

Through a Glass Darkly, the Metaphysics of Plato: A Love Supreme

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For now we see through a glass, darkly... I Corinthians 13:12

But what if Shakespeare— and Hamlet— were asking the wrong question? What if the real question is not whether to be, but how to be?

Gayle Forman, Just One Day

2000 years ago we heard from St. Paul that we saw through a glass, darkly. Thinking about it, some 400 years prior to that Socrates was teaching something similar. In the 5th century BCE in Athens young men would learn from their fathers about knowledge. Then came the Sophists who descended upon Athens and taught knowledge and wisdom for a fee. Sophia is Greek for wisdom. These teachers would teach the trivium: grammar, logic and rhetoric. Knowing how to speak in Ancient Athens was to be a man of power. In addition, they would teach the quadrivium: arithmetic, geometry, musical theory, and astronomy, essentially the seven liberal arts and sciences we learned about as a Fellowcraft.

But Socrates didn't believe that truth could be taught for a price. He would ask one of these great teachers questions, then more questions, till, finally, getting to the core problem, would show that the man of wisdom actually didn't understand what real truth, real virtue, real justice was. His was the Socratic Method so well described by Plato in his early works. All was skepticism, a concept further defined by Pyrrho a century later.

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Plato thought that one could "know" real truth. He understood the ontology of being, of true being, and this was the beginning of metaphysics. According to Plato, humanity only knew and understood shadows of the true essence. What was virtue? There could be many virtuous acts, but there could be only one truth of virtue, one essence. For him, this was perceived through intelligibility, not through sensibility. To understand, one needed to see things through the "minds eye", not through the senses.

What is a triangle? Is it the object drawn on paper, or the essence of a triangle as a concept? Could the same be said for all objects in the world, and for ideas of ethics, and virtue, that of prudence, justice, temperance and courage? Eventually, we may have that "ah ha" moment when we understand a concept, and know that we are seeing things with our minds eye. To Plato, then we understood the "forms" instead of the shadows.

He described this further in *The Republic* with his allegory of the cave. In this allegory, Plato states that humanity is bound in a cave, only able to see the far wall and see shadows of objects cast on the wall from flames behind. It is only with a progression of steps is man able to achieve enlightenment. First there is liberation and being unchained. Then one needs to turn around, to have "conversio", that of a conversion. Following this is the climbing out of the cave into the light, to rise up. Then truth is seen in the light of the sun. The forms of a triangle, of goodness, of virtue . . . to become enlightened. To the pagan Plato, the sun was the True Good, the Supreme Good. There is one final step, that of returning to the cave and finding others who are worthy, and helping them into the light.

For Freemasons, this allegory of the cave goes one level deeper. We also become unchained, when our cable tow is released at the altar. Then we have a conversion from darkness into the light, by order of the Worshipful Master. For me, I rose up as Hiram

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before me, with the assistance of King Solomon and the Lion's Paw in the northwest corner of the lodge. Then we understood the Truth and Light at the altar, upon the Volume of Sacred Law. The sun, for Plato the Supreme Good, is used as a metaphor for the duties of the Junior Warden, Senior Warden, and Worshipful Master. Then, we leave the light of the lodge, going out the door into the darkness of the world, looking for those who are worthy, to bring them into the light.

We strive for our purpose, of the entelechy of humanity in this metaphysical world, and of *being*. The greatest truth is love, greater than virtue, prudence, temperance, faith, or hope. Men have looked for love in many places. Some searched for this in the supreme good described by Plato, or the Divine Omnipresence of Newton. Thomas Aquinas described the analogy of being and Paul Tillich of the ground of being which is above all being. This brings to mind the universal and rational love described by Jonathan Edwards- possibly that love revealed by John Coltrane in his spiritual piece, *A Love Supreme*.

There is so much unknown and uncertain. Thinking about the rest of what St. Paul wrote, that even though we are now seeing through a glass, darkly, but then....face to face.

I still remember standing in front of the Worshipful Master as an Entered Apprentice. He asked me if I had something of value to present. When I did not, he admonished me to remember this in my life as I ran into those less fortunate. It must have been important because he made me swear to uphold this principle thrice more on my journey to become a Master Mason.

At this point in our lives, after the long journey of Samsara towards enlightenment, when we know as we are known, I truly believe, as we stand in the light we should emulate the words of Mother Teresa:

"At the end of life we will not be judged by how many diplomas we have received, how much money we have made, how many great things we have done.

We will be judged by 'I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat, I was naked and you clothed me. I was homeless, and you took me in.'"

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