

Some Observations on Conditioning

I've always wanted to jot down some ideas about how we as human beings are conditioned or affected by forces either internal or external to us, hence this article. The term 'observations' in the title is somewhat bland though a deliberate insertion. It reveals that the following remarks are not set forth in a professional manner but are derived from personal experience as well as from that of a wide variety of people. Also they are indicative of the almost infinite ways by which we are conditioned, mostly without realizing it. What's of special concern is that we go through life without giving these conditionings a thought. Too bad, really, for once we become aware of them they startle us at their intrusiveness, yet this awareness allows us to start disengaging ourselves from their influence. A more sobering thought: I suspect that on our death beds we grasp with special clarity how we had been conditioned throughout life. The big problem is that it's too late to do anything except have regrets. Usually we think that external forces have greater impact...the reasons are obvious since they are out there for all to see...but a closer look at our inner workings reveals that just as much (if not more is going on there than on the outside. Sometimes the thoughts we entertain set in motion events exterior to us which assume a life of their own in our attempt to manipulate our surroundings. They may seem innocuous enough but easily can snowball well beyond our control. Upon realizing the profound impact both inner and outer forms of conditioning exert upon our behavior, we're tempted to throw up our hands in despair and consider freedom an illusory ideal. At this point scientific determinism looks like the only valid way to describe our situation. Nevertheless, we can make a truce with our conditionings because many of them are predictable modes of behavior which have become familiar to us even if they are unwelcome house guests. From what I gather, addictions and compulsions are distinct from conditionings. These are more specific forms of behavior where the exercise of free will is at a minimum. Regular conditionings seem to imply a delicate balancing act between free will and that which lies outside it.

Here at the beginning quickly I wish to refer back to my earlier musings on the subject of recollection or anamnesis (cf. the article on this Home Page, *On Anamnesis or Recollection*). This ancient practice is a tried and true way of enabling us to step outside or beyond the realm of our conditionings. It isn't a method in the modern sense but a way of accessing our memory with view toward perceiving our innate divine nature, one founded upon ancient philosophical insights. Anamnesis is a more suggestive approach. By that I mean the ancients made intimations about an innate faculty lying just over the horizon, not fully in view, which forms the background to our awareness. They give examples of people both immune to its existence as well as those open to its presence. The chief means of accessing anamnesis is the process of dialogue whose participants discover aspects of themselves they'd rather leave hidden. Although Socrates engaged freely in conversations with all sorts of people (many of whom were less than desirable), it was among his friends that he had the greatest impact. Friendship has a way of letting us drop our guard and pretensions, thereby allowing our recollective faculty shine through more clearly. As for that article on anamnesis, I am quite sure that my musings there led to the current one though both appear unrelated. The earlier one was based upon interior dialogues with myself and more significantly, with other persons. I've asked them (starting with myself) whether all the talk we hear about immortality and the existence of a soul is a figment of the imagination and has any bearing upon reality. The consensus points to the latter; the same applies to the witness of two centuries of literature we've inherited, readily available for anyone to read. Observing the tension between anamnesis and conditionings creates conflict and a desire to resolve it. Once done, it automatically leads to greater humility and understanding, a process which never ceases. Actually the practice discloses that the quest is better than attainment. No problem there, really, for if in our imaginations we could reach the goal we'd be disappointed if not close to despair.

To appreciate how we're conditioned centers around awareness of a dualism which pervades all reality, human and non-human. When we hear that word automatically Descartes comes to mind, but the dualism which concerns us here is practical and symptomatic of a more pervasive malaise. It takes the form of a

dissatisfaction between what we're doing right now and what we could be doing...in other words, not realizing our potential. In this situation we confront our innate inertia which is more stubborn than laziness. Actually, we're always confronting it, for this battle quietly wages on the interior front with varying degrees of intensity. At the same time we squander time away wishing to escape the malaise of sluggishness and to do something positive with our lives. For such motivation to have a positive effect it must arise from within. Influences (i.e., conditionings) from society have made this inertia more difficult to shake off due to the constant bombardment of choices, mostly through images, which over time create a paralyzing mediocrity. And all this happens pretty much without our realizing it. Thus we're dealing with one of the most pernicious forms of conditioning which lulls us to sleep while life is passing us by.

One way of appreciating who/what affects us is to put some distance between our thoughts and actions, in other words, withdraw from them. This may take the form of meditative practices or even a physical withdrawal, but that's a topic different from the subject at hand. A lot has been written on the matter, and most likely the reader will follow his or her nose for proper guidance. The particular kind of withdrawal I have in mind is accessing our recollective faculty...our anamnesis...and to observe its impact on more subtle features of our constitution, chief among which are memories. Please keep in mind that I am not speaking about a specific practice though such access can be garnered from a slow, careful reading of Plato's Dialogues. We are reluctant to disengage—for that takes effort—since it rubs contrary to how we normally function (I prefer the word 'disengage,' for it approximates a decoupling or letting go which is on the passive side and makes the task at hand more palatable). Often a crisis or dissatisfaction with our lives awakens a desire to withdraw. When pushed to the extreme, a crisis compels us to fall back upon our inner resources which for the most part remain unexplored. After all, the constant barrage of images from outside precludes us from making the necessary inner gesture. Upon discovery that the solution to our crisis lies not without but within, we're enabled better to tap that partially known though very real faculty of anamnesis which is independent of every conditioning imaginable. If we doubt this, there's the testimony of other people along with a formidable body of literature over two thousand years old to back us up.

I hesitate to label the faculty of anamnesis personal as commonly understood; it might be better to call it 'impersonal.' I use quotation marks to distinguish it from the common understanding of the term, inadequate as it may be. Yet should we allow the impersonal realm to inform us, we discover to our great delight that this reality, shrouded in mystery as it is, has our best interests at heart. You might say that the impersonal reality governs us as opposed to conditions us. We know that such government is genuine in that its chief effect is a profound sense of joy that we are on the right track. Such joy, as will be spelled out shortly, is the criterion *par excellence* of this assurance. Here is not the place to develop the mysterious quality of that which is impersonal, would that I could. Suffice it for not simply to mention it in passing.

I know from experience that the opinions of other people influence how I think and act, more often than I wish. We're reluctant to admit them, and I confess to falling into this trap on a regular basis. They reveal an innate weakness that afflicts other persons (as I've discovered to my relief), for when people talk about them a unique bond emerges based upon the common ground of humility. The opinions I have in mind arise from people close to us and to a lesser extent from strangers and the media. Regardless of right or wrong, their opinions carry more weight because of the bond of friendship and ties of blood. Here an opinion can quickly morph into a belief which I the listener adopt because I'm more ready to accede to their authority. In most cases this process isn't harmful though in essence is a form of conditioning under another guise. In other words, put a friendly face on an opinion, and it's harder to resist. We may kid ourselves and claim their opinions are passing though not true if we're honest with ourselves. The human personality gives substance to opinions, and this substance remains long in our memories after a face-to-face encounter has faded away. In addition to these 'friendly' opinions we have the negative variety derived from second-hand information. Once such opinions strike our ears and get into our thoughts, it's a small

and sometimes lethal step to passing judgment. Thus the judgement is re-enforced since I as recipient share the same opinion as the person who imparted it to me. Sometimes we adopt these views against our better judgment, thereby causing inner turmoil which we'd be better off without. How many times we wish we had turned a deaf ear or had been in another place to avoid them! Over a period of time—and this can be as brief as a millisecond—the opinions we hear evolve into fact even if we realize they are distortions of the truth. A lot of this results from a person able to convey them articulately which leads to an interesting distinction between opinions and truth, one discussed at some length by Plato and revealed by the excerpts below.

In his **Republic** Plato has Socrates and several interlocutors discussing the way to establish a city-state or polis. We can misconceive the arguments set forth there as an attempt to found a government on lofty ideals whose inhabitants would be ruled by a philosopher-king. To our ears this image has an air of unreality, often distorted by later interpreters as a literal description of a city-state. At the same time it smacks of an unattainable utopia not far from a mythical Camelot ruled by King Arthur and his knights. Maybe the ideal philosopher-king is a bit far-fetched to us jaded inhabitants of the twenty-first century, though privately we may wish someone like that to come on the scene. Regardless, we eavesdrop on the discussions recorded in the **Republic** where several people are enjoying themselves by sharing ideas on how to improve their current social condition. Today we'd call it brainstorming. Their ideas aren't intended as the literal truth—the participants would readily agree to this—but as rough guidelines for the betterment of social behavior. Not just that, but Socrates is always present, ready to prod his companions to make sure the participants put their noblest aspirations forward to serve the polis. As obvious from many of the conversations, the **Republic** is a discussion about a city-state. Then again, you can get confused since Socrates digresses on the human soul. Sometimes you don't know who is talking about what, a delightful conundrum, for both are interchangeable and mirror each other. We can detect a playful spirit in these discussions by the frequent presence of sentences along the lines of 'Let us (propose or follow such-and-such an idea).' Here the mood is not literal but within the format of a free exchange where the participants enjoy a safe space without being threatened. It's very flexibility allows for continuous adaption which we moderns in our serious intent fail to grasp. In other words, the discussion takes into accounts opinions...conditionings...and attempts to transform them into true knowledge for service of the polis.

Wherever a polis exists we find a multitude of people from diverse backgrounds even if they've been trained (ideally speaking) in philosophy. Such persons are bound to be in conflict despite the best intentions which makes one wonder if the enterprise of legislating for a city-state is worth the effort. It's easy to make criticisms at this level and be skeptical of the results. Nevertheless, this attitude fails to account for the vital interplay between the individual soul or psuche and the larger polis or 'philosopher written large' as Plato himself declares. This conflict also reflects a lesser understood aspect of his philosophy, namely, to counter the sophist reliance upon opinions or philodoxa (love of opinions) as opposed to philosophy (love of wisdom). The hidden lesson is that if the individual soul can become well-ordered, there's hope for the polis. Thus there's hope that the micro and macro levels can work as a unit. If one interlocutor in the **Republic** can speak of the tyranny of opinions which threatens the entire city, certainly his remarks have bearing upon a soul striving to remain free from a similar tyranny. It seems you can never get everyone in the polis to be inclined philosophically, hence the realism of Plato which often is overlooked. You get the sense from a close read that if just a handful of citizens are attuned to accessing the faculty of anamnesis, influence upon the polis can be profound. This makes me recall Abraham interceding with God on behalf of Sodom (cf. Gen 28.22+). Abraham starts off with fifty righteous men and ends up with ten beyond which he does not go. Not a bad effort, but ultimately not that amount of men could be found in Sodom.

All in all this process may be viewed as a movement from conditioning to opinions and hopefully to

knowledge, for without this knowledge we would forever abide on insecure ground. Such a movement leads us to consider whether something deep within us might be immune to opinions, exterior or interior (preferably both). If the conditioning side of life is so familiar, can we make analogies about this other reality? Can we describe it with the tools at our disposal? Probably not directly but indirectly. However, asking these questions presupposes the possibility that this side might exist and is not a figment of our imagination. Despite evidence not in its favor, we persist in our questioning, for history recounts numerous wise persons who had entertained similar thoughts. The ultimate result of this inquiry is of a philosophical and theological nature. While perfectly valid, these two disciplines (especially the latter) have become so overlaid with cultural influences that we become immune to their basic insights and leave them unexplored. In fact, inquiry was often suppressed because it was perceived as a threat to society. Anyway, let's say for a moment that such a transcendent reality does not exist. Our very act of wondering (I like this word because it differs from speculation and includes our imaginative faculty. Famously it's been said that wonder is wellspring of philosophy) is a way by which we can step outside our conditionings and explore new avenues. Although our imaginative faculty is underestimated, it remains closely allied to our intent. And intent may be loosely defined as that which is already present in our imagination including where we want to go together with the steps to arrive there. In a sense, we already have made the transition into this mysterious reality by projecting ourselves into the future through our intent. As for intent, it seems closely allied to will power. The latter, of course, is an act of will projected into the future with a desire to foist it on other people.

Even an inkling of this less familiar side of our human nature suffices to excite our interest for further exploration. I believe we would go there even if strongly counseled not to, for our innate curiosity would get the better of us. We'd persist in our inquiry despite the evidence experts have marshaled against us. The tension between the two poles—our conditionings and the possibility of an alternative—may be intense, and we may do a lot of stumbling in between. Nevertheless, something impels us forward because we are guided by an innate desire for freedom based upon a suspicion that with regard to what we are currently ignorant may be fuller than what we enjoy now. Despite our certainty of having stumbled upon something significant, a nagging doubt as to its existence can remain. In short, we need corroboration from other people. I've heard quite a few accounts of how perfect strangers quickly become friends when they share a common pool of knowledge. It has an uncanny way of bringing them together, not unlike a magnetic force. Personal experience and external corroboration go hand-in-hand, for as we all know, we can never keep our quest hidden from other people. This partly disclosed reality is not a *tableau rasa* or a forced state of mind where we block everything out. It may appear that way because conditioning is a filter, and we have to wean ourselves from this predisposition. Sometimes our perception of an unknown reality (let's call it spiritual or even philosophical) is colored by the popular mis-perception that it's static. Conditionings are marked by all sorts of activity. Therefore a reality wholly different from common experience often is conceived as disassociated with activity. Analogical representation tends to be on the negative side which gives the impression that contact with this reality makes us deaf and dumb to the world. If that were true, we'd be forsaking our familiar conditionings for one that can only be termed the greatest conditioning of them all, a true prison from which there is no escape.

Okay, let's engage in an experiment to test the waters and find out whether or not we can divest ourselves of conditionings. Surely a tall order which comes with a note of caution. This experiment doesn't mean by saying to yourself something like, 'From this moment onward I refuse to be conditioned.' I put it thus a bit naively, but sometimes we think that way deep-down. Anyway, to entertain such thoughts is flirting with disaster. Even if you did succeed in blotting out your conditionings, it would last less than five minutes. Chances are 100% you'll be flat on your face and in a place worse than you had started out. In other words, will power isn't the way to go regardless of good intentions. We have to discover another means to effect this experiment. The other incorrect way of doing this is to blank out our mind in an attempt to create a *tableau rasa* as noted in the last paragraph. Despite being at opposite poles, both

approaches are representative of a certain naivete which demonstrates how alien is the enterprise we have undertaken. Still, there's no reason to wash our hands and walk away. What's the first thing that strikes our experimenter once he or she has gone one or the two routes, either willfully trying to resist all input or blanking one's mind? Both are two sides of the same coin and are marked by will power which makes us even more vulnerable to conditionings. This predicament has the potential of making us spin around in the same place going nowhere. The quandary in which we are put leaves one option, namely, succumbing to our innate laziness (or better, inertia). Thus will power quickly yields to its opposite, a stagnated frustration. We're baffled because we run into a hidden wall, hard as brick, standing in our way. In the meanwhile we are more subjected to conditioning than when we had started out. Talk about vulnerability. No small wonder that St. Anthony, considered as the father of monasticism, was assaulted for so long by so many devils. On top of that, Anthony went out into the desert with no precedent, no model on which to model his manner of life. But if we get into demons, devils and the rest, we are straying from the original intent of the experiment at hand. Such matters are specialized and for those who've been practicing a form of Christian asceticism for many years.

Trying to get a grip on a radically different situation as just described can plague us by the perennial conflict between being and doing. The latter is our natural preference which is perfectly fine. Trouble is that we get caught up with so many things that we lose sight of our being or better, how to comport ourselves as we are made naturally. I say 'naturally' to distinguish our 'artificial' behavior shaped by conditionings. This dichotomy is familiar on the intellectual level but quite another once we're thrown into it. We confront our conditionings when the time comes to buckle down and deal with them, for example, by remaining still in a chair. After getting over the initial resistance, all the conditionings to which we are subject and hitherto had remained in the background assault us with an intensity that astonishes us. Should we persevere with this uncommon practice—all the more uncommon in light of today's media driven world—we discover areas of ourselves that really matter. The problem is that these areas are overlaid by an infinite variety of conditionings which otherwise would remain undetected. At the same time they are thrown into a new light, the light of that partially discovered realm where we're free from them. We might have a flush of exhilaration at our new discovery and want to tell the world that we've overcome our conditionings. Obviously it's advisable to let this temptation pass, for we need to get better acquainted with our newly found discoveries before broadcasting them. After all, these are conditionings more or less on the surface level. Others await us which are more deep rooted and harder to extricate.

Slowly...ever so slowly...as is the case with most folks there begins to emerge a clearer distinction between opinions and true knowledge. It takes considerable time to distinguish between the two, and time shouldn't be rushed or forced. As several excerpts from Plato below reveal, we're at a crucial point in our development because many people can spend their entire lives without realizing the distinction. It seems that an opinion is a social form of conditioning, one that occurs when we comport ourselves according to external expectations (I'm not sure we could interchange the word 'prejudice' with opinion. It seems that prejudice is a hardened form of opinion that has more harmful impact and abides with us longer). Obviously they include what others have to say about such-and-such a person or anything else for that matter. We're more vulnerable out of a desire to be polite and fit in with what people expect, that is, their opinions. Perhaps herein lies that shift from conditioning to opinion because the former is more allied with scientific determinism or involuntary reflex actions. Under this heading we may include inherited physical traits and characteristics, things pretty much beyond our control. They do impact the form of opinions and thus our behavior. Opinions are more out in the open, so if we stick with looking into their nature, the former may be impacted.

Let's say our experimenter sitting in a chair has gained the necessary inner peace, a prerequisite for remaining in a given spot more or less free from fidgeting. Such peace has the benefit of preventing him or her from getting up too quickly when memory of those old conditionings arise. I believe we must have

a taste of this peace at the outset without which the desire to inquire further would evaporate quickly. Peace has a way of weaning us from both outer and inner turmoil in order that we may sustain our inquiry. Not to say that later on we become un-peaceful (though that's bound to happen at times), but this initial quietude enables us to handle more tumultuous experiences, an inevitable part of our journey. After a fairly quick time we're enabled to make a clearer distinction between this initial peace and the turmoil recently left behind symbolized by those breakers crashing upon the shore. I wouldn't be surprised if reminiscences of that initial choppy experience hang around in our memories for a while, but they subside the further we inquire. Presuming that all goes reasonably well, we watch everything that has made us who we are (that is, our conditionings) parade before our eyes and are astonished at the rapidity of their rise and fall. No small wonder that Plato came up with the example of a puppeteer or in Greek, *thaumatopoios*, which literally translates as 'maker of wonders.' These mysterious beings are responsible for projecting images onto the cave's wall which keep the prisoners in their chains. Putting it in mythic terms, we get an intimation that some kind of spirit is responsible for implanting these images in our heads. It's understandable because the 'wonders' passing before our eyes are not the result of our own volition. We do not subscribe to them willfully, otherwise we wouldn't have felt compelled to disclose their true nature. Also the image of a cave is appropriate, for the *thaumatopoi* are invisible, lurking as they do in the shadows which is their natural habitat. The puppeteers seem to have been in the cave waiting for our arrival. Then again if we keep Plato's imagery in mind, we come to the embarrassing conclusion that we've been in that cave just as long as the puppeteers. The only advantage is that the puppeteers preceded us and know the territory much better than we. Instead of being antagonistic towards them, we can learn from how they operate.

Once we've learned not to follow every whim and fancy the puppeteers present to our minds we begin to appreciate the crucial difference between opinions and knowledge. A problem arises with this greater clarity. We've just come to grips with the fleeting though compelling sway opinions have over us and must cope with their constant rise and fall. Hence the difficulty of sitting in one place. While there, we remain mentally in motion...perhaps more so than if we had been engaged in simple physical activity. We're caught in the grip of these images against our will by reason of their clarity and persistence. Part of the reason for our fascination is a realization, often half-realized, that the alternative is death or an interior paralysis worse than physical death. What sustains our inquiry is that despite the fear of death, we haven't yet died. Actually we're astonished to find ourselves very much alive. And despite the ebb and flow of opinions assaulting our attention, we're coming closer to recognize that much of our knowledge consists of opinions. Just the fact that we perceive this standard with greater clarity is no mean achievement and is a cause for gratitude. As we develop, we find that gratitude becomes a benchmark or criterion for discerning the truth. Perhaps it isn't truth *per se* but the threshold to truth. We are at a stage not unlike the author of Ecclesiastes who exclaims, 'Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.' At first glance a bit on pessimistic side, but he has an insight that covers the fleeting nature of human opinions mirrored by the changeable physical world.

At this juncture we begin to have an hint of what real knowledge might be like (i.e., real in the sense of stable and opposed to what is transitory, opinions). Not that we 'know' more fully but are flooded with a Joy that's completely unexpected. Permit me to use a capital J to distinguish it from joys proper to the transitory nature of opinions. From our new vantage point multiple joys are marked by just as many (if not more) disappointments. This new-found singular Joy may be called a sentiment but is broader in scope because it transcends conditioning or habituation. Given our inclination to incessant conditioning, this Joy seems too good to be true. Thus it's no surprise that we want to test it from all possible angles: up and down, left and right...to make sure we aren't deceiving ourselves. Once we've exhausted all avenues, we look back at our familiar opinionated state and for the first time recognize what true knowledge is. In other words, our conditioning has tried every trick in the book to see if can find one measly conditioning, and when it doesn't, we seek another behind that and so forth ad infinitum. Through it all, that Joy persists

immune to all our testings. Thus real knowledge (as distinct from opinion) begins to emerge as something with which we've been born.

We have come to the blessed conclusion that no standards can be found to characterize this state of joyous un-conditioning even if we only have the slightest clue as to what it is. I liken our initial awareness of this reality to the negative example of an amputee whose right arm had been removed. For some time after the operation the patient functions as if he or she still had that arm. But instead of having lost a sound limb, we have lost (or have begun to lose) our adherence to opinions. They hang around a while after their disappearance but gradually fade away. One thing is essential: that we remain faithful to our practice of sitting without twitching, otherwise quickly we'd fall back into the mire of opinionated knowledge as opposed to real knowledge. Another aide which keeps us going is surrendering to the process without trying to figure it out, of refraining from the temptation to correlate our current experience with our earlier ones or with those of other persons. Should we persist, we'd end up right back into the bosom of opinions and our old conditionings. Here the definition of progress differs from the one we've been used to (i.e., more conditionings). Actually this term is a misnomer; what's at work is a standing-still...you could call it a kind of hesitating...when we feel the rush of opinions arising within our minds. In a real sense what will happen next is happening now, for it happened before (shades of Ecclesiastes), a fact that dawns upon us slowly. At this juncture we begin to understand the difference between our former opinionated state and true knowledge. Strange to say, this new-found knowledge is old; old in the sense that we always had it as Joy, something with which we were born. The task now is to assert our birthright and see where it will take us.

Because we've always had this innate Joy (I'll continue with the uppercase J) we can designate it as part and parcel of anamnesis or recollection. How or why we have it is a mystery. The only thing we can do is appreciate this reality and take into account those obstacles which prevent us from its actualisation. In real life, however, we weave in and out of Joy and our conditionings. There's no absolute deliverance from the tension, for we always remain rooted in conditionings. This may sound heartbreaking but really isn't. Sometimes we approach a spiritual and/or philosophical practice with a view towards completely transcending our current existence. Not that we ascend to heaven like Enoch (cf. the book of Genesis, 'who walked with God and was not'), but we've made the fundamental choice to favor Joy over conditionings. No small wonder that Gregory of Nyssa recognized this tension and developed the notion of constant progression in the knowledge of God. Gregory stands out among the early Church Fathers in that he speaks in greater detail of that ocean after having passed beyond the breakers as opposed to remaining within the confines of digressing about the introductory nature of the spiritual life. I mention Gregory of Nyssa because he adopts both a religious and philosophic approach to this dilemma. He does it in a manner prior to the sharp distinction with which we moderns are accustomed, a refreshing point of view. I believe the same applies to some practitioners today, and I am acquainted with several who, though they may not be conscious of it, have retained the seamless unity between two disciplines. Instinctively they draw upon the wells of both religion and philosophy, hardly giving a thought as to their distinction. They are witnesses that the philosophic side to their souls is innate and not in conflict with their religious side. Concretely, these people are a blessed mixture of both in the ancient sense. It's thus difficult to draw a distinction, especially when someone who has been at it a long time because at a point down the line the two merge. You can't say this to someone setting out because that stage is more susceptible to opinionated knowledge. Experiences of the beginning are projected into the future with the intent of mapping it, a disastrous assumption. Only later when opinions and true knowledge (i.e., Joy) are more clearly distinguished can we see the two disciplines merge.

When I began to formulate these ideas about conditioning there came to mind an historical example, St. Anthony the Hermit, to whom I briefly alluded. Anthony is considered the 'father of monks' because he spend several decades alone out in the Egyptian desert. Athanasius' Life of Anthony is full of vivid

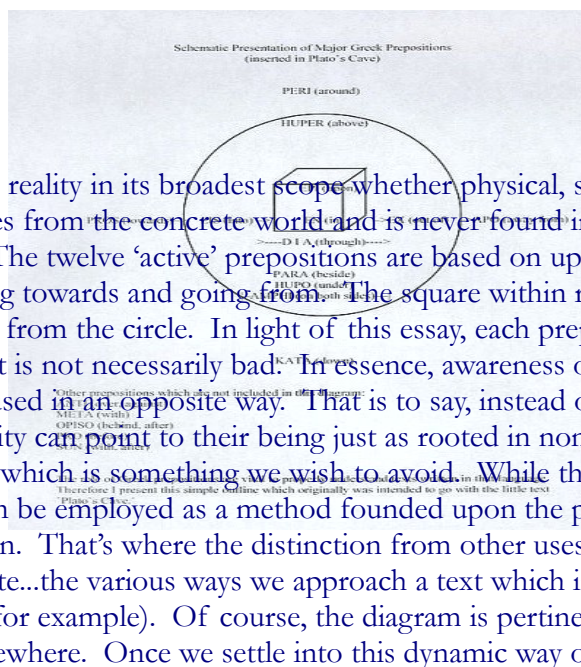
struggles with the devil and temptations as he sat in an empty tomb all by himself. While some may not assent to the description of Athanasius because it's couched in specifically Christian terms, a person who has spent an extended period alone sooner or later is assaulted by a whole range of thoughts and images. At the same time Anthony's account is not unlike a description of ancient practitioners of philosophy; seems all you have to do is change the terminology. It might have been valid for that time but not for today due to what we've inherited from more recent centuries. While Anthony was engaged in his struggles, other early Christians were beginning to integrate Hellenistic culture into their faith. This contact has always fascinated me, more so in later years, for I am more convinced it can serve as a model of adapting the Christianity of those early centuries. Such language doesn't mean watering down Christianity but recapturing the spirit of those early Christian pioneers, if you will. After all, the process took several centuries, a reminder that no such thing exists as a quick-fix. An important point because talk about conditioning needs something more than religious terminology. We've pretty much abandoned that close relationship between religion and philosophy which had been conceived as a way of life. Ancient classical texts have a way of couching human experience in a wonderfully timeless way provided we take time to explore them. Quickly I mention Eric Voegelin, a rare modern figure who has seen the modern predicament and finds a solution by advocating a return to Plato. What's fascinating about Voegelin is that he couches this in light of politics.

Even though the blending of religion was a natural development which really worked, nowadays people sense that it's well, ancient, and no longer pertinent. We modern Christians are so far removed from that time period that talk of it would smack of regression. One modern attempt popular about twenty years ago to recover the blend between philosophy and religion though along different lines was interest in Eastern religion, specifically Zen. Much of the interest was guided by Western religion's inability to address our innate conditionings. The texts were there but the means to interpret them got lost somewhere along the line. In this instance we have non-Christian practices complementing native Christian ones which suddenly became outmoded. That period remains a cautionary tale insofar as more than a few practitioners went overboard in their enthusiasm. They attained a point in their Christian praxis when they instinctively felt it was time to move on, and the best option laid in the East. That period of experimentation was unique, full of exuberance, though coupled with a sense that something wasn't quite right. Obviously it would have been foolish to advocate a return to our classical Western roots. To do so would have had the ring of Christian fundamentalism. Those experimenting with the East felt...and rightly so...that failure to adopt practices from there would have been a regression. Classics should remain in library stackrooms, the province of scholars and conservatives.

But something inherently different between Westerners and Easterners had been overlooked during those heady days. With some hesitation I decided to return to Plato, that is, wondering I might be descending into one of those forbidding stackrooms long ago consigned to oblivion. After a few weeks of reading the Greek texts I saw that this wasn't the case; someone like Plato, Aristotle and Plotinus might speak to us moderns. This presented another problem. Better minds have gone the same route and have done so more articulately. They suited their times, a fact that conditioned (!) me from inquiring further. This is a harder rut to get out of than at first glance, for I realized how deep cultural conditioning reaches, almost to the point of preventing further inquiry. At that point a friend observed that we need to develop a method. Upon hearing the word 'method' I thought she was speaking naively or along the lines of Centering Prayer. No, this elderly lady who had taught biology at the undergrad level for many years had in mind method as a simple, direct outline as applicable for spiritual seekers. To her a method consisted of a few easy-to-understand principles distilled from hard-won experience which can be presented to others. It appeared obvious, almost too much so, though belayed the effort that went into its development. That's when I reflected upon my own experience of reading Plato's Dialogues in the original Greek. Although recommended for everyone at the outset, I picked up on its vibrancy applicable for today. It was clearly distinct from the stuffiness and abstract preconceptions (conditionings) we associate with such texts.

How could I in my limited experience come up with a method? Surely the best and brightest personalities who lived throughout the past 2,000 years would have come up with a method equal to their brilliance. Thus any improvement seemed out of the question. Not necessarily so...thinking like this puts you in a type of conditioning from which escape is difficult. There is always room for expansion even if it's for your eyes only. Anyway, what later emerged was that the ancient authors in and by themselves are perfectly fine. The real problem consisted in how these authors had been interpreted. I have in mind not such much their work (one or more steps removed from the original) which unfortunately can translate into philosophical inquiry. Closer inspection reveals that this too is a conditioning hard and formidable as any brick wall. So one way of jumping over it was to come up with a simple outline I had found in one of those old stuffy Greek grammars. Something similar was on the Internet, yet I apply it according to the spirit of *lectio divina*. The diagram has the advantage of honing in on a chief characteristic of Greek thought which easily has philosophical ramifications. In other words, it is founded upon twelve of the major prepositions (other less dynamic ones are listed below this diagram). So without further ado, here it is. Please note that I have the diagram inserted elsewhere on this Home Page, 'Plato's Cave' and 'Notes on St John's Gospel (chapters 14-17)'. It has application there, but I present it anew in this document:

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The circle represents reality in its broadest scope whether physical, spiritual or philosophical. Like all images, a circle comes from the concrete world and is never found in perfection, but that's beside the point for our discussion. The twelve 'active' prepositions are based on up and down movements which include left and right or going towards and going from. The square within represents a more compact view and is by no means distinct from the circle. In light of this essay, each preposition reveals a way by which we are conditioned, and that is not necessarily bad. In essence, awareness of the twelve ways by which we are conditioned can be used in an opposite way. That is to say, instead of escaping our boundedness, their roots in physical reality can point to their being just as rooted in non-physical reality. Thus a gap between the two is precluded which is something we wish to avoid. While the diagram is a tentative depiction of reality, I believe it can be employed as a method founded upon the practice of *lectio divina*, not as an exercise in abstraction. That's where the distinction from other uses comes in. We are invited to consider...contemplate...the various ways we approach a text which in this instance is scriptural or classical (Plato's **Dialogues**, for example). Of course, the diagram is pertinent to texts written in Greek but has ready application elsewhere. Once we settle into this dynamic way of looking at reality our conditionings

loosen up while at the same time their form or shape remains. These forms seem to remind us of our historical condition from which we can never escape nor is it desirable to do so. Hard to describe in writing, but the loosening process does work if we yield to the gentle discipline of *lectio*. Again, what tells us that it works is Joy which confirms the singular beauty of the knowledge we acquire as opposed to a multitude of opinions.

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Appendix (excerpts from Plato's **Dialogues** concerning 'opinion')

Alcibiades, 117b-d

Do you waver about what you realize you don't understand? For example, you know, I think, that you don't know how to prepare a fine meal, right?

Quite right.

So do you have your own opinions about how to prepare it, and waver about it; or do you leave it to someone who knows how?

The latter.

Well, if you were sailing in a ship, would you be out there wondering whether to put the helm to port or starboard, and wavering because you didn't know? Or would you leave it to the skipper and take it easy? I'd leave it to the skipper.

So you don't waver about what you don't know, if in fact you know that you don't know.

Apparently not.

Don't you realize that the errors in our conduct are caused by this kind of ignorance, of thinking that we know when we don't know?

Meno, 97b-98a

A man who knew the way to Larissa, or anywhere else you like, and went there and guided others would surely lead them well and correctly?—Certainly.

What if someone had had a correct opinion as to which was the way but had not gone there nor indeed had knowledge of it, would he not also lead correctly?—Certainly.

And as long as he has the right opinion about that of which the other has knowledge, he will not be a worse guide than the one who knows, as he has a true opinion, though not knowledge.—In no way worse. So true opinion is in no way a worse guide to correct action than knowledge. It is this that we omitted in our investigation of the nature of virtue, when we said that only knowledge can lead to correct action, for true opinion can so do also.—So it seems.

So correct opinion is no less useful than knowledge?

That appears to be so of necessity, and it makes me wonder, Socrates, this being the case, why knowledge is prized far more highly than right opinion, and why they are different...

For true opinions, as long as they remain are a fine thing and all they do is good, but they are not willing to remain long, and they escape from a man's mind, so that they are not worth much until one ties them down by (giving) an account of the reason why. And that, Meno, my friend, is recollection, as we previously agreed. After they are tied down, in the first place they become knowledge, and then they remain in place. That is why knowledge is prized higher than correct opinion, and knowledge differs from correct opinion in being tied down.

Phaedrus, 248a-b

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 and is carried around in the circular motion with the others.

Although distracted by the horses, this soul does have a view of Reality, just barely. 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. The remaining souls are all eagerly straining to keep up, but are unable to rise; they are carried around below the surface, trampling and striking one another as each tries to get ahead of the others. The result is terribly noisy, very sweaty, and disorderly. Many souls are crippled by the incompetence of the drives, and many wings break much of their plumage. 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.

Philebus, 59a-c

When you gave this answer now, did you realize that most of the arts and sciences and those who work at them are in the first place only concerned with opinions and make opinions the center of their search? For even if they think they are studying nature, you must realize that all their lives are merely dealing with this world order, how it came to be, how it is affected, and how it acts? Is that our position or not?

Quite so.

So such a person assumes the task of dealing, not with things eternal, but with what comes to be, will come to be, or has come to be?

Undeniably.

So how could we assert anything definite about these matters with exact truth if it never did possess nor will possess nor now possesses any kind of sameness?

Impossible.

And how could we ever hope to achieve any kind of certainty about subject matters that do not in themselves possess any certainty?

I see now way.

Then there can be no reason or knowledge that attains the highest truth about these subjects!

At least it does not seem likely.

We must therefore dismiss entirely you and me and also Gorgias and Philebus, but must make this declaration about our investigation.

What declaration?

Either we will find certainty, purity, truth, and what we may call integrity among the things that are forever in the same state, without anything mixed in it, or we will find it in what comes as close as possible to it.

Everything else has to be called second-rate and inferior.

Phaedo 84b

The soul of the philosopher achieves a calm from such emotions; it follows reason and ever stays with it contemplating the true, the divine, which is not the object of opinion. Nurtured by this, it believes that one should live in this manner as long as one is alive and, after death, arrive at what is akin and of the same kind, and escape from human evils. After such nurture there is no danger, Simmias and Cebes, that one should fear that, on parting from the body, the soul would be scattered and dissipated by the winds and no longer be anything anywhere.

Republic

477a-478d

Then, as knowledge (gnosis) is set over what is, while ignorance is of necessity set over what is not, mustn't we find an intermediate between knowledge and ignorance to be set over what is intermediate between what is and what is not, if there is such a thing?

Certainly.

Do we say that opinion is something?

Of course.

A different power from knowledge or the same?

A different one.

Opinion, then, is set over one thing, and knowledge over another, according to the power of each.

Right.

Now, isn't knowledge by its nature set over what is, to know it as it is? But first maybe we'd better be a bit more explicit.

How so?

Powers are a class of the things that are that enable us—or anything else for that matter—to do whatever we are capable of doing. Sight, for example, and hearing are among the powers, if you understand the kind of thing I'm referring to.

I do.

Here's what I think about them. A power has neither color nor shape nor any feature of the sort that many other things have and that I use to distinguish those things from one another. In the case of a power, I use only what it is set over and what it does, and by reference to these I call each the power it is: What is set over the same things and does the same I call the same power; what is set over something different and does something different I call a different one. Do you agree?

I do.

Then let's back up. Is knowledge a power, or what class would you put it in?

It's a power, the strongest of them all.

And what about opinion, is it a power or some other kind of thing?

It's a power as well, for it is what enables us to opine.

A moment ago you agreed that knowledge and opinion aren't the same. How could a person with any understanding think that a fallible power is the same as an infallible one?

Right. Then we agree that opinion is clearly different from knowledge.

It is different.

Hence each of them is by nature set over something different and does something different?

Necessarily.

Knowledge is set over what is, to know it as it is?

Yes.

And opinion opines?

Yes.

Does it opine the very thing that knowledge knows, so that the knowable and the opinable are the same, or is this impossible?

It's impossible, given what we agreed, for if a different power is set over something different, and opinion and knowledge are different powers, then the knowable and the opinable cannot be the same.

Then, if what is is knowable, the opinable must be something other than what is?

It must.

Do we, then, opine what is not? Or is it impossible to opine what is not? Think about this. Doesn't someone who opines set his opinion over something? Or is it possible to opine, yet to opine nothing?

It's impossible.

But someone who opines opines some one thing?

Yes.

Surely the most accurate word for that which is not isn't 'one thing' but 'nothing'?

Certainly.

But we had to set ignorance over what is not and knowledge over what is?

That's right.

So someone opines neither what is nor what is not?

How could it be otherwise?

Then opinion is neither ignorance nor knowledge?

So it seems.

Then does it go beyond either of these? Is it clearer than knowledge or darker than ignorance?

No, neither.

Is opinion, then, darker than knowledge but clearer than ignorance?

It is.

Then it lies between them?

Yes.

So opinion is intermediate between those two?

Absolutely.

479d-e

We've now discovered, it seems, that according to the many conventions of the majority of people about beauty and the others, they are rolling around as intermediates between what is not and what purely is.

We have.

And we agreed that anything of that kind would have to be called the opinable, not the knowable—the wandering intermediate grasped by the intermediate power.

We did.

As for those who study the many beautiful things but do not see the beautiful itself and are incapable of following another who leads them to it, who see many just things but not the just itself, and so with everything—these people, we shall say, opine everything but have no knowledge of anything they opine.

Necessarily.

What about the ones who in each case study the things themselves that are always the same in every respect? Won't we say that they know and don't opine?

That's necessary too.

506c

Do you think it's right to talk about things one doesn't know as if one does know them?

Not as if one knows them, he said, but one ought to be willing to state one's opinions as such.

What? Haven't you noticed that opinions without knowledge are shameful and ugly things? The best of them are blind—or do you think that those who express a true opinion without understanding are any different from blind people who happen to travel the right road?

They're no different.

508c-e

You know that, when we turn our eyes to things whose colors are no longer in the light of day but in the gloom of night, the eyes are dimmed and seem nearly blind, as if clear vision were no longer in them.

Of course.

Yet whenever one turns them on things illuminated by the sun, they see clearly, and vision appears in those every same eyes?

Indeed.

Well, understand the soul in the same way: When it focuses on something illuminated by truth and what is, it understands, knows, and apparently possesses understanding, but when it focuses on what is mixed with obscurity, on what comes to be and passes away, it opines and is dimmed, changes its opinions this way and that, and seems bereft of understanding.

It does seem that way.

So that what gives truth to the things known and the power to know to the knower is the form of the good. And though it is the cause of knowledge and truth, it is also an object of knowledge. Both knowledge and truth are beautiful things, but the good is other and more beautiful than they. In the visible realm, light and sight are rightly considered sun-like, but it is wrong to think that they are the sun, so here it is right to think of knowledge and truth as good-like but wrong to think that either of them is the good—for the good is yet more prized.

