’ “real” self, even though he finds himself ultimately unable to make something of this excitement.\(^\text{85}\) It is fitting that the two characters who have the best dispositions for philosophy, Socrates and Theaetetus, are described as having “eyes that stick out” (143e). This physical similarity is an apt metaphor for the

\(^{85}\) The language of the opening out of possibility in relation to the experience of aporia (Greek for an impasse or experience of doubt) is formulated more broadly by Catherine Keller in her work on negative theology. See Catherine Keller, “The Cloud of the Impossible: Feminist Theology, Cosmology and Cusa” (presentation, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, March 22, 2007).
kind of opening that these philosophically inclined individuals are capable of. They are both ready to take in what lies ahead, to follow the argument wherever it goes, to actively surrender themselves to philosophy in all of its frenzy and wonder and “experience.”

We must remember, though, that this sense of destabilizing language as the beginning of the philosophical process does not imply a Despland-type timeline of experiencing which is separate from, and leads into, interpretation. Each of these experiences of frenzy or wonder occur through an interpretive process that is happening during engagement in discourse, be it Phaedrus’ choice to focus on pleasure or Socrates’ establishment of critical distance from bad speeches. These experiences are both interpretive and destabilizing: they are openings out, glimpses that appear to the human being during engagements with discourse that convey some sense of possibility, or impossibility, or something in between.

We see again how our Proudfoot-inspired conditions are playing out. As we have continuously noted, what is necessary for the philosophical experience is to be receptive to content—to take in the water or ingest the food—to succumb to the experience of frenzy or wonder to which this reception always leads in some form, and then, ideally, to achieve the proper integration of the right kind of content. We are left wondering what is necessary in order to possess the right kind of psychological disposition to open oneself out in the right direction, toward proper integration of the proper content. We will turn to this question in our next chapter.
CHAPTER THREE
THE INTEGRATIVE AWE OF SIGHT

What Comes Next?

We have just worked through descriptions of the experience of philosophy in process, and as we have noted, each described experience was found to be missing some element of the ideal combination of proper content and proper integration which would characterize the best possible experience of philosophy. We are left wondering what this ideal combination might look like. This question is even more urgent given that some of the scholarship we worked through in Chapter One argued that there is something different that happens after the in-process experience of philosophy, that these experiences of engagement with speech and discourse are mere instruments for a new “type” of experience that looks nothing like these in-process moments and instead consists in a Jamesian sort of conversion experience. This chapter will attempt to test the truth of these claims by exploring the metaphors Plato uses for the highest levels of the experience of philosophy. We’ll find that we can trace a cohesive relationship between the language of frenzy Plato uses for the in-process, not-quite-there-yet experience of philosophy and the language of vision that Plato uses for the culmination of that experience. In the process we will become well equipped to challenge the scholarship’s view that the culmination of the philosophical experience is a sort of rupture that breaks with the rest of the in-process experience.
Half-Seeing Souls

Before looking at Plato’s descriptions of the highest stages of the experience of philosophy, we should note the fact that Plato only gives us accounts of this experience through allegory. This will be particularly important when we discuss the experience of “seeing” the Forms; we must be thinking about seeing allegorically, not literally. The Forms are not physical entities which the soul can grasp tangibly or see as one might look at a painting. However, this is not to say, as we saw some scholars suggest in Chapter One, that we should view the physical or visual metaphors that Plato employs as ultimately useless. In fact, we will see throughout this chapter that the language of vision offers a culmination of the process of active receiving which we saw playing out to different degrees in the characters we analyzed in the last chapter.

Our first exploration of Plato’s descriptions of the highest levels of philosophy will be the chariot allegory in the *Phaedrus*. As we might remember from Chapter Two, the allegory offers the image of the soul as a charioteer with two winged horses. The gods’ souls have two horses that are both of good breeding, whereas non-god souls have a mix: one horse is “beautiful and good and from stock of the same sort” and the other horse is “the opposite and has the opposite sort of bloodline” (246a-b). As long as a soul’s wings are in good shape, it is able to inhabit heaven: Socrates says of this heavenly state, “All soul looks after all that lacks a soul, and patrols all of heaven, taking different shapes at different times. So long as its wings are in perfect condition it flies high, and the entire universe is its dominion…” (246c). Some souls find that their wings begin to

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86 The particular character of the Forms is the subject of much scholarly discussion. While the current chapter will focus on the experience of reception for the human being and not on the nature of the Forms themselves, useful discussion of Plato’s writings on the character of the Forms as related to his metaphysics and cosmology can be found in Richard D. Mohr, *God & Forms in Plato* (Las Vegas: Parmenides Publishing, 2005).
shed, and so they fall down from heaven, becoming earthly beings in the process. While
the gods’ souls exhibit easy movement, non-god souls are more often than not clumsily
stumbling around. Socrates describes this difference:

When they go to feast at the banquet they have a steep climb to the high tier at
the rim of heaven; on this slope the gods’ chariots move easily, since they are
balanced and well under control, but the other chariots barely make it. The
heaviness of the bad horse drags its charioteer toward the earth and weights him
down if he has failed to train it well, and this causes the most extreme toil and
struggle that a soul will face (247b).

These immortal god-souls are able to look up at what is beyond heaven, an experience
which involves “seeing what is real and watching what is true” (247d).

The non-god souls, however, have a very different sort of experience. The souls
who most resemble the gods do experience struggle but are still able to achieve a view of
the truth beyond heaven. Socrates states of this experience, “As for the other souls, one
that follows a god most closely, making itself most like that god, raises the head of its
charioteer up to the place outside...Although distracted by the horses, this soul does have
a view of Reality, just barely” (248a). Other souls, though, have even more of a struggle.
Socrates says of their experience, “Another soul rises at one time and falls at another,
and because its horses pull it violently in different directions, it sees some real things and
misses others” (248b). We see here that most souls are engaged in an athletic
competition far beyond their abilities. An even lower level of souls cannot rise to the
place beyond heaven at all; as Socrates puts it, “The remaining souls are all eagerly
straining to keep up, but are unable to rise...Many souls are crippled by the
incompetence of the drivers, and many wings break much of their plumage...” (248b).

As we established in Chapter Two, the souls in the allegory are in constant need
of nourishment, and souls are always taking in different forms of content in the hope of
achieving health and safety. These souls who are unable to rise end up taking in the
wrong form of content. Socrates says of these souls, “After so much trouble, they all leave the sight of reality unsatisfied, and when they have gone they will depend on what they think is nourishment—their own opinions” (248b). Eventually, all souls who do not demonstrate the right amount of ability fall down to earth. Socrates states, “If any soul becomes a companion to a god and catches sight of any true thing, it will be unharmed until the next circuit…. If, on the other hand, it does not see anything true because it could not keep up, and by some accident takes on a burden of forgetfulness and wrongdoing, then it is weighed down, sheds its wings and falls to earth” (248c-d).

Given that this is an allegory about the human soul, we should take a brief interlude here to ask ask how the characters whose narrated experiences we studied in Chapter Two might fare in the allegorical arms race for truth in heaven. Alcibiades, it seems, would fit the description of the charioteer who is able to rise, but only for short periods of time. We saw Alcibiades characterize his experience as a state of conflict between his understanding of Socrates’ arguments about the best life and his desires for worldly fame or pleasure. Metaphorically speaking, Alcibiades reminds us the soul whose “horses pull it violently in different directions” and therefore “sees some real things and misses others” (248b). The language of partial sight here is reminiscent of Alcibiades’ description of the “glimpses” he was able to get of Socrates’ truths when he peeled back the layers of the metaphorical Silenus statue (Symposium 217a). We also saw Socrates criticize Alcibiades’ capabilities for philosophical “sight.” We might recall that he had said to Alcibiades, “The mind’s sight becomes sharp only when the body’s eyes go past their prime—and you are still a good long time away from that” (219a). The use of the language of sight around Alcibiades’ experience establishes him as a sort of half-seer, and it emphasizes that there is something more to be done to yield a sort of “full” sight, the
kind which those souls that resembled the gods were able to achieve (if only momentarily), and which the gods’ souls are able to achieve consistently and completely. Theaetetus’ experience, too, was described using some sight-related language; we might remember the line about his eyes “sticking out,” or his statement about “looking” in wonder at certain puzzles to which he does not know the solutions (143e; 155c). Even Theaetetus has not yet achieved whatever “full” sight entails, though, given that the dialogue ends in 

The continuation of the chariot allegory will offer descriptions of a sort of full-sight experience which goes beyond even a capable thinker like Theaetetus’ state of aporia. We will turn to these descriptions now.

The Madness of Love as a Full-Sight Experience

According to the allegory, souls on earth are all striving to reach the true content that they had once seen in the realm beyond heaven, and some souls are more successful than others. So what can these souls realistically aspire to? Socrates tells us that all that these poorly-to-moderately capable souls can strive for are reminders of this true content. Socrates affirms that all souls on earth have seen truth in some form, ranging from a glimpse to a broader view, and so those who best remember this truth are best capable of seeing it reflected in an earthly representation. Socrates says, “…the soul of every human being has seen reality…But not every soul is easily reminded of the reality there by what it finds here—not souls that got only a brief glance at the reality

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87 See Theaetetus 210c-d; Socrates tells Theaetetus that the thoughts with which they end the discussion are not viable—he uses the metaphor of pregnancy to convey this point—but that these ideas will lead to greater success in future discussions.
there...Only a few remain whose memory is good enough...” (250a). Here we again get a sense of what Alcibiades was incapable of doing and what the ideal “seer” of truth is able to do. The right kind of seeing entails a sufficient “memory” of truth and, by extension, an ability to see this truth reflected in the earthly realm.

Socrates had started this speech with the intention of defending the madness of love to its critics, and it is at this point that the benefits of love appear in the allegory. As we might remember from our earlier gloss of Despland’s argument, Socrates began by delineating three forms of god-given madness: prophecy, what he calls “mystic rites and purifications” that provide “relief from present hardships,” and the poetry that is created under “possession by the Muses” (244b; 244e; 245a). These three forms of madness are clearly beneficial, Socrates argues, and so we can be assured that the madness of interpersonal love is also both god-given and beneficial to the individuals involved (245b). The benefit of love, it turns out, is that it helps stimulate the soul’s memory of its experience of truth before falling to earth; the beauty of a beloved is the best possible earthly reminder of the true beauty that the soul had seen in the realm beyond heaven. Socrates identifies the madness of love as the experience of being reminded of truth through the beauty of a beloved: he states, “…this takes me to the whole point of my discussion of the fourth kind of madness—that which someone shows when he sees the beauty we have down here and is reminded of true beauty...” (249d).

Socrates identifies these “proper” seers who are capable of being reminded of true beauty as philosophers. He says of “a philosopher’s mind” that “its memory always keeps it as close as possible to those realities by being close to which the gods are divine. A man who uses reminders of these things correctly is always at the highest, most perfect level of initiation” (249c). It seems that there is an active element to this experience of
truth. It is not enough to simply be reminded; the philosopher must “use” the reminders “correctly” (249c). It now seems that the philosopher-soul’s experience entails action at both an early stage, in which it must strain to see the truth beyond heaven, and at this later stage, in which it must properly utilize the memory of this truth when it appears. The active nature of this experience of recollection seems to consist in a sort of proper orientation: the soul seeing beauty on earth is reminded of the right kind of beauty and therefore looks away from earthly concerns toward the truth that he had once seen in the realm beyond heaven.88 Socrates describes this experience of the soul being reminded of truth: “…he takes wing and flutters in his eagerness to rise up, but is unable to do so; and he gazes aloft, like a bird, paying no attention to what is down below” (249d). This experience seems to exemplify the soul’s proper “use” of the memory; the soul does not linger on beauty in the earthly realm but instead strives to see the “real thing” beyond earth.

Socrates emphasizes that even though the soul that is reminded of beauty exhibits this proper orientation toward truth, the experience of being reminded of beauty is in itself shocking and overwhelming. Socrates says of these souls with the best memory that “they are startled when they see an image of what they saw up there. Then they are beside themselves, and their experience is beyond their comprehension because they cannot fully grasp what it is that they are seeing” (250b). The experience that Socrates describes seems akin to the most powerful version of déjà vu; the soul is

88 Burnyeat emphasizes this sense in which recollection is the “cause” of the active nature of sight for the lover: “[I]n the Phaedrus the lover’s seeing true Beauty imaged in the face of a beautiful boy…may be regarded as the dawning of an aspect which can only dawn on him because he has seen true Beauty before.” He quotes Wittgenstein, identifying this experience as “half visual experience, half thought” (Burnyeat, The Passion of Reason in Plato’s Phaedrus, 256).
“startled” by a reminder of something so distant as to be slightly incomprehensible, but still nonetheless familiar enough to be impactful.

Socrates emphasizes that the proper orientation to the beauty of the beloved consists in a sense of awe. He states, “A recent initiate…one who has seen much in heaven—when he sees a godlike face or bodily form that has captured Beauty well, first he shudders and a fear comes over him like those he felt at the earlier time; then he gazes at him with the reverence due a god, and if he weren’t afraid people would think him completely mad, he’d even sacrifice to his boy as if he were the image of a god” (251a). We might be tempted to view even this experience as the sort of half-sight that Alcibiades had described, but Socrates emphasizes that this experience of awe-inspiring sight consists just as equally in a kind of proper orientation toward the object of sight. The soul “shudders” at the understanding that it is a recollection of true beauty he is looking at; with this understanding in mind, he treats this sight with “reverence.” But without this understanding, without the ability to look at the proper thing and acknowledge it as such, this individual would not be led to this state of reverence. Socrates makes this point clear when he contrasts this experience of the reverent soul with the kind of relationship a soul of lesser ability would turn to. He states of this kind of lesser soul that sees beauty in the earthly realm, “Of course a man who was initiated long ago or who has become defiled is not to be moved abruptly from here to a vision of Beauty itself when he sees what we call beauty here; so instead of gazing at the latter reverently, he surrenders to pleasure …” (250e). We see again that the experience of “gazing reverently” is a case not of passive reception of beauty but of a proper orientation toward it.
Even the soul in love who is experiencing this “right” kind of madness does
experience conflict, but this conflict is of a much different sort than Alcibiades’ conflict.
The soul does not question its desire for the recollection of truth in this other human
being; instead, it is only in conflict due to the fact that it cannot always be around this
human being. The soul experiences terrible pain when it is away from the beloved and
pure joy when it is reunited with the beloved; this combination constitutes the madness
of the experience of love. Socrates describes this combination: “From the outlandish mix
of these two feelings—pain and joy—comes anguish and helpless raving; in its madness
the lover’s soul cannot sleep at night or stay put by day; it rushes, yearning, wherever it
expects to see the person who has that beauty” (251e). This madness stems out of the
soul’s understanding that the experience of being with the beloved is the proper healing
for its pain. Socrates states, “…in addition to its reverence for one who has such beauty,
the soul has discovered that the boy is the only doctor for all that terrible pain” (252b).
Here, we again see a combined sense of reverence but also an experience of proper
orientation; the soul understands that this “nourishment” is the right kind, and it is able
to properly take it in. Here we can return to Despland’s timeline, in which the experience
of love offered a “nudge” for a new kind of interpretation; he had argued that for Plato,
“there are experiences that make us talk in novel ways, with a powerful impact that
apparently leaves us helpless at first. And he considered erotic love to be the most
moving example of that.”89 But here we see that the “helpless” experience of love is tied
into action, and that if there is “nudging” going on, this nudging must be happening
from both sides; in other words, the soul in love must recognize, desire, and properly
engage with the beloved in order for the experience of love itself to be possible.

89 See Chapter One, 27-28.
At this point we might wonder, what is different here? What allows the best kind of soul the ability to receive or take in this reminder of beauty in a way that a character like Alcibiades had seemed incapable of doing? Alcibiades, too, was able to “see” something true and experience a type of reverence—we might remember that he called Socrates’ true elements “godlike”—although we might see his reverence as slightly different from this sort given his state of conflict (Symposium 217a). We have yet to figure out what increased ability the philosopher-lover has which enables him to properly orient himself in his experience of recollection in the earthly realm. Socrates begins to answer this question by emphasizing that getting to this state of proper reunion with the reminder of true beauty involves a careful dance between the three parts of the soul. Socrates describes the experience of the soul being reminded of true beauty in the beloved:

When the charioteer sees that face, his memory is carried back to the real nature of Beauty … At the sight he is frightened, falls over backwards awestruck, and at the same time has to pull the reins back so fiercely that both horses are set on their haunches, one falling back voluntarily with no resistance, but the other insolent and quite unwilling (254c).

In the first part of this description, we have a sense of awe, fear, and the giving over of oneself to an unfamiliar experience. But the second part of the sentence shows the soul struggling to accommodate itself to the circumstances of this experience, to exercise the necessary control to make this experience possible. Plato explicitly uses temporal language in this statement; the phrase “at the same time” is a direct translation of the Greek term ἕμα. This language implies that these two elements of the experience are not temporally distinguished from each other.

We can now understand that even the most consuming and awe-inspiring sight—the very experience, we must remember, that Socrates calls madness—is
accompanied by an active integration of the parts of the soul. This pulling of the reins seems to be what Alcibiades was unable to achieve in Chapter Two; he was “seeing” the right content, but his desires were still in a state of chaotic conflict, and so he was not able to orient himself properly toward Socrates’ truths in a way that would enable him to fully integrate this content. We can remind ourselves of where we had ranked Alcibiades in the metaphorical competition of souls in the heavenly realm; he seemed to fit the description of the one whose “horses pull it violently in different directions” (248b).

Here, we see that the best experience of sight and of proper orientation toward truth must consist in a simultaneous ordering of the soul, or, in accordance with the metaphor, of the horses. It now becomes abundantly clear that the language of “shuddering” Luce had used to identify a Jamesian sort of religious experiencing only makes sense in the context of this active process of integration. Only by “pulling the reins”—or, in other words, only by properly integrating the diverse desires of the soul, as represented by the good and bad horse—can the soul properly orient itself toward truth and engage in the right kind of sight and reverence. It is important to note, too, that pulling the reins does not rid the soul of the bad horse. The bad horse is still quite a strong force during the experience of seeing true beauty, and the charioteer consistently fights with the horse until it is somewhat subdued; even once subdued, however, its influence persists, and the charioteer must battle its temptations for physical pleasure every time the soul interacts with its beloved (254c, 256a).

The active nature of the experience of seeing true beauty on earth is further emphasized with a contrast to the description of the kind of sight that souls above earth are capable of. Socrates describes the soul’s sight experience before falling down to earth: “the souls…saw that blessed and spectacular vision…And we who celebrated it
were wholly perfect and free of all the troubles that awaited us in time to come, and we gazed in rapture at sacred revealed objects that were perfect, and simple, and unshakeable and blissful” (250b-c). This description is the closest we get to the language of a fully passive vision experience. As far as human beings in this world go, however—and, by extension, as far as our understanding the experience of philosophy itself goes—the reader is left with an image of the experience of seeing the Forms that is concurrent with the continued orientation of one's soul toward truth, as well as the continued engagement with the beloved, who consistently reminds the philosopher-lover of this truth, even after the philosopher's initial experience of recollection (256b). The text does not actually provide us with a description of a moment of viewing truth that is entirely free of either an active self-orientation of the soul or a relationship with another human being.

These descriptions of seeing true beauty offer us a new step in the “timeline” of the experience of philosophy that we have been laying out. We are starting to see that what has changed between the in-process experiences of Phaedrus, Alcibiades, and Theaetetus and this description in the allegory of a higher form of philosophical experience is much subtler than much of the scholarship on these high stages of the experience had implied. The shift is not from striving to passively gazing, nor even from philosophy in-process to philosophy post-process. What we are seeing is a continuous process which consists at every timeframe in both awe and action. We haven't seen a

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50 Some have argued that this description is a reference to the rites at Eleusis; see Kenneth Seeskin, “Platonism, Mysticism and Madness,” The Monist 59, no. 4 (1976): 574-86. Seeskin describes the practice: “These rites began with a holy procession from Athens to Eleusis. Along the way, the participants engaged in a variety of rituals intended to cleanse or purify the soul. The procession ended when the worshippers approached a temple where they beheld a sacred vision” (Seeskin, “Platonism, Mysticism and Madness,” 579).
move from the in-process frenzy to a fully “rational” integration of this frenzy; nor have we seen the other extreme, a move from a rational process of discourse to an all-consuming Jamesian sort of moment. We are not seeing a “rupture” in time or in the self-conception, even at the highest stages of philosophy; instead we have the narrative of an experience which consistently integrates the combination of reception and action that the individual has been honing from the beginning of the process of philosophy.

In *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy*, Catherine Pickstock offers a summary of the proper experience of philosophy in the *Phaedrus* that can help us piece together what we have been constructing here. Pickstock writes of the philosopher’s recollection experience, “…the distinction between active and passive is…disturbed, since the gaze of memory is a passive reception of what is remembered, and yet philosophic recognition requires an act of judgement of likeness, as well as an ‘active’ yearning or desire to recognize.”91 We will return to this concept of the seer recognizing “likeness” in the truth that is recollected as we move on in this chapter, but what we can understand at this point is that the binary between activity and passivity is blurred at this highest stage of the philosophical experience. This combination makes sense given the structure of the soul with which we’ve now become so familiar. The soul is an active receptacle, taking in content and “judging” it, to use Pickstock’s term. As she notes, this judgment is intimately connected with desire and need; we’ve seen that the proper orientation toward the experience of recollection consists in understanding the object of “sight” as the proper and truly desirous nourishment.

Sight as Interpretation: Studying the Sun in the Republic

Before we can say that our work in combatting the arguments in the scholarship for a Jamesian sort of religious experience is done, we ought to look at a few more allegorical descriptions of the highest stages of philosophy, particularly those that the scholarship has utilized to make these claims of a non-interpretive experience. We will turn now to the cave allegory in the Republic, where Plato offers us a more detailed view of how the highest forms of philosophy might appear to the experiencer.\textsuperscript{92}

Socrates sets the stage for the cave allegory by distinguishing between a kind of non-discursive, immediate sight and the experience of knowledge. He says to Glaucon, one of his interlocutors in the dialogue: “Education isn’t what some people declare it to be, namely, putting knowledge into souls that lack it, like putting sight into blind eyes” (518b-c). Socrates offers an account that diverges from this image of a passive receptacle of knowledge:

\begin{quote}
[T]he power to learn is present in everyone’s soul...the instrument with which each learns is like an eye that cannot be turned around from darkness to light without turning the whole body. This instrument cannot be turned around from that which is coming into being without turning the whole soul until it is able to study that which is and the brightest thing that is, namely, the one we call the good (518c-d).
\end{quote}

Here we might return to our image of Socrates and Theaetetus having eyes that “stick out”; in contrast to “blind eyes,” those with the right constitution for philosophy seem to have eyes that are ever-eager, ready for this soul-turning that Socrates discusses (Theaetetus 143c). Chappell writes of this particular passage that it “might have created the very concept of conversion.”\textsuperscript{93} The fact that Plato so clearly distinguishes here between a

\textsuperscript{92} Quotations from the Republic refer to the translation by G.M.A. Grube, rev. C.D.C. Reeve, in Cooper and Hutchinson, Plato: Complete Works.

\textsuperscript{93} Chappell, “Conversion or Conversation?,” 320.
passive experience of reception and the “conversion” experience of philosophy, to use Chappell’s term, should make us consider very carefully the kind of conversion experience that Plato conveys here.

Socrates continues to utilize the language of sight; he says to Glaucon:

Then education is the craft concerned with doing this very thing, this turning around, and with how the soul can most easily and effectively be made to do it. It isn’t the craft of putting sight into the soul. Education takes for granted that sight is there but that it isn’t turned the right way or looking where it ought to look, and it tries to redirect it appropriately (518d).

Here, again, we see resonances of the sort of half-sight experience that Alcibiades described, in which the soul has achieve something more than blindness but still less than proper orientation, or, in the language of this passage, “turn[ing] the right way.”

The cave allegory further identifies this combination of seeing and the proper ordering of the soul to do what is necessary to take in the object of sight. In short, the allegory tells the tale of the journey of an individual who had been trapped in a cave seeing only shadows of reality and manages to escape the cave, at which point he sees the reality beyond the shadows. When the individual leaves the cave and first witnesses these realities, he is helpless in much the way that Alcibiades or Theaetetus described. Socrates says of the person being freed from the bondage of the cave, “When one of them was freed and suddenly compelled to stand up, turn his head, walk, and look up toward the light, he’d be pained and dazzled and unable to see the things whose shadows he’d seen before” (515c). Socrates walks Glaucon through the steps it would take for this individual to move from the helpless, “dazzled” state toward an ability to see clearly. He describes the end of this process. He continues, “Finally, I suppose, he’d be able to see the sun, not images of it in water or some alien place, but the sun itself, in its own place,

94 The complete allegory can be found in Republic, Book VII, 514a-517a.
and be able to study it...And at this point he would infer and conclude that the sun provides the seasons and the years, governs everything in the visible world, and is in some way the cause of all the things that he used to see” (516b-c). Here we again have the kind of sight experience that we developed in the chariot allegory. The individual's sight experience is simultaneous with a sort of ordering around the object of sight and an understanding of the object, or the metaphorical sun, with attention to what it is and what it does. Plato uses temporal language for this sight experience as well; he writes that the individual is “able to see the sun...and at this point he would infer and conclude that the sun provides the seasons and the years”; just as in the chariot allegory, the phrasing here is a direct translation of the temporal language in the Greek. The phrase *tauta* implies a phrase such as “at this stage” or “at this time.” Again we see a use of language that makes clear that there is no temporal lag between the seeing experience and the integrating process.

We have now seen another example of sight that consists in the proper orientation toward the object of sight. We see that the “dazzling” vision of the sun is one step in the process, a temporary step which is followed by something else. The description of the experience of seeing the forms in the cave allegory does provide us with an ascent, but not from active processes to a passive vision experience. Instead, we have a move from a helpless or “dazzling” sort of vision experience to a vision that, due to proper preparation and orientation of the soul through education, consists in the simultaneous act of seeing and “studying,” to use Socrates’ term, or, as we might understand it, the act of properly integrating this sight into a totalistic, or at least holistic, understanding of truth as it connects to the surrounding world.
We can take the combined imagery of the pulling of the reins in the chariot allegory and the studying of the sun in the cave allegory to get a fuller sense of what Plato views as the process of proper self-ordering: it seems that some sort of education or acquiring knowledge is related to the seer’s ability to moderate and control the conflicting desires of one’s soul. Providing an account of how exactly an individual like Alcibiades would develop an ability to integrate truth through philosophical education would be beyond our scope here, but what is important to note for our purposes is that this active integration and self-ordering is happening even in Plato’s descriptions of the highest levels of the experience. In other words, we have now established that what we had once viewed as the preconditions of the experience of successful philosophy are actually also constitutive of the experience itself. Plato has not given us a temporal moment which establishes a “new” type of experience that is distinct from an active self-ordering. There is no experience of passive reception that becomes possible once the individual has sufficiently ordered the soul.

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95 Melissa Lane describes this combinatory model of the culmination of philosophy, emphasizing that it is through education that the philosopher acquires knowledge and therefore comes to develop a full understanding of the relative value of each of the soul’s conflicting desires; without acquiring this knowledge, she argues, the proper ordering of the soul is impossible: “The higher value on the pleasures and objects of the soul, over those of the body, to which the natural philosopher initially dispositionally and then evaluatively subscribes, will only be reinforced by the attainment of knowledge. And it is that preference for the soul, for truth and learning, over the bodily, which generates and eventually explains the philosopher’s consistent avoidance of the actions and attitudes most typical of intemperance, cowardice and injustice. Rooted in his or her temperance, the natural philosopher develops an evaluative attitude which supports the disposition to be courageous, and these qualities together mean that she or he will not act unjustly. This basic pattern of dispositions and evaluations will be reinforced by the attainment of knowledge...” (Melissa Lane, “Virtue as the Love of Knowledge in Plato’s Symposium and Republic,” in Maiensis: Essays in Ancient Philosophy in Honor of Miles Burnyeat, ed. Dominic Scott (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 65).
We can now feel more confident in engaging with Chappell’s argument about the “vision” experience at the culmination of the philosophical process. Chappell had argued:

The vision of the Form of the Good, it seems to me, really is a matter of mystical insight which (quoting Locke again) ‘like the Light of bright Sunshine, shews itself, and needs no other Proof, but its own Evidence....the philosopher's education, and his vision of the Form of the Good, are two separate things, and in the end, of course, the latter is the ‘higher’; yet it is only the first that can prepare the philosopher for the second.  

We see now that Chappell’s bifurcation of the experience of philosophy as “education” followed by “mystical insight” does not track in the text. Even if we were to concede, as some of the scholarship does, that the moment of seeing the sun in the cave allegory represents an internal moment of contemplation which is not related to an interpersonal sort of philosophical education process, we are still a long way away from the passive sort of “insight” that Chappell is describing here. The description Chappell chooses here connotes just the opposite of what we’ve learned about the relationship between the individual and the object of sight. The object “needs” much more than “its own Evidence” in order to be seen. It has become clear that even during the experience of sight, the object “requires” a level of action on the part of the recipient which Chappell does not account for. In this way we now become able to complicate Chappell’s timeline at the other end, too. Just as we saw that what he had called the “rational discipline” of the process of philosophical discourse is actually characterized by experiences of awe and destabilization, we now see that what he views as a passive experience of reception

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96 Chappell, “Conversion or Conversation?,” 327.
97 McCabe offers an account of a kind of intellectual activity in the soul that she sees happening in the Republic. She sees sight as integral to this activity: “To spectate may be an activity, to survey the spectacle, to take it in, integrate it, see how it all fits together into a whole” (McCabe, Platonic Conversations, 118).
which diverges from all rational processes is actually endowed with a level of active interpretation. Just as we saw with Despland, we see here that another projected timeline of “experience” and interpretation bleeds into itself from each end.

**Sight Itself**

In all of our attempts to emphasize the interpretive process at play in the experience of seeing truth, we must not forget that Plato does in fact use the language of vision to describe these experiences. We owe the metaphor of vision the same attention that we have been giving to the metaphors of interpretation and active integration. This is particularly necessary given that as we’ve seen, some scholars have argued that this metaphor might just as well be substituted for other forms of language.98 Plato’s repeated use of the imagery of eyes, sight, and vision seems to suggest that there might be an element of the experience of philosophy that is specific to the metaphor of sight.

The first point to make about sight is a fairly general one. We have identified consistently that proper integration of truth requires the proper construal of the individual’s relationship with this truth. We saw, for example, the differing ways in which the characters of Alcibiades and Theaetetus construed themselves in relation to truth; each of these reactions entailed a sense of understanding one’s relationship to this truth. We saw this play out in Plato’s metaphors, too. The lover’s soul must know not to engage in physical pleasures with the beloved but instead to gaze at the beloved in reverence. The individual seeing the sun must come to understand it as the cause of various natural phenomena. What these metaphors imply is that there is a “being” with

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98 See Chapter One, 23.
which the individual can engage in a relationship; a relationship cannot be construed unless there is a sort of separation between the individual and the “object” of this relationship. The language of sight is useful for providing descriptions of individuals conceiving of their relationship, be it far or close, with true or right content. Nightingale argues for this use of the sight metaphor, writing, “The ‘visibility’ of the Forms to the mind…reveals their substantiability and ontological presence. Metaphors from the concrete, physical world do an excellent job of conveying this ontological point…”\(^9\) In this way, while sight is metaphorical, it does establish that the Forms are “present,” which in turn establishes a certain relationship between the subject undergoing the experience of “vision” and the object of the experience, between seer and seen.

Nightingale also argues that the language of vision entails an experience of rest for the philosopher. As we might remember from our introduction, Plato uses the Greek term \textit{theoria} for some of his descriptions of sight; this term was the name for several forms of Greek ritual in which an individual travels far from home, arrives at a destination, and then returns. With this metaphor in mind, Nightingale views the experience of philosophical contemplation as the experience of “arriving” at a given destination. She writes, “…though the philosophic theoros makes a journey that is painful and toilsome, he experiences intense pleasure and happiness when he contemplates the Forms… the journey is distinguished from the activity of contemplation. Contemplating the Forms is depicted as an intellectual activity that is not technical or methodical or effortful.”\(^10\) The active language within the experience of sight that we’ve been emphasizing might make us question this argument, but on closer

\(^{9}\) Nightingale, \textit{Spectacles of Truth in Classical Greek Philosophy}, 110.
\(^{10}\) Ibid., 114.
look it seems that we might be able to conceptualize the kind of action we have been seeing as a type of rest. The active language has been used to describe the proper ordering of the soul and the proper conceptualization of one’s relationship to truth. We might see this experience as a form of inner rest which an individual in conflict, like Alcibiades, would not be fortunate enough to experience. Alcibiades’ seeing was active in a stressful way; like the horse in the chariot allegory that is attempting and failing superhuman gymnastics to see the Forms, Alcibiades was painfully aware of his own limitations and his own distant relationship to the Forms. The experience of proper sight, then, seems to consist in a rest from this kind of effort and instead a more pleasant sort of effort in which the individual is engaging in the right relationship with the right content.

The Wonder of Proper Engagement

So far we have delved into the language of integration and vision at the highest stages of the process of philosophy. We might be left wondering how we might construe the awe present in this final experience. We’ve seen the language of destabilization in the experience of seeing the Forms; the charioteer, we might remember, “falls over backwards awestruck” at the sight of the Forms (Phaedrus 254c). Nightingale helps us to better conceptualize this form of awe at the highest stages of philosophy by bringing our attention to what she sees as a “second” form of wonder, which she sees as coming after the sort of wonder as opening of possibility we saw with Theaetetus. Nightingale writes,
“But in fact there is a new wonder to come, a wonder that is quite distinct from perplexity.”

Nightingale points to the use of the language of wonder in the description of the vision of the Forms in the Symposium. While a full reading of this passage has been beyond our scope in this chapter, given that it is the last “ascent” passage in Plato’s dialogues, we will briefly check in with this passage here and see if this wonder that Nightingale finds offers us a different view of the individual’s experience with the Forms. In the Symposium, Socrates gives a speech which he claims he heard from a woman named Diotima; the speech outlines the individual’s ascent to the Forms through love. When Diotima discusses the highest stage of the individual’s ascent, which involves seeing the Form of Beauty, she states: “…when he looks at Beauty in the only way that Beauty can be seen—only then will it become possible for him to give birth…to true virtue” (212a). The Greek phrase for “only then” establishes a clearer temporal proximity than the choice of English translation does; the term is "entautha . . . monachou," which can be translated as "at that time alone." In all three descriptions of sight at the highest level of philosophy, then, we have the language of simultaneous action: in this case, the seer is “giv[ing] birth” to virtue as he gazes at the Forms.

Nightingale identifies that this experience of sight in the Symposium involves the use of the term “wonder”: Plato calls the sight of the Forms “wonderfully beautiful in its nature” (210e). Nightingale writes of this use of the term, “This experience of wonder – what I call ‘Platonic wonder’ – accompanies the vision of the Form. It includes awe, reverence, and astonishment, and is therefore quite different from the perplexed form of

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101 Ibid., 258.
While Nightingale is correct that the language of wonder has returned to describe the experience of vision, we should be wary here of bifurcating the experience of philosophy as one sort of wonder switched out for another. Instead, aspects of each “form” of wonder seem to flow in and out of each step of the process of philosophy. As we saw, even Alcibiades’ experience with Socrates did entail a level of understanding of truth and a kind of awe, albeit a different kind. The wonder at the end of the philosophical journey is, of course, the right kind, but can we really say it is different from Theaetetus’ wonder?

What seems to have changed is the placement of the individual in relation to truth. Theaetetus saw an opening of possibility and expressed excitement about getting there, but his wonder does not imply that he has achieved a “right” relationship to the Forms. We might remember that wonder can go one of two ways, and here we see where it might lead: to more wonder, and a right relationship with truth. This critical wonder at the high points of the philosophical process offers us another image of how one of Plato’s characters might move toward these higher stages of philosophy. The “right” kind of sight experience at the culmination of the philosophical process can be found in the placement of the individual in the right sort of relationship with the object of sight. This understanding of one’s right relationship is reverential and wonder-inducing, but it is also interpretive.

As we have seen through the description of the lover gazing in reverence at the beloved, what is necessary for a proper philosophical experience is a shift in the individual’s sense of self and placement in relation to truth. Nightingale expands on this point: “It should come as no surprise that seeing divine beings would evoke wonder—

102 Ibid., 258-259.
this is the natural response to the sight of the superhuman. But the Platonic philosopher does not simply see something divine and awesomely different from himself; he also sees something that is intimately related to him. For, as Plato claims in a number of dialogues, the rational part of the human soul is divine in nature and ‘akin’ to the Forms.”103 We might be reminded of the kind of déjà vu experience described in the chariot allegory; the individual experiences reminders, and these reminders establish a level of familiarity between the self and the Forms. The experience of seeing the Forms is destabilizing not in the sense of an unfamiliar, new vision or a total loss of self-control, but rather in the sense of understanding one’s own proximity and relationship to the Forms. The individual experiences the reverence and the opening of further possibility to which this understanding leads.

As we bring this chapter to a close, we have now challenged generalizations about the timeline of the experience of philosophy in one final way. We have not only shown that the most seemingly “rational” moments of the philosophical process include awe and destabilization and that the most seemingly “experiential” moments of philosophy at its highest levels include interpretation and active processes. Now we have also shown that we need not surrender the presence of reverence and wonder at the “end” of the experience in order to emphasize the interpretive processes at play. In this way, the scholarship that we have been dealing with need not lose its emphasis on the overpowering, reverential elements that classify what we could, if we wanted to, call the “religious experience” of philosophy. Classification becomes a much less dangerous business now that we’ve seen from our overview of the religious studies debates on

103 Ibid., 259; for Plato on the human soul as divine and similar to the Forms, see Phaedo 78b-84b.
experience that the stakes we might have thought we were dealing with in this question are simply not present, both in Plato’s text and in experiences that are explicitly framed as religious. In other words, Chappell can keep the “conversional” model of philosophy without worrying that it will be overtaken by the “conversational” model, because conversion is already always in some way conversational, be it a conversation with oneself or with another human being.

Proudfoot reminds us that the very delineation of something as a religious experience automatically connects it with some sort of interpretive process. He writes: “Religious experience cannot be identified without reference to concepts, beliefs, grammatical rules, and practices.” 104 So where do we go from here in terms of the question of classification? Proudfoot argues that denying that those who claim they have had a religious experience have actually had such an experience is a worthless exercise. As he puts it,

Religious experience, like any experience, must be specified from the subject's point of view. Were we to define religious experience by…. including an assumption of the independent existence of the object in the conditions for identifying an experience as religious, we would have to deny that…Stephen Bradley had an experience of the Holy Spirit unless we were prepared to accept the theological doctrines those experiences presuppose. But to identify an experience from the subject’s point of view is not to exclude issues of explanation…[The subjects’] beliefs about the proper kind of explanation to be given of their experiences cannot be separated from the experience.105

This method of actively observing the experiences of others is what we have tried to achieve in our reading of Plato. Plato has given us character studies and metaphors, and we have attempted to take at face value the language that he uses in these places to describe the experience of philosophy. At the same time, we have tried to be attentive to

104 Proudfoot, Religious Experience, 228.
105 Ibid., 229-230.
the particular rules and structures that are at play even in these fictionalized accounts of experience. Guided by Proudfoot, we were able in our introduction to parse through Bradley’s narrative and see the places where the interpretive elements of his experience were showing through, even if Bradley didn’t say it himself. We’ve tried to do the same for Phaedrus and Alcibiades and Theaetetus, to construe their narrated experiences in a way that was both true to their telling and accounted for the circumstances likely at play. We have been fortunate to also have Plato's moments of widening out through metaphor to give us the tools to engage with these character narratives with the kind of respectful yet active listening that Proudfoot has described.

What we’ve found through this exploration is that just like any other religious experience—as we saw with Proudfoot’s deconstruction of the case of Stephen H. Bradley—the Platonic experience is an experience of active reception. We need not establish any strict binary timelines in which one element of the experience swaps out for another, in which all gives way to a completely passive reception of content with no ties to interpretive processes, because this is wholly impossible for any kind of human experience. And, as we’ve now seen again and again, this is simply not the text that Plato gives us. Plato gives us text that enables us to avoid any kind of clear binary of experience that we might be tempted to create. If we just listen to him carefully enough, we find that he has given us a model that might just ring true with the kind of multifaceted human experience that we are trained to recognize today.
CONCLUSION

What does it mean to uncover a past that looks a little like the present? At this point we have figured out what contemporary scholarship can do for readers of Plato (and for readings of Plato, though not for Plato himself; it should be clear by now that he is in no need of assistance from us when it comes to the category of religious experience). Can Plato give us anything in return?

One possible answer stems out of an unlikely place: one of the most famous of those Neoplatonist-inspired Christians who won’t stop haunting Plato scholarship. The individual in question is Augustine of Hippo, a Christian theologian living in the fourth century AD whose *Confessions* has become a seminal work in many different ways. One aspect of the work that has persisted strongly is Augustine’s detailed description of his conversion experience. In fact, William James takes Augustine as his model for the ideal and unifying religious conversion experience. He says of Augustine, “There could be no more perfect description of the divided will, when the higher wishes lack just that last acuteness, that touch of explosive intensity, of dynamogenic quality…that enables them to burst their shell, and make irruption efficaciously into life and quell the lower tendencies forever.” The end of the story, James tells us, is that Augustine “emerged into the smooth waters of inner unity and peace.”

In what probably seems like a tired old trick at this point in the thesis, we’ll now turn briefly to Augustine’s own narrative of his conversion experience and see if it

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107 James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 171.
108 Ibid., 173.
matches up with James’ description, and we’ll bring our new understanding of Plato with us. The beginning of Augustine’s narrated experience might remind us of Alcibiades’ sense of internal conflict. Just as we saw with Alcibiades, Augustine expresses an awareness of what is right or true, accompanied by an inability to integrate that “right thing” into his conflicted soul. He writes, “…in the middle of that grand struggle in my inner house…I turned to Alypius and cried out: ‘What is wrong with us? What is this that you have heard?... we with our high culture without any heart—see where we roll in the mud of flesh and blood.’”\textsuperscript{109} Like Alcibiades, this combination of awareness and shame elicits a physical and passionate reaction in Augustine. He describes his state as follows: “My uttered words said less about the state of my mind than my forehead, cheeks, eyes, colour, and tone of voice.”\textsuperscript{110}

In this conflicted state, what appears to Augustine is a vision of Lady Continence. When we trace the temporal structure of Augustine’s experience against the experience of Alcibiades, we encounter an interesting similarity here: just as Alcibiades got a “glimpse” of the real Socrates while still being in a state of internal conflict, Augustine has a vision of Lady Continence beckoning him toward the right path while still in his conflicted state.\textsuperscript{111} Just as the vision experience did not enable Alcibiades to achieve the kind of full integration for which he yearned, this vision does not bring Augustine all the way toward his goal. Augustine states of his reaction to the vision, “I blushed with embarrassment because I was still listening to the mutterings of those

\textsuperscript{110} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{111} Augustine, \textit{Confessions}, 8.11.27.
vanities, and racked by hesitations I remained undecided…This debate in my heart was a struggle of myself against myself.”

Like Alcibiades, Augustine recognizes that the vision is coming from “true” authority, yet despite this understanding, Augustine appears unable to integrate this authority more deeply until something else occurs. As Augustine remains distraught by his sense of internal conflict, he hears a voice from in the house, beckoning him to “pick up and read”; Augustine decides to heed the call and open the “book of the apostle.” He recounts, “I seized it, opened it and in silence read the first passage on which my eyes lit…I neither wished nor needed to read further. At once, with the last words of this sentence, it was as if a light of relief from all anxiety flooded my heart. All the shadows of doubt were dispelled.” It would of course be a stretch to imply that Augustine’s picking up of this book after hearing a beckoning voice is the same experience as the careful, lengthy process of education described by Plato, but the loose comparison still tells us something: it was not the vision of Lady Continence that quelled Augustine’s conflicted soul, but it was instead a moment of study, perhaps even active and intentional study. We also see from the rest of the text that even after his conversion experience, Augustine must consistently battle his rivaling temptations. At a later point, Augustine states that “the necessity of food is sweet to me, and against that sweetness I fight lest I become a captive.” Just as the process of engagement with truth does not render Plato’s tripartite soul unified in a way that makes conflicting desires disappear,

112 Ibid.
113 Ibid., 8.12.29.
114 Ibid.
115 Ibid., 10:31:43.
Augustine’s conversion experience does not seem to lead to a Jamesian “unity” that is permanent.

So it seems that our old trick works yet again. Augustine’s experience seems more complicated than James had laid out. The “smooth waters of inner unity” don’t seem quite so permanent, and the “final” moments of his conversion experience seem at least slightly more active than James had identified. We’re also now equipped to see that James skips one temporal moment in his outline of Augustine’s experience. Here is how James recaps Augustine’s experience: “You all remember…his restless search for truth and purity of life; and finally how, distracted by the struggle between the two souls in his breast and ashamed of his own weakness of will, when so many others whom he knew and knew of had thrown off the shackles of sensuality…he heard a voice in the garden…” James simply skips the moment in Augustine’s experience where he sees the vision of Lady Continence but is still unable to reach whatever the proper internal state would be that would allow him to fully succumb to a conversion. James opts for a cleaner narrative that leads straight from a conflicted soul to a unified one.

There is much to be said about this vision of Lady Continence, but for the recent reader of Plato, this moment in the text seems to emphasize the complex and tenuous nature of the conversion process, as well as the simple fact that the human experience is too multifaceted to have a sudden and immediate shift from any one state to another. Having our new understanding of the Platonic experience fresh in our minds is a useful tool that can help us focus on these realities of human experience and turn to Augustine with an eye for picking these elements out of the narrative. Of course, this is not to say that we need Plato in order to be good readers of Augustine. But it is to say that we have

found in Plato a new starting point, a foundational period in Western intellectual history which we have now seen opts for complexity over simplicity and division, at least when it comes to its descriptions of human experience. The case of Augustine emphasizes that finding our more nuanced starting point in Plato can make us more careful readers of all of his inheritors and quasi-inheritors, the “footnoters” and plagiarizers and everything in between. It can also make us more careful readers of accounts of religious experience more broadly.

This might mean that a good reading of Plato is still relevant and helpful to both philosophy and related disciplinary spheres. We may have used Proudfoot as a helpful framework to better understand Plato, but what we’ve found in the end is that Plato’s text is more amenable to Proudfoot’s model than we might have thought. And this is more than a coincidence; it implies that just as Proudfoot helped us with Plato, just as religious studies helped us to better understand philosophy, perhaps philosophy, if read carefully enough, can find its place in contemporary religious studies and prove helpful. It at least seems useful in allowing a field like religious studies get a clear handle on where the binaries and biases and limits that have pervaded through centuries came from, and where they didn’t come from.

This is not to say that our future readings of the texts of the past will now be completely unbiased and pure, nor that they have to be. We’ve been consistently battling the powers and dangers of interpretation in this thesis, and even now that we have gone through Plato’s text and gained some clarity, we are still not free of this power and this danger. It is possible that there never will be such a thing as simply “reading Plato.” Our biases are always creeping in; if we’ve learned anything from Proudfoot, our particular contexts are always playing a role. Sometimes our particular contexts are as simple as
disciplinary boundaries, as was the case with some of the scholarship in which we’ve been in dialogue in this project. Some of our biases are far deeper and more dangerous.

We do not necessarily have to see this fact as a sad ending, though. There must be a midway point between reading Plato wrongly and reading him purely, between misinterpretation and reinterpretation. The experience of philosophy in Plato might offer us the right place to start. We might find our footing by engaging in a study of the past that, like Plato’s experience of philosophy, is both reverential and actively participatory. Only then will we know where we stand in relation to this past and open up the possibility of being upfront about our biases. Only once we master this combination of respect and rebellion can we find ourselves willing to start thinking about what we might want to keep from the intellectual traditions of the past and what we might want to alter. Maybe the metaphors of footnoting and footnoted are too extreme for the process of reflection we should be aiming for when we read Plato. Maybe we just find ourselves somewhere in the middle of the page, messily finding our way through.
Works Cited


