

Proving God with Plato

By Justin Cancelliere

“The most important [matter] of all ... is to get the right ideas about the gods and so live a good life.”

Laws 888b

“But have you not already under your nose what you ... have long wanted to see?”

Philebus 18d-e

In Plato's *Phaedo*, Socrates alerts his interlocutor to the danger of abandoning reasoning (*logos*) for no better reason than one's own failure to grasp certain philosophical arguments. Instead of blaming rational discourse itself and lapsing into “the conviction that argumentation has nothing sound about it,” we should rather “believe that it is we who are not yet sound,”¹ and this lest we “be deprived of truth and knowledge of reality.”² Although such epistemological optimism strikes many today as wide-eyed,³ the prevalence of this impression must be understood as proceeding historically from various misunderstandings regarding the true nature and scope of human reason. First, in the wake of the Enlightenment, reason became overburdened as more was asked of it than it is in principle capable of delivering. And second, with such rationalist pipe dreams having run their course, modern scientific empiricism was further confirmed in its claims to being epistemically self-sufficient (i.e., independent vis-à-vis the humanities), while the philosophical scene

¹ *Phaedo* 90e. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are taken from the 1997 Hackett edition of Plato's complete works (ed. John M. Cooper).

² *Ibid.*, 90d.

³ Not altogether inappropriately, one might add, given the fact that “this wondering ... is where philosophy begins and nowhere else” (*Theaetetus* 155d).

spawned newly beguiling formulations of relativism (itself of ancient provenance⁴). But what was forgotten in all this is the simple fact that “truth does not depend on reasoning—obviously truth is not created by reason—but ... it reveals itself or becomes explicit thanks to the key provided by the mental operation.”⁵ As Plato explained in the *Seventh Letter*,⁶ the “knowledge of the problems with which I am concerned ... is not something that can be put into words like other sciences; but after long-continued intercourse between teacher and pupil, in joint pursuit of the subject, suddenly, like light flashing forth when a fire is kindled, it is born in the soul and straightaway nourishes itself.”⁷ In other words, the highest knowledge is only ever a question of *illumination*.⁸ It is in this spirit, then, and for the sake of affirming true philosophy, that in what follows we can summarily work through one possible way of reasoning from a self-evident, universally acknowledged fact to the existence and attributes of God.



It is self-evident that there are things that exist. How, in light of the

⁴ Indeed Nietzsche, in whom many of these trends find inspiration, was fond of the Greek sophists. See Joel E. Mann and Getty L. Lustila, “A Model Sophist: Nietzsche on Protagoras and Thucydides,” *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 42, no. 1 (2011): 51-72.

⁵ Frithjof Schuon, *Logic and Transcendence*, ed. James S. Cutsinger (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2009), 50.

⁶ The question of its authenticity is unimportant for our purposes, since its philosophical contents are obviously genuinely Platonic.

⁷ *Letters* 341c. See also *Phaedrus* 276c (“words that are as incapable of speaking in their own defense as they are of teaching the truth adequately”) and *Symposium* 210e (“all of a sudden he will catch sight of something wonderfully beautiful in its nature”).

⁸ As for what Plato calls *dianoia*, or discursive reasoning, the relative certainties it affords (when deductive, and assuming formal logical validity) are contingent on the truth of the premises upon which it operates. As Socrates explains to Glaucon in the *Republic*, the soul, when engaged in this sort of activity, “is forced to investigate from hypotheses, proceeding not to a first principle but to a conclusion” (510b), since “it cannot reach beyond its hypotheses” (511a). This is in contrast to *noēsis*, or immediate intellectual apprehension, which “does not consider these hypotheses as first principles but truly as hypotheses—as stepping stones to take off from, enabling it to reach the unhypothetical first principle of all” (511b, trans. modified).

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