

CHAPTER 1

Soul Wings

Of Western philosophers, Plato is perhaps the one who beyond all others represents the ethical soul of truth, the procreation of truth by the good. And this despite the historical role he has been assigned, at least since Nietzsche, of establishing the authority of reason's truth. I have marked Socrates' extraordinary claim in Plato's *Republic* that the good oversees knowledge and truth, gives them their authority.¹ Even here, if the good is understood as a standard, a measure, then the claim it makes on truth belongs to truth, to being, despite Socrates' explicit denial.

This reality, then, that gives their truth to the objects of knowledge and the power of knowing to the knower, you must say is the idea of good, and you must conceive it as being the cause of knowledge, and of truth in so far as known. Yet fair as they both are, knowledge and truth, in supposing it to be something fairer still than these you will think rightly of it. But as for knowledge and truth, even as in our illustration it is right to deem light and vision sunlike, but never to think that they are the sun, so here it is right to consider these two their counterparts, as being like the good or boniform, but to think that either of them is the good is not right. Still higher honor belongs to the possession and habit of the good. (Plato, *Republic*, 509a)

Truth is not the sun, is not sunlike; the light of truth comes from the good, from what is fair and beautiful. It is no minor matter, perhaps the most important matter, that this light of truth reflects something beautiful as well as honorable, beautiful beyond compare.² "An inconceivable beauty you speak of, he said, if it is the source of knowledge and truth, and yet itself surpasses them in beauty. For you surely cannot mean that it is pleasure" (Plato, *Republic*, 509bc). The good that entrusts truth and knowledge with their authority, and their responsibility, is a beauty beyond compare, perhaps that of which Diotima speaks to Socrates in *Symposium*,

speaking of nature's abundance and of love. For one who has learned the lessons of love:

when he comes toward the end will suddenly perceive a nature of wondrous beauty [*phusin kalon*] (and this, Socrates, is the final cause of all our former toils)—a nature which in the first place is everlasting, not growing and decaying, or waxing and waning; secondly, not fair in one point of view and foul in another, or at one time or in one relation or at one place fair, at another time or in another relation or in another place foul, as if fair to some and foul to others, or in the likeness of a face or hands or any other part of the bodily frame, or in any form of speech or knowledge, or existing in any other being, as for example in an animal, or in heaven, or in earth, or in any other place; but beauty absolute, separate, simple, and everlasting, which without diminution and without increase, or any change, is imparted to the ever-growing and perishing beauties of all other things. (Plato, *Symposium*, 210e–211a)³

The good, nature's abundance, is understood in terms of beauty and love, beyond all limits and distinctions, beyond the gathering of being. With love and beauty I will return to the way in which truth and being cannot stand alone in the majesty of their authority, but present themselves in the light of something beyond authority, at least that authority which excludes, divides into binary oppositions. All things, including truth and being, are included in the good, an inclusion quite different from gathering them into totality.

In like manner, then, you are to say that the objects of knowledge not only receive from the presence of the good their being known, but their very existence and essence is derived to them from it, though the good itself is not essence but still transcends essence in dignity and surpassing power. (Plato, *Republic*, 517ac)

This surpassing power, in a tradition that gives precedence to being, to truth and reason, evokes the idea of force, of mastery and rule over beings. Dignity is another matter, together with beauty and love. The thought I hope to pursue is of a love and beauty, a dignity and fecundity, that belong to the good beyond any being, therefore beyond any nonbeing, reason, or truth. This "beyond," an impossible thought or condition, calls beyond all oppositions, all exclusions, to a good beyond measure, present everywhere as interruption, immeasure. Yet nothing seems more obvious in Plato, including the passages I have quoted, that the good is a supreme measure. If it seems obvious, still I resist it.

For to be a measure is to be, and is to be truly a measure. Measures belong to the world in which to be is to cut, divide, to separate beings from

each other, individual beings and kinds of beings. Everlasting measures, measures grounded in eternity, are no less measures, filled with authority, dividing finite from infinite, temporal from atemporal. Yet Diotima speaks of a nature of wondrous beauty whose everlastingness knows nothing of measure and authority, dividing one from the other, which cannot then be identified with the totality of beings, but is closer to the *apeiron*, except for its beauty and love. In some places, Christianity says that God is love where God and the earth belong to different realms of being. I follow a thought of love as messenger between earth and heaven, finite and infinite, expressed by Diotima in *Symposium*, but interrupt this movement with a thought from Irigaray, suggesting that angels are messengers without a message or a place, crossing boundaries, thresholds, displacing places, liminal, intermediary figures of the “intermediary-interval” (Irigaray, *ESD*, 8), interrupting the gathering of truth in *legein*. Irigaray’s figure of identity and place is the envelope, wrapping indeterminate figures of the good, always in motion, with material, engendered identities.

angels . . . circulate as mediators of that which has not yet happened, of what is still going to happen, of what is on the horizon. Endlessly reopening the enclosure of the universe, of universes, identities, the unfolding of actions, of history.

The angel is that which unceasingly *passes through the envelope(s) or container(s)*, goes from one side to the other, reworking every deadline, changing every decision, thwarting all repetition. Angels destroy the monstrous, that which hampers the possibility of a new age; they come to herald the arrival of a new birth, a new morning. (Irigaray, *ESD*, 15)

This thought of the unceasing traversal of borders and judgments, intermediary movements, is given by Irigaray as an ethical thought, a thought that insists on sexual difference, material crossings from one envelope to another, heterogeneous movements. The ethical thought of the good faces up to heterogeneity by resisting, crossing, boundaries, still heterogeneous, for example, between men and women, divided by sexual difference—and, I add, between humans and animals, humanity and nature, living and dead, and more, the world divided into heterogeneous and multiple kinds. I will return to Irigaray and sexual difference, return to intermediary figures and truths of natural kinds in the name of the good. I think that no thought of the good in our time, perhaps ever, can be undertaken without confronting sexual difference in its complexity, a heterogeneous multiplicity closely related to nature’s abundance. I understand abundance as an intermediary figure, expressed in nature’s species and kinds.

I return to Diotima’s nature as the abundance of the good. The nature of wondrous beauty of which she speaks is either the totality of the world

without borders or a general economy in which messengers cross ceaselessly from one envelope to another, traverse boundaries and thresholds—material and other thresholds, including that which Irigaray describes as “A remaking of immanence and transcendence, notably through this *threshold* which has never been examined as such: the female sex. The threshold that gives access to the *muco*s. Beyond classical oppositions of love and hate, liquid and ice—a threshold that is always *half-open*” (Irigaray, *ESD*, 18). Like Diotima, another woman, Irigaray speaks beyond oppositions and divisions, thereby speaking of the good, or nature, or love—but not love divided from hate. The good takes us on a journey beyond knowledge and truth, beyond truth and falsity, beyond good and evil. The nature of wondrous beauty of which Diotima speaks takes us beyond the being of identities and essences, beyond good and bad, high and low, to a good which includes rather than excludes. Or if this beyond imposes infinite transcendence on us, we may think of angels and love, intermediary figures, a different beyond, in endless circulation.

This thought of the gift of the good to truth and being is so different from the idea of the good ascribed traditionally to Plato that I must pursue it a bit further throughout the dialogues, though I believe I have traced it sufficiently for my purposes here. The good of which I speak is this nature of wondrous beauty quite unlike any other thing—unlike any thing and like all things, no figure of the same—but where the likeness is as indeterminate, as beautiful, as what it resists: envelopes and identities, intermediary movements. To measure, to know, to cut what we know from what we do not know, to know truth as a measure, something must call us to that task, something from the good that does not exclude, named desire, interrupting the gathering of things under truth and measure, intermediary figures of thresholds and crossings. We must be exposed to things beyond measure to know their truth, for them to open to us in truth, and they must be exposed to us, liminal crossings. But crossing requires desire, a love of wondrous beauty, and more, a love belonging to the earth in abundance, in heterogeneity. I hold this thought in abeyance for a while.

Socrates incessantly repeats that he does not know, representing his superiority to other people, who think that they know.

I am certainly wiser than this man. It is only too likely that neither of us has any knowledge to boast of, but he thinks that he knows something which he does not know, whereas I am quite conscious of my ignorance. At any rate it seems that I am wiser than he is to this small extent, that I do not think that I know what I do not know. (Plato. *Apology*, 21d)

For truth belongs to God.

whenever I succeed in disproving another person's claim to wisdom in a given subject, the bystanders assume that I know everything about that subject myself. But the truth of the matter, gentlemen, is pretty certainly this, that real wisdom is the property of God, and this oracle is his way of telling us that human wisdom has little or no value. It seems to me that he is not referring literally to Socrates, but has merely taken my name as an example, as if he would say to us, The wisest of you men is he who has realized, like Socrates, that in respect of wisdom he is really worthless. (Plato, *Apology*, 23ab)

In particular, he denies knowledge of good and bad. "I share the poverty of my fellow countrymen in this respect, and confess to my shame that I have no knowledge about virtue at all" (Plato, *Meno*, 71b). Reason, truth, are gifts of the gods, come from the good, and bear that debt within themselves, a debt betrayed by granting them authority, especially self-legitimizing authority.

Against such an understanding, we must consider the possibility that he claims to know virtue in *Republic* and rejects skepticism in *Theaetetus*, together with another refusal of knowledge. I briefly anticipate my extended discussion of *Theaetetus* in the next chapter with a few selected passages to which I shall return.

the highest point of my art is the power to prove by every test whether the offspring of a young man's thought is a false phantom or instinct with life and truth. I am so far like the midwife that I cannot myself give birth to wisdom, and the common reproach is true, that, though I question others, I can myself bring nothing to light because there is no wisdom in me. (Plato, *Theaetetus*, 150bd)

I know nothing of such matters and cannot claim to be producing any offspring of my own. I am only trying to deliver yours, and to that end uttering charms over you and tempting your appetite with a variety of delicacies from the table of wisdom, until by my aid your own belief shall be brought to light. (157cd)

If what every man believes as a result of perception is indeed to be true for him; . . . then, my friend, where is the wisdom of Protagoras, to justify his setting up to teach others and to be handsomely paid for it, and where is our comparative ignorance or the need for us to go and sit at his feet, when each of us is himself the measure of his own wisdom? (162de)

I offer two observations at this time. One is that this denial of the relativity of measure concerns the possession of truth and knowledge while at no time does Socrates repudiate his passionate desire for truth and the good. If he does not know the good, if he does not possess knowledge, still he is

called by it, yearns for it. What he denies is a knowledge of virtue, the good, or anything else, closed to criticism, as if owned. The second observation is that his criticism of Protagoras has traditionally been read to suggest that if knowledge is a measure, it must cut, divide, what is known from what is not; and, moreover, we must be able to know the difference between what we know and what we do not. It follows that one cannot deny the existence of knowledge as if one knows that knowledge does not exist. Nevertheless, Socrates repeatedly claims to be wiser—closer to the gods and the good—in denying that he knows, denying that there is wisdom in him. Perhaps even here he would prefer to claim that he does not know but cannot know that he does not know. He says in his *Apology* that “I do not think I know what I do not know” (21d), not that he knows that he does not know it.

Can one think (or know) that one does not know what one does not know without self-contradiction? Several answers may be given, but at least one must be that if one does not know something then one ought to be able to think, even to say, that one does not know it. I do not know, and I know that I do not know, how to read or speak Chinese. Yet perhaps we may identify a difficulty here that bears upon the good, which cannot be considered in relation to being and truth alone. Can one think of what is not?—a famous Sophistic question, to which Socrates himself devotes considerable attention. What if we were to rephrase the question away from being, so that it did not belong to the gathering of being and saying, did not concern whether one can speak of what is not, but responded to being and saying as given from the good? What good is given when we speak of what is not, when we think that we ought to speak of what is and not of what is not? Heidegger offers a powerful answer, despite his refusal to relate it to the good. We have forgotten nothing, have transformed nothing into nonbeing. We must think again of nothing in order to think Being, in order to approach the It that gives. In order, I suggest, to respond to the good as giving. The good is nothing, NOTHING.⁴

To say “I know that I do not know” is to say something difficult and strange from the standpoint of being and language gathered together; it runs afoul of the logical structure of ontology. Heidegger speaks of ontotheology, the movement toward a God who resolves the nonbeing in the heart of being by a movement toward the infinite. This movement toward the infinite, however, traditionally involves the good, in Plato the debt the good levies on being and truth, the good that comes before being, truth, and saying; in Descartes, the perfection of the world, from God, allowing error. Truth and knowledge concerning what is not, concerning falsity and error, lead to the good, away from truth. “[I]s it better, then, that I should be capable of being deceived than that I should not?” (Descartes,

M, 4, 146). I suggest that error and deception are intermediary figures of the intermediary movements of knowledge and truth, movements that do not come to rest in gathering, but circulate in memory of the good.

We may read Descartes's movement from the truth of error to its goodness as bearing on free will and God. If we are free we must be free to err, though God is not. Even here, we can see that Descartes does not think that the question of error is a question of truth alone, perhaps not a question of knowledge and truth at all. Error is an imperfection in a perfect universe; the will that causes error is a mark of God. Whatever we think of divine perfection, we face an ethical demand in facing error. And if we believe, as I believe, that truth and error are profoundly intermixed, then truth and knowledge also bear an intimate and profound relation to the good, carry ethical weight.

To say "I know that I do not know," whatever its ontological and epistemological shortcomings, reflects something it must be possible to say and do, however liminally, speaking here in ethical terms. If I do not know, I must, I am obligated, indebted, to refrain from acting as if I know; the task is given from the good to avoid falsehood. This is true—I speak in an ethical voice—no matter how difficult it might be to know what I do not know, however impossible. I bear this debt toward truth within its impossibility despite an ethical tradition that denies impossible obligations.

The infinite debt of which I speak is described by Levinas, not a responsibility relieved by impossibility, by any calculation, but a debt that grows beyond measure. "[I]n the measure that responsibilities are taken on they multiply. . . . The debt increases in the measures that it is paid" (Levinas, *OB*, 12). Even if it is impossible, I am still obligated beyond all limits to avoid error, to know that I do not know, exposed to the things around me within an infinite responsibility for pursuing truth and avoiding error. Even if there is no truth unmixed with error, no complete and total or purified truth, no knowing without not-knowing, so that we cannot avoid error no matter what we do, even so, the truth as given from the good, together with error, calls upon us beyond measure to seek the truth and to avoid error. And this is so even as we also know that where the truth is given from the good, it is always given in error, together with error, and error also comes from the good. A lie, deception, error, is not always wrong, is sometimes a wonderful accomplishment. This is how I understand Socrates' suggestion in *Phaedrus* that "just" and "good" are "disputed terms": "we diverge, and dispute not only with one another but with our own selves" (Plato, *Phaedrus*, 263ad); we also dispute love and, I am arguing, truth. We dispute endlessly with ourselves and others about what is deeply and profoundly disputable, intrinsically disputable, everything involving justice and the good and truth, everything ethical and political. Some seem to believe that truth and

knowledge, bound to being, can be indisputable. In Plato, I believe, we find the understanding that truth and knowledge are fundamentally disputable in relation to the good, bear responsibility to the good, making them disputable. Disputability is given from the good as endless exposure.

All this bears on the authority of knowledge and truth, an authority I understand as given from the good. All authority is ethicalpolitical authority. That is what we hear in Descartes's transition from error to imperfection, ethical imperfection, bearing upon God's goodness and human free will. And it is what we hear in Plato, whose Socrates speaks endlessly of his ignorance, driven as gadfly toward the good, obsessed by the good. Whatever his failings—and I believe he has many—Socrates is portrayed by Plato as obsessed beyond all obsessions by the good, to the point of dying for it, too obsessed perhaps, we might say, though only in terms of an analogous obsession toward the good. Socrates claims that his ignorance is better than others' claims to knowledge; not truer but better. It is a better, I believe, that knows no best, knows no measure. Truth is not quantitatively better than falsity but responsive to a call to which falsity fails frequently to respond—not always.

Plato speaks incessantly of the good, and speaks as well of gifts. Socrates describes himself as a divine gift, another expression of his obsession for the good.

If you doubt whether I am really the sort of person who would have been sent to this city as a gift from God, you can convince yourselves by looking at it in this way. Does it seem natural that I should have neglected my own affairs and endured the humiliation of allowing my family to be neglected for all these years, while I busied myself all the time on your behalf, going like a father or an elder brother to see each one of you privately, and urging you to set your thoughts on goodness? . . . The witness that I can offer to prove the truth of my statement is, I think, a convincing one—my poverty. (Plato, *Apology*, 31bc)

It is an extraordinary claim to truth that Socrates was poor, so obsessed by goodness as to neglect his daily life. I take it to be a response, an exposure, to the good. Socrates' obsession is a divine gift, bearing memory of the good, driven by insatiable desire—for the good beyond any attainment. His quest for knowledge—more aptly, I would say, his pursuit of ignorance—belongs to the same obsession. He himself is victim of the madness he describes in *Phaedrus*, another gift of the gods, including *poiësis*.

in reality, the greatest blessings come by way of madness, indeed of madness that is heaven-sent. (Plato, *Phaedrus*, 244c)

it was because they held madness to be a valuable gift, when due to divine dispensation, that they named that art as they did. . . . Corresponding to the superior perfection and value of the prophecy of inspiration over that of omen reading, both in name and in fact, is the superiority of heaven-sent madness over man-made sanity. (244d–245a)

when grievous maladies and afflictions have beset certain families by reason of some ancient sin, madness has appeared among them, and breaking out into prophecy has secured relief by finding the means thereto, namely by recourse to prayer and worship. . . . (245ab)

if any man come to the gates of poetry without the madness of the Muses, persuaded that skill alone will make him a good poet, then shall he and his works of sanity with him be brought to nought by the poetry of madness, and behold, their place is nowhere to be found. (245bc)

I have spoken elsewhere of *poiēsis* together with *mimēsis* as divine gifts, anarchic interruptions of the rule of *technē*.⁵ Truth without madness is lifeless, lacks the divine spark given from the good. Here I wish to speak of the good whose gift is the madness that obsesses Socrates and Descartes, overwhelms philosophy with passion for the truth, an insatiable passion given from the gods as madness, mad desire for the good.

Recall that “real wisdom is the property of God . . . human wisdom has little or no value.” This remark can be read as skeptical, and much of the Western tradition has been directed against its skepticism, within the rule of being. Socrates’ claim has another side, however, given from the good. For it is not that human wisdom is false but that it has no value, that whatever value it has is ethical—and you and I may disagree with Socrates, believe that truth and wisdom are very good, bear memory of the good, understood here as a gift from the gods. We who are obsessed with the good are obsessed with its sacredness and divinity. Yet we have given ourselves over to that obsession as if we were prepared to give up the gods in the name of truth. Instead, we need to remember the madness for the good that drives our obsession, remember that every madness is a sacred gift from the good, remember the madness of truth.

One of the themes of Western reason, closely tied to knowledge and truth, is that emotion stands in the way of truth. Socrates speaks of this in *Phaedo*; Descartes famously speaks of it in his *Meditations*. I leave Descartes aside for later, noting that his obsession for certainty may be the greatest obsession known to philosophy. But Socrates’ desire for the good is quite unlimited.

In fact, it is wisdom that makes possible courage and self-control and integrity or, in a word, true goodness, and the presence or absence of

pleasures and fears and other such feelings makes no difference at all, whereas a system of morality which is based on relative emotional values is a mere illusion, a thoroughly vulgar conception which has nothing sound in it and nothing true. The true moral ideal, whether self-control or integrity or courage, is really a kind of purgation from all these emotions, and wisdom itself is a sort of purification. (Plato, *Phaedo*, 69bc)

I leave aside for another time reading *Phaedo* in the light of death, so that consolation and resolution are called for in the face of fear. Wisdom's strength belongs to goodness; Socrates' words are designed to call forth emotion, passion, obsession, for wisdom rather than other emotions, courage or integrity, even self-control. These may respond to the good but they do not touch it, bear its force directly. Only obsession for the goodness of wisdom, purified of every other emotion, can respond to the gift of the good. The purification of which Socrates speaks, the purification of wisdom, is described as philosophy, obsession with truth in the name of the good. "Well, in my opinion these devotees are simply those who have lived the philosophical life in the right way—a company which, all through my life, I have done my best in every way to join, leaving nothing undone which I could do to attain this end" (76a).

One of *Phaedo*'s most important thoughts concerns recollection, repeated in *Meno*. It is described as remembrance of a knowledge before our birth, but it works throughout our lives, always knowing.

Then if we obtained it before our birth, and possessed it when we were born, we had knowledge, both before and at the moment of birth, not only of equality and relative magnitudes, but of all absolute standards. . . . So we must have obtained knowledge of all these characteristics before our birth. . . . And unless we invariably forget it after obtaining it we must always be born knowing and continue to know all through our lives, because 'to know' means simply to retain the knowledge which one has acquired, and not to lose it. . . . Either we are all born with knowledge of these standards, and retain it throughout our lives, or else, when we speak of people learning, they are simply recollecting what they knew before. In other words, learning is recollection. (Plato, *Phaedo*, 75c–76a)

Thus the soul, since it is immortal and has been born many times, and has seen all things both here and in the other world, has learned everything that is. So we need not be surprised if it can recall the knowledge of virtue or anything else which, as we see, it once possessed. All nature is akin, and the soul has learned everything, so that when a man has recalled a single piece of knowledge—learned it, in ordinary language—there is no reason why he should not find out all the rest, if he keeps a stout heart and does not grow weary of the search, for seeking and learning are in fact nothing but recollection. (Plato, *Meno*, 81cd)

This always knowing seems an extraordinary, indefensible claim if we are to know standards, concepts, the specific determinations, truths, of empirical experience and good and bad. The truth of the good rules over the good itself, holding it in its grip. But if we are always to know something that makes it possible to seek and find truth, including the truth of good and bad, it is a gift that must come without standards, cannot itself be the standard, a truth without truth so to speak, without being, bearing ethical gravity. We recollect not what is good and bad, but bear an immeasurable vision of the ideal from which good and bad may be judged. That is how I read Anaximander's injustice.⁶

I could continue speaking of Plato without end. But I wish to consider other places in which the good emerges in the Western tradition in the name of truth. I will devote the next chapter to *Theaetetus*, where we may imagine another view of truth can be found, closer to its ontology. Perhaps. After that I will leave Plato to himself.