

## Chapter One

### Overview

Whoever comes into close contact with Socrates and has any talk with him face to face, is bound to be drawn round and round by him in the course of the argument—though it might have started at first on a quite different theme—and cannot stop until he is led into giving an account of himself, of the manner in which he now spends his days, and of the kind of life he has lived hitherto; and when once he has been led into that, Socrates will never let him go until he has thoroughly and properly put all his ways to the test. (Said by the Athenian General Laches, in Plato's dialogue *Laches*, 187e–188a; Lamb tr.)

When I hear [Socrates] speak I am worse than any wild fanatic; I find my heart leaping and my tears gushing forth at the sound of his speech, and I see great numbers of other people having the same experience. When I listened to Pericles and other skilled orators I thought them eloquent, but I never felt anything like this; my spirit was not left in a tumult . . . whereas [Socrates's] influence . . . has often thrown me into such a state that I thought my life not worth living on these terms . . . Even now I am still conscious that if I consented to lend him my ear, I could not resist him, but would have the same feeling again. For he compels me to admit that, sorely deficient as I am, I neglect myself while I attend to the affairs of Athens. So I withhold my ears . . . and make off as fast as I can . . . There is one experience I have in the presence of this man alone, such as no one would expect in me—to be made to feel ashamed by anyone; he alone can make me feel it. For he brings home to me that I cannot disown the duty of doing what he bids me, but that as soon as I turn from his company I fall victim to the favours of the crowd. So I take a runaway's leave of him and flee away;

when I see him again I think of those former admissions, and am ashamed. Often I would wish he had vanished from this world; yet again should this befall, I am sure I should be more distressed than ever; so I cannot tell what to do with the fellow at all. (Said by Alcibiades in Plato's *Symposium*, 215e–216c; Lamb tr.)

These are two accounts Plato gives of the way Socrates affected people who talked with him. The “Socrates” that appears in Plato's writings is Plato's philosopher-hero.

### Socrates's Search for Truth about Virtue

Plato's Socrates represents two things:

- On the one hand, he represents unrestricted questioning in search of truth. He tried to teach people to value questioning at the expense of comfort. People will not begin to seriously search for truth until questioning shakes their confidence that they already know it. Socrates died by court-ordered suicide, convicted of “corrupting the youth.” In Plato's picture he died because he taught young men of Athens a love of truth which caused them to question traditional beliefs.
- But what is the “truth” that Socrates was seeking? It is truth about “virtue,” *arētē*, moral excellence of character. Virtue is what makes a soul a healthy soul, and at his trial Socrates said he was teaching young men to search for the truth about virtue. He begins a picture of his life mission by an imagined address to the people of Athens:

Most excellent men of Athens . . . Are you not ashamed to care for the acquisition of wealth and for reputation and honor, when you neither care or take thought for wisdom and truth and for your soul that it might become its best?

And if any of you argues the point, and says that he does care, I shall not let him go . . . but I shall question and examine and cross-examine him, and if I find that he does not possess virtue but says he does, I shall rebuke him for scorning the things that are of most importance and caring more for what is of less worth. (*Apology* 29e, tr. Fowler 1914, 109, lightly revised; for more on Socrates and “care of the soul,” see A. E. Taylor 27–28)

These are two of the main topics of this book.

- The concern for virtue, which as I will explain is in Plato's thought the same as a concern for what we would call today personal spirituality. As illustrated in the passages above, Socratic Platonism is a challenge to change one's life, not just change one's beliefs.
- Serious concern for the truth, in which nothing is considered beyond questioning, and truth is what will withstand the most serious and sustained questioning.

I want to present here a third dimension of Platonist thought—treating it, that is, as a rational way of dealing with “ultimate” questions, questions about what finally matters in human life. One might think of this as recovering the “religious” dimension of Platonism—Platonism as a fully rational way of dealing with those kinds of ultimate questions that are more often consigned today to matters of religious faith. Platonism so conceived is a kind of reason-based spirituality, whose practice includes critical reasoning aimed at formulating virtue-ideals rationally known to be perfect in their goodness, and then taking these transcendent, “divine” ideals as the focus of one's ultimate loyalties and commitments.

Julia Annas (1999) shows that so-called middle-Platonists in the first two centuries AD emphasized two aspects of Plato's thought that tend to be neglected today, but that accord well with this focus on virtue as what finally matters in life. One is the idea often strongly asserted by “Socrates” in Plato's dialogues, that virtue is good for its own sake, apart from any good results produced, and that it is in fact the supreme good in human life, worth sacrificing other goods for. The other is the idea that becoming virtuous is “becoming like God,” the highest being. Frantisek Novotny's comprehensive history of Platonism also shows that this spiritual/religious dimension of Platonism was prominent well into the Renaissance period, as shown, for example, in the religious Platonism of Marsilio Ficino (1433–1499; see Novotny 457–72).

One intention of this book is to develop and present a version of reason-based Platonist spirituality as a live option for interested individuals today. I also want to develop it as the basis of a “philosophy of religion.” Platonism so conceived is extraordinary in its ability to begin only with the thoughts and perceptions of ordinary untutored individuals such as Socrates meets on the streets of Athens, and yet use these as the basis for answers to the most fundamental of human concerns. As the Roman writer Cicero (106–43 BC) said, “Socrates . . . was the first to call philosophy

down from the heavens and locate her in cities, and even introduced it into homes, getting people to inquire about life and customs, and about things good and bad” (*Tusculan Disputations*, 5.4.10–11. My translation; unless otherwise noted, translations from Latin and Greek in this book are my own.)

### Existential Questions: What Finally Matters

Here, then, I begin a substantive outline of the version of Platonism I advocate, by presenting an assortment of examples describing what I mean by an “existential” concern with ultimate questions, to which I claim this version of Platonism provides rationally well-founded answers.

- I set myself certain goals. Sometimes I succeed and sometimes I don’t. But what goals are really important? If I achieve goals that are themselves unimportant, whether I succeed or not is also not really important. Are there some goals that I should take completely seriously as important in themselves?
- I try to live up to certain moral standards. My self-esteem depends partly on how well I live up to these standards. But what about the standards themselves? What standards deserve to be taken completely seriously as measures determining whether I am a good person or not?
- Social pressure, “what the neighbors think of me,” whether others approve or disapprove of me, has a lot of power to determine what I think of myself. But do these things deserve this power that they have? Should these be taken completely seriously as standards determining whether I am a good person or not?
- Sometimes other people, or institutions, make demands on me. I feel good about myself when I meet these demands, and I feel guilty or inadequate when I fail. But does this ultimately matter? Are there some demands I should take completely seriously, and others which I should not? Is there anything out there in the world to which I really owe complete and unconditional loyalty? What am I ultimately responsible to, what responsibilities should I take completely seriously?

- Some experiences I have—falling in love, experiencing nature’s beauty, playing great music—seem very meaningful, soul-satisfying, filling my life with meaning. Other times my life appears relatively boring and meaningless, with nothing interesting or important going on. I’m just taking up space in the world. Sometimes it happens that something feels very meaningful at the time, but it brings no deep and lasting satisfaction, and later appears to have been an unimportant episode. Is there anything that is absolutely meaningful in itself? Is there some way of telling what is really meaningful and what only appears meaningful?
- When I come to die, looking back over my life, what kind of life will have been a significant, meaningful life, a life I can be proud of and satisfied with? Is it possible to lead a “wasted life,” as opposed to a highly worthwhile life, a life in which something happened that is truly important?
- What kind of world do I live in? The world out there seems to have great power to affect my sense of self-worth and meaning in life. But does anything out there really deserve the power that it has? Is there anything out there to which I really owe something—owe admiration, respect, loyalty, commitment, conformity?
- Is reality good? Does the world out there support goodness, or are goodness and reality separate, perhaps opposed to each other? Is goodness itself really real, or just a dream, separate from “the real world” and in no sense real itself?

It should be emphasized that these are not only, not even primarily, problems for theory. They are “existential” problems, problems affecting how we see ourselves, how we feel about our lives, potential sources of encouragement or discouragement about life.

### Plato’s Two Worlds

The Platonist answer to these personal questions consists in a view of “two worlds,” one world “here” (*enthade*), another separate world “over there” (*ekeise*).

There is the material/social world “here,” that has most power to affect a person’s senses and feelings—power to confirm or disconfirm a person’s sense of self-worth and meaning in life. But this world here is at best a changing mixture of good and not good, a world which Plato characterizes as a world where what is right is always “mixed with” what is not right, what is noble and beautiful is always mixed with what is shameful and ugly. This means that nothing here deserves my unconditional loyalty. This world here should not be taken with complete seriousness as a context for judging what finally matters. It is not a good basis for deciding what is truly important and meaningful, or for self-evaluation. Nothing in this world here deserves to be taken completely seriously when it comes to the kinds of ultimate questions described above.

But a good Platonist lives in a reality in which there is another world “over there,” separate from this world. This “divine” world is a world of pure and “unmixed” goodness, deserving to be taken with ultimate seriousness, deserving all the respect, admiration, and commitment that I can give it, and deserving to be taken as the true standard for deciding what finally matters.

Here is one of Plato’s descriptions of this otherworld in a conversation between Socrates and a young man, Theodorus, in Plato’s *Theaetetus* (176a–c):

*Theodorus:* If, Socrates, you could persuade all men of the truth of what you say as you do me, there would be peace and fewer evils among mankind.

*Socrates:* But it is impossible that evils should be done away with . . . they cannot have their place among the Gods, but must inevitably hover about mortal nature and this region. So we must try as quickly as possible to flee from here [*enthende*] to get over there [*ekeise*]. [Such] fleeing is becoming like God as far as is possible . . .

God is in no way and in no manner unrighteous, but is most perfectly righteous, and nothing is more like Him than any one among us who becomes the most nearly perfect in rightness as is possible. (My translation after Fowler, 127–28. Note that “righteous” can be a misleading translation of the Greek *dikaios*, if this calls up associations with being self-righteous. As a virtue, I think the adjective *dikaios* might be better translated as “right-minded,” describing the habit of making rightness one’s primary concern in life.)

This is a succinct description of Plato's otherworld existing "over there," its relation to this world here, and how the ideal Platonist relates to this other world.

The Platonist otherworld over there is populated by what Plato calls "Forms" of virtue, such as the virtue of right-mindedness, or courage, or love, and so on. The Platonic Form of right-mindedness is the virtue of right-mindedness at its most perfect, containing no admixture of unrightness. This contrasts with the world over here, in which perfect rightness does not exist. Everything over here in this world is an imperfect and changing mixture of rightness and not-rightness. The perfect world over there is the reality we should take completely seriously, as the reality before which we must justify our existence.

This describes well the personal, "existential" orientation of the ideal individual Platonist, the otherworldliness that characterizes her way of being in the world. It also, however, illustrates well Plato's metaphorical use of language and imagery. One might at first think that "fleeing from here to get over there" refers to literal soul-travel, or at least to ignoring this world here and trying to live as though one actually existed in this other world over there. But Plato makes it clear that this is not what he means. "Taking flight from this world to the other" means "becoming as right-minded as possible" *in this world*.

The perfect Form of Right-Mindedness should serve as what Plato describes elsewhere (*Republic* 484c, 540a, 592b) as a "paradigm" (*paradeigma*), on which one should model oneself and one's own character. Or to use another Platonist concept: The goal of the ideal Platonist should be to "participate" as closely as possible in the perfect Platonic Form of Right-Mindedness, Courage, Love, and so forth.

Why "perfect" or "divine" Virtue-Forms, when "no one is perfect"? While perfect Virtue-Forms are the focus of the ultimate loyalties of ideal Platonists, their realistic goal is not to actually *become* perfect. It is rather to strive toward perfection—or perhaps better, to "strive for moral *excellence*," since "being a perfectionist" often has negative connotations today. As Plato says:

If we discover what Rightness is, will we demand that the righteous man not differ from it in any way, or will we be satisfied if he comes close to it and participates in it . . . ?

It was for the sake of having a model [*paradeigma*] that we inquired about "What is Rightness Itself?" and if a man became perfectly Right, what kind of person he would be in becoming

so—so that . . . we might be compelled to agree . . . that whoever is most like those [perfectly righteous men] we will have a kind of existence most like to theirs.

It was not for the sake of proving that it is possible for these things to [actually] exist . . . Do you think an artist any less [an artist] if, having painted a model [*paradeigma*] of what would be the most fine [*kallistos*] man, putting in the painting everything important for this, he would not be able to prove that it is possible for such a man to exist?

We are [only] trying to create in words a model [*paradeigma*] [of Rightness]. . . . [*Republic* 472b–e]

Compare this to other fields of endeavor. We admire individuals who strive for excellence in sports, or music, or learning. If I want to become an excellent violinist, I do not want to imitate mediocre violinists and model my playing after theirs. To imitate imperfect violin-playing might be to imitate these imperfections—not a way to strive for excellence. I want to listen to virtuoso violinists instead. I might never reach their level of excellence, but I can know that every step I make toward making my playing resemble theirs will bring me closer to excellence.

### Philosophy as a Way of Life

It is important to the version of Platonism I propose here to emphasize the *pragmatic function* of the Virtue-Forms in the life of the ideal Platonist, and the characteristics they need to have in order to fulfill this function. That is, as noted in the introduction, I focus here on an aspect of Plato's thought that Pierre Hadot has emphasized (1995, 81–109; 2002, 22–76), Platonism as a way of life. That is, "Philosophy" for Plato was not yet a professional academic discipline. To be a Platonist philosopher was to be an individual whose primary loyalties lie in the world of perfect, otherworldly Virtue-Forms. And the primary way in which this commitment should manifest itself is the cultivation of virtue, caring for one's own soul, "that it might become its best."

The chief characteristic a Platonic Virtue-Form needs to have to fulfill its practical function of guiding virtue-cultivation is that it needs to represent some particular virtue *at its most perfect*. The reason for this is the one just given: An individual must be able to be assured that every step she makes toward participating in a given Form will make her a more good and



admirable person. This would not be true if the virtue-concept she is trying to model her character on is an imperfect mixture of Good and not-Good. A virtue-concept to model oneself on serves as an ideal norm by which to measure oneself. And as Plato says, “the imperfect is not the measure of anything” (“*ateles . . . oudenos metron*”; *Republic* 504c)

On this understanding, the ethical *perfection* of Platonic Virtue-Forms is the foundation for Platonist spirituality or Plato’s worldview, what it is that needs to be shown to be true about these Forms in order to provide Platonist spirituality and worldview with a solid foundation. This is what constitutes the otherworldliness or “transcendence” of Virtue-Forms: the fact that they transcend in their ethical perfection anything possible in this imperfect world we see in this realm “over here” (*enthade*) or “here below” (*kato*).

### Individualist Platonism and Critical Reconstruction

I also want to emphasize the cultivation of virtue as an “individualist” undertaking—a project to be voluntarily undertaken by each individual for its own sake. Knowledge of perfect virtue-paradigms might of course be useful for other purposes, such as parents’ attempts to form the characters of their children, or attempts by political leaders to foster an environment conducive to virtue on the part of citizens. But treating virtue-knowledge in such social and interpersonal contexts as they occur today would make necessary a discussion of many complex and controversial issues that do not need discussion if we stick to a practical context (certainly central to Plato’s thought), in which a single individual wants virtue-paradigms to use for guidance in her own efforts to become virtuous.

This individualist emphasis marks a great difference of course with respect to an assumption underlying a great deal of discussion of moral issues today. That is, it is often assumed that the purpose of discussion of moral issues is to arrive at moral truths, or rules, or principles, backed by reasoning, which all people might be persuaded to agree to, and so would hopefully be accepted as a basis for social and political life. Of course, it would be desirable to have a mode of reasoning capable of bringing everyone to universal agreement. Problems arise when one makes this high ambition the *essential* goal of moral reasoning, which then gives rise to moral skepticism when this goal cannot be achieved. In any case, whatever can be said about the abilities of reason in general, I don’t think we find in *Plato’s* writings any reasoning method capable of bringing about this universal agreement among

all people everywhere—especially given our global awareness and acceptance of cultural diversity today. As I will point out below, the “Socratic” reasoning method we do find in Plato is also “individualist,” in that it relies on a critical examination by a single individual of that individual’s own ethical perceptions and beliefs.

These remarks illustrate well an interpretive principle explained further in chapter 3 as “critical reconstruction.” That is, many different claims are made by characters in Plato’s dialogues. Some of these claims can be supported by good reasons today and some are justifiably regarded as doubtful and controversial at best. Rather than try to figure out which of the claims made by Plato’s characters represent Plato’s own thought, what I try to do here is reflect on (1) which of these claims are central to Platonism as a virtue-centered spirituality and way of life for individuals, and (2) which claims can also be supported by good reasons today.

Critical reconstruction is a way of avoiding some typical objections to Platonism common today. In the present case, for example, one can find in Plato’s writings some statements that can be taken as claims that there is one and only one small set of virtues universally valid for all people for all time. However,

1. We find in Plato’s writings no reasoning methods capable of supporting this claim. As I will point out below, Socratic reasoning is “individualist” in that it asks each individual to reflect only on her own ethical perceptions and beliefs, without being concerned about disagreements with others whose life-experience is different.
2. Agreement with others is not important if reasoning is something done by each individual, for the purpose of formulating perfect virtue-models to model her own character on.

So I cannot claim to know for sure that the person Plato did *not* believe in one set of universal timeless truths regarding the number of genuine Platonic Virtue-Forms that exist. If Plato held such a belief, we should just say that here he overreached himself. This is a belief that he could not support with good reasons, certainly not reasons we can continue to regard as good reasons today. But we should not regard this as a reason for entire rejection of Plato’s theory of Virtue-Forms, concluding that we have nothing to learn from this theory today. We should, rather, see if we can scale back claims made about Virtue-Forms to what can be supported by a model of Socratic reasoning we can also derive from Plato’s writings, and still retain

what is essential to provide the Platonist way of life with a solid foundation. One of my tasks in what follows is to show how this is possible.

### Virtue-Models, not Rules for Conduct

One further major difference between Platonism and modern moral thought is a difference implicit everywhere in Plato's writings, in the mere fact that he takes not moral *behavior*, but "virtue" as the central topic of ethical discussion, and treats Virtue-Forms as perfect models ("paradigms") to model one's character on. This again is quite different from an assumption underlying most discussion of ethical or moral issues today: This is the assumption that ethical/moral problems are problems about rightness *in external conduct*, and about general rules, principles, or axioms from which one can deduce proper behavior in particular circumstances. I will try to show below that one result of "Socratic" reasoning recognized by Plato himself is a realization of limitations inherent in the nature of all ethical thought focused on external conduct and rules for external conduct. These limitations can only be overcome if one abandons the attempt to capture human goodness in the form of rules for externally observable conduct, and focuses instead on trying to formulate pure and perfect *virtue-models* one can model one's character on—"virtue" being something internal to a person, which will of course *manifest* itself in admirable conduct, but which is not itself directly visible to the general public from the outside. (I will discuss the relation between internal virtue and external conduct at greater length in chapter 4.)

This focus on "individualist Platonism" does not mean that individual Platonists would be cultivating her own virtue *instead of* caring for others, being involved in political life or in efforts to better her community, and so on. Cultivating kindness or right-mindedness, for example, is not only a purely psychological matter of an individual's relation to her own inner life. Being a virtuous person is a way of being-in-the-world, a fundamental way of relating to the world, defining one's identity as a representative of moral goodness, making goodness an effective presence in the world. Cultivating kindness, for example, means becoming a representative of kindness in the world, making kindness an effective presence in the world—which of course necessarily means cultivating kind attitudes toward others and expressing these attitudes in concrete behavior when the situation calls for it. Cultivating right-mindedness means becoming a representative of rightness in the world, trying as much as possible to make rightness prevail in the world, which of course means doing whatever one can to right the

wrongs of the world, struggling against unrightness and injustice in the world when opportunity presents itself.

### Platonism as a Difficult Way of Life

Platonism is a *difficult* way of life for individuals. The main problem lies in the fact that the concrete imperfect world visible to the senses, which has the most emotional power to affect a person's sense of self-worth, is least morally deserving of this power. And on the other hand, the perfect world of Platonic Forms, which are most deserving to be taken as standards for self-evaluation, can only be grasped in the form of mental abstractions, which have the least emotional power to affect one's sense of self-esteem and meaning in life.

This I take to be one of the primary meanings of Pierre Hadot's use of the term *spirituality* to describe Platonism. It has nothing necessarily to do with the literal existence of thing-like spiritual entities or substances. Nor in my critical reconstruction is it necessarily associated with relating oneself to an actual higher being. (I advocate taking "divine" in reference to Plato's Forms as equivalent to "perfect in its goodness," possibly but not necessarily connected to belief in a really existing supernatural entity who represents this perfect goodness. Whatever Plato himself may have believed on this topic, his writings offer no reasoning method capable of resolving modern doubts about the existence of God in this sense.)

"Spirituality" in Plato's case has rather to do with overcoming "materialistic" concrete-mindedness when it comes to considering what finally matters in life, being able instead to focus one's attention and loyalty on goodness in its purity, which (as I argue below) Socratic reasoning shows can only be grasped by means of abstract concepts separated from material reality visible to the senses.

That idea that all knowledge tied in any way to the concrete world visible to the senses is by nature imperfect, and that perfect goodness can only be precisely grasped in abstractions—this is not a Platonist dogma, but is one of the main results of systematic employment of a kind of critical thinking that Plato attributes to his teacher Socrates, the subject of my next section.

### How Can We Get "Over There" from "Here"?

The central Platonist claims that need to be supported by critical reasoning concern the *existential* import of Platonic Forms, the idea that pure and perfect virtue-paradigms are what deserve to be taken completely seriously

when it comes to ultimate questions. This means that when we speak of Platonist “love of truth,” this is the kind of truth we are speaking about.

This requires raising some particular questions: What kind of critical reasoning, based on what kind of evidence, is the kind of reasoning and evidence suited to this search for perfect Virtue-Forms? Is there a rational way to gain knowledge of pure goodness? Is there a rational way of telling the difference between a virtue-concept that really represents a perfect Platonic Form of some virtue, and one that does not?

This question about reasoning and evidence is a question belonging to what philosophers call “epistemology.” Epistemology is the theory of knowledge. More exactly, it is a theory about the basis for valid knowledge. My concern here is with a *working* epistemology, an epistemology that can serve as a practical guide to reasoning about Platonist Virtue-Forms, and provide criteria for knowing the extent to which a given virtue-concept does or does not qualify as a Platonic Form.

The following is a brief sketch of an epistemology related to knowledge of the above issues that is central to the present critically reconstructed Platonism. This is an epistemology I think implicit in several examples of Socratic reasoning presented in Plato’s dialogues (discussed below and in chapter 5), seen in conjunction with passages in the middle chapters of the *Republic* (discussed in chapter 6) suggesting how Socratic reasoning can lead to knowledge of Platonic Virtue-Forms.

This epistemology depends on a complex role played by concrete experience in the process of gaining knowledge of pure and perfect “otherworldly” goodness.

- On the one hand, we have no other basis for our knowledge of rightness, or other virtues, besides our perceptions of what is right and not right, admirable and not admirable, in concrete situations in this world. We only acquire knowledge of the virtue of right-mindedness by witnessing people acting rightly, or not-rightly in particular situations. This is true of courage, love, and all other virtues.
- On the other hand, no person in this world, no institution in this world, no action in this world, no rule for how to act in this world, precisely represents something only and always purely and perfectly good. As long as we try to grasp goodness in terms of something concrete and externally visible, we will always be grasping goodness in an imperfect and changeable form, mixed with other things that do not merit being taken with unconditional seriousness as perfectly good.

In other words, on this account, concepts of pure goodness (perfect Platonic Virtue-Forms) are present *in* our perceptions of what is good and not good in the concrete world that we live in over here. It is just that, as Plato pictures it, pure goodness exists in these perceptions in a mixed and imperfect form, mixed with impurities, things that are not purely and perfectly good. Grasping goodness in its pure and perfect form requires mentally separating the pure goodness present in our perceptions, from all the things that are not good, also present in those perceptions. This is the sense in which pure goodness can only be grasped by means of “abstract” concepts, concepts separated from anything concrete.

Consider by comparison the process of silver mining. Pure silver is already present in raw silver ore. It is just present there in a mixed form, mixed with other impurities that are not pure silver. Silver mining requires a process of extraction and refining—extracting the pure silver from all those other things in raw silver ore that are not pure silver.

In other words, the courage represented by the Platonic Form of Courage is the same courage we perceive in concrete courageous people and concrete courageous behavior. The Platonic Form of Courage does not have a kind of being different from the being of the courage we perceive in concrete individuals and concrete actions. It only represents this same courage, mentally separated and purified of the imperfections that affect all concrete examples of courage.

### Does Perfect Courage Exist?

This relates to the question often asked: Can it be said that the Platonic Form of Courage “exists”? To what extent can it be said that the Platonic Form of Courage is “real”?

I think that problems arise here if one takes the material objects and events that we see in the world around us as the paradigm case of things that “really exist.” On this assumption, “the real world” consists of thing-like objects. Everything that really exists must exist as a thing-like object—if not a material object made of material stuff, then a thing-like “spiritual” object made of spiritual stuff.

Along with this often goes the assumption that critical reasoning can only be focused on the validity of beliefs about the existence or nonexistence of thing-like objects. If a person has a belief that is not about the existence or nonexistence of thing-like objects, then this is just something arbitrarily posited by that person, an arbitrary “mental creation” about which there

can be no reasoning, since there is no real entity involved about which the person could have mistaken beliefs or well-founded beliefs.

Part of the answer here is that Plato wants to challenge this very idea that only concrete thing-like entities are “real,” and that “reason” is the faculty by which a person examines the truth or falsity of beliefs about such “real entities.” The Platonic Form of Courage does not exist as a particular thing-like object. If one assumes that “the real world” is a world made up of thing-like objects, then the Platonic Form of Courage is not part of “the real world.” The Platonic Form of Courage is an *ideal* that concrete individuals might strive to approximate (“participate in”) more and more closely if they want to *better* their concrete existence as persons.

But one of Plato’s main ideas is that, when it comes to deciding what finally matters, *ideals* such as this are what deserve being taken most seriously. We should evaluate ourselves and our lives in the light of ideals that do not “exist” as part of the concrete world of particulars we see around us. I will argue in chapter 7 that this is the main point of Plato’s Cave parable. Cave dwellers represent people who mistakenly take the concrete world they see around them as the only “real world.” The Platonic philosopher is a person who takes the world of ideal Platonic Forms *outside* the cave to be the really “real” world, for purposes of self-evaluation and for deciding what finally matters.

The Platonism I develop here also rejects the idea that there can be no reasoning about ideals as ideals, that ideals are just arbitrary mental creations. It holds that ideals do have a reality independent of the human mind, which we as human beings might be mistaken about, and about which we can reason in order to avoid being mistaken. It’s just that reasoning here does not have the task of trying to accurately picture some concretely existing thing-like entity.

Here again, I think the analogy to silver mining is helpful. The ideal reality that reasoning about perfect courage is trying to represent does actually exist in concrete human individuals and their visible behavior, as we actually experience these. Perfect Ideal Courage is not a different kind of reality than the courage we perceive in these concrete individuals and concrete behavior. It is this same reality “abstracted” from these concrete individuals and grasped in its most pure, most highly refined form.

This of course assumes that when we perceive admirable courage in concrete individuals and their behavior we are perceiving something “out there” in some real sense, independent of our arbitrary mental creations. Defending this thesis, which will be controversial for some readers, will be the main task I undertake in chapter 2.

## Individualist Reasoning and the Midwife Principle

I spoke above of the “individualist” *goal* of Socratic reasoning—the formulation of virtue-paradigms which an individual can use to model her own character on. Here I want to elaborate on a matching individualist principle essential to Socratic reasoning *method*, also briefly mentioned above. This individualist character is best expressed in a passage in Plato’s *Theaetetus* (148e, 157c, 160e), where Socrates compares himself to a midwife. He does not argue with people. In fact he says has no ideas of his own that he wants to put into the minds of others. He only helps other individuals “deliver” their own intellectual “babies”—that is, to articulate ideas and perceptions about virtue already present in their minds—and then test each of these to see how sound each one is. And the testing itself must utilize only this individual’s own perceptions. It must not become a debate between two individuals with different views, aiming to reach agreement between the two parties (*Theaetetus* 167e). If this reasoning is done in conversation between two individuals, one of the two must play the part of “Socrates,” merely helping the other individual in a process of self-critical self-exploration. The individual engaged in this self-exploration should feel no need to “broaden” her views or respond to objections unless these objections resonate with her own experience. This reasoning method relies only on knowledge of goodness that a single individual’s concrete experience in this world has already revealed to her. In the case of courage, for example, a pure and perfect concept of courage already exists in this individual’s own perceptions of concrete individuals acting courageously, or her perceptions in stories about such individuals. It just exists in these perceptions mixed with other things that are not perfect courage, and needs to be mentally extracted from these other things.

This means that Socratic reasoning, so described, makes no attempt to get beyond the particularity or “narrowness” of an individual’s views of virtue based on this individual’s own life-experience. That is, I agree with Richard Robinson’s view (quoted and commented on in chapter 5), that Socratic reasoning does not try to broaden an individual’s knowledge by asking her to consider the views of others, or to try to reach agreement with them. In the modern context, this means that Socratic reasoning as understood here makes no attempt to overcome the “subjective” or “culturally conditioned” character of the ethical perceptions of the individual involved, which might be the source of variation between individuals.

So the version of Platonism I propose here gives up any attempt to arrive at a single set of unchanging and universally valid “Timeless Truths”



about virtue valid for all people for all time. Plato's writings do not even attempt to provide a rational basis for any such claim, especially as we would understand such a claim today. As noted above, giving up such claims is one facet of critical reconstruction: Scaling back claims made about the Forms to what can be supported by reasoning methods found in Plato's writings.

But such claims are also unnecessary for a Platonism that is a way of life for idealistic individuals. I will argue instead for a "critical pluralism," involving the idea that there might be an indefinite number of virtues and Platonic Forms related to each. This is an idea explained farther below.

### Asking the Right Question

Socratic reasoning can only serve as a basis for knowledge of perfect, "otherworldly" Platonic Forms if it is guided by the right kind of question. In the case of courage, for example, the question as I construe it is not just What is courage? if this simply means What do people normally mean by the word "courage"? This is not just a matter of the use of words, trying to grasp what is common to all particular examples to which people apply the term *courage*. We have to keep in mind the *substantive* purpose of this discussion: To formulate a concept of courage deserving unreserved admiration and commitment, deserving to be taken as a norm for self-evaluation, because it represents something pure and perfect in its goodness.

For this purpose, in the case of courage, the question an individual must ask herself in order to grasp courage at its most perfect is this: *That kind of courage that I find morally admirable—how can I articulate precisely the essence of what I find admirable about it?*

Such a precise articulation would be a pure Platonic "essence" of courage. If I could precisely articulate the essence of what makes admirable courage admirable, I could not have too much of this. Every step toward modeling my character on this concept would invariably make me a more admirable person. This would be a concept deserving my unreserved loyalty and commitment, something I could and should try to conform myself to with complete consistency.

#### An Illustration: Socratic Discussion of Courage in the *Laches*

The process of Socratic reasoning described above can be illustrated in the following analysis of an interchange between Socrates and the Athenian

general Laches concerning the virtue of courage (*Laches*, 190e–192b). The Athenian general Laches has witnessed and admired many Greek soldiers courageously standing in formation (holding to their assigned positions in a Greek phalanx) in the face of enemy attack. When Socrates asks, “What is courage?” Laches’s initial attempt to articulate what he admired about the soldiers is, “I would describe as courageous any person who remains in formation in the face of the enemy and does not flee.”

But if this articulates in a very precise way the essence of what Laches admires, he would admire such conduct wherever it occurs. Socrates shows that this is not the case, by bringing up a number of “counterexamples,” one of which is the story of the battle between Greeks and Persians at Plataea. Here Greek commanders first ordered their armies to retreat because their supply lines had been cut. The army then obeyed orders and “fled.” Although this contrasts with Laches’s definition—courage consists in not fleeing—Laches readily agrees that fleeing on orders is obviously not a sign of lack of courage. This is a fact dramatically illustrated in this case when, as Socrates remarks, the “fleeing” Greeks suddenly turned on the pursuing Persians and won a great victory against superior numbers.

When asked to consider cases like this, Laches’s own perceptions tell him that in particular cases where a general has ordered a retreat, “standing in formation and not fleeing” would *not* represent admirable courage.

Socrates’s counterexamples uncover an unsuspected conflict *within* Laches own beliefs and perceptions. Laches initially thought he believed that courage consists in “not fleeing,” but now he sees that his own perceptions contradict this definition. Laches’s own perceptions tell him that he does not admire “remaining in formation” whenever and wherever it occurs. So his initial definition failed to articulate in a precise way the essence of this kind of goodness revealed in his experience—exactly what it is that he himself admires when he is admiring courageous soldiers. “Remaining in formation and not fleeing” is not something a person should adhere to with complete consistency.

This example illustrates very well the “inductive” character of Socratic reasoning:

1. This example assumes that each person’s own immediate “subjective” perceptions of what is ethically good and not good in very clear particular concrete cases are trustworthy sources of moral knowledge for that person.
2. If such immediate perceptions in clear concrete cases conflict with a general moral principle one believes in, this con-

flict is to be resolved in favor of the concrete perception. Immediate perceptions in clear concrete cases are the most reliable source of moral knowledge, so such conflicts show a defect in the general principle involved, and calls for an alteration of the general principle.

In the present case, for example, Laches announces what Socrates takes to be a general principle: Courage will always mean that a soldier remains in formation and in contrast to “fleeing.” Socrates then brings up some concrete cases in which Laches’s own immediate perceptions contradict this general principle. This reveals a contradiction between Laches’s general belief, on the one hand, and his own immediate perceptions in specific concrete cases. And both Socrates and Laches assume that priority in this case is to be given to the immediate perceptions. They are what is trustworthy, and they show that the general belief Laches first announced is not as trustworthy as he had thought.

I speak of “*immediate*” perceptions in contrast to intellectual judgments based on appeal to general moral axioms or principles. Laches does not have to consult some general principle or general concept of courage to know that a soldier “fleeing” on orders from a commanding officer is not exhibiting blameworthy cowardice. Nor should we say that Laches does not really *know* this unless he can “ground” this knowledge as something that follows by logical deduction from some general axiom or principle rationally known to be well founded. This would involve us in well-known problems about how we can rationally prove that some specific general moral principles or axioms are well founded. While the present account has its own problems (noted immediately below), it avoids this particular problem by proposing an “inductive” model of moral reasoning, in which general ideas about virtues are derived by generalizations from such immediate perceptions. (This is in accord with what Aristotle says when in *Metaphysics* 13.4, 1078b, 24–30, he describes Socratic reasoning as “inductive.” Roderick Fitts’s article, “Inductive Quest,” gives a good summary and discussion of Aristotle’s ideas on inductive reasoning.)

This account of inductive Socratic reasoning as a basis for knowledge of Platonic Virtue-Forms runs directly counter to the way Plato is commonly categorized today as a “rationalist” philosopher. Philosophical “rationalism” is associated with “deductive” models of reasoning, in which one begins with absolutely certain general first principles, from which one can derive particular logical conclusion by strict logical deduction. One objection to this model is that, once arrived at, these supposed absolutely certain first

principles are not correctable in the light of further experience. The inductive model of Socratic reasoning explained here is very different. Progress can be made in purifying virtue-concepts of imperfections. But no particular virtue-concept can be securely regarded as final and finished, impervious to further critical considerations. Every virtue-concept is in principle correctable in the light of further experiences serving as the basis for more “counterexamples.”

### A Basic Problem

The assumption explained above—that the immediate perceptions of individuals in very clear concrete cases like this one are a valid basis for ethical knowledge—is absolutely central to the present critical reconstruction of Platonism. Once this is granted in fact, I think I can show that the remainder of what I propose here follows in a pretty logical way.

This is an assumption that I think Plato took for granted, and that most people still today take for granted in the conduct of everyday life. I recognize however that this assumption is also perhaps one of the most controversial parts of my proposal from a modern philosophical point of view. This I argue is due to doubts raised for us by modern science. By considerably raising the bar for what counts as an “objective fact,” science has highlighted the “subjective” character of ethical perceptions, and hence raised fundamental doubts about their reliability as a source of genuine knowledge. It is commonly supposed today that when one says that ethical judgments are based on the “subjective” perceptions of individuals, this is equivalent to saying that they are arbitrary and without substance. The entirety of chapter 2 will be devoted to a discussion of this issue on a theoretical level, and proposing a solution to it in a way that supports the assumption at issue here.

Here I want to expand on the two points mentioned above: Firstly, I want to further illustrate the point that still today most people in the conduct of their everyday life take for granted the reliability of ethical perceptions in clear concrete cases, despite their doubts on a theoretical level. Secondly, I want to offer a further illustration of the fact that this same assumption is implied in the way “Socrates” often argues in Plato’s dialogues.

First then, I want to point out the rather striking contradiction between what people tend to say today when this issue is put in a theoretical way, and what practically everyone assumes in the conduct of everyday life.

This contradiction is well illustrated in the case of Bertrand Russell, explicitly admitted by Russell himself. On a theoretical level, Russell held