

# Plato and The Birth of Conceptual Thought

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For over a century, thought has attempted to free itself from metaphysics.<sup>[1]</sup> A certain philosophical postmodernity has declared this a vain endeavor, having decided that metaphysics is the indispensable form of any coherent reflection. Yet since humanity existed before metaphysics, we should be able to survive its demise. It suffices that we oppose to it a form of thought sufficiently powerful to be able to think both its beginning and its end.

Primitive, egalitarian societies function by means of ritual distribution systems guaranteed by the symmetrical differentiations of mythical speech. With the appearance of social hierarchy, the mastery of ritual distribution becomes fixed in one place and refuses to circulate; the new task of cultural language is to justify this disequilibrium. But in the society of the “Greek miracle” that arises in the margins of the archaic empires, the accelerated circulation of goods and ideas loosens hierarchical rigidity and gives language a competitive value. The Sophists learn to manipulate speech for the purpose of persuasion. Yet, whether out of indifference or self-interest, they do not seek the a priori conditions of this manipulation; language is for them simply a tool in the hands of man who claims to be “the measure of all things.”

## **The concept as ethical content**

Following Socrates, Plato understands that “free” speech, far from being gratuitous, is the sign of a new, implicit ethical order. In order to understand this order, it is necessary to reflect not on what language refers to but on what it signifies to the community. We may roughly express this distinction by contrasting the ensemble of worldly referents of a word (its “denotation” in analytic philosophy) with its “signified” or meaning (its “connotation”). But for Plato, the latter is not an abstract meaning but a substantial *content* that the users of the word possess in common. The intuition that the usage of certain words reveals an ethical content that is more than an abstract signification is the very foundation of philosophical reflection. This intuition is already implicitly that of the Socrates of the early dialogues, and was no doubt that of the historical figure who irritated his contemporaries by forcing them to define courage, beauty, friendship... It is by deepening his understanding of

the content of words that Plato will transform Socrates' open interrogations into conceptual thought, which is only another name for metaphysics.

In order to grasp the ethical point of departure for this way of thinking, let us listen to the debate between Socrates and Callicles in the *Gorgias*:

1. [Callicles:] For by nature the ugliest thing is also the worst: to suffer injustice; whereas it is only because of the law that it is worse to commit it [...]  
Unfortunately it is the weak and the masses who have created the laws [...] they say that it is unjust to wish to have more than the others. [...] For, as they are inferior, it suffices for them to have equality! (482abc) What is by nature beautiful and just, is that [...] he who wants to live his life rightly must [...] give to each desire that may come upon him its fullness of satisfactions [...] Should they who are able to enjoy without restraint all that is good pose as a master over themselves what is decreed [...] by the multitude? [...] Sensuality, license, unreserved freedom, [...] that is virtue and happiness! (491e;492c)2. [Socrates:] But [the pleasures] that are good, are they also those that are useful [...] ? Now, pleasures as well as pains, it is those that are useful that one must choose and practice? [Thus] it is for the sake of good things [...] that we should do everything [...] Do you not agree [...] that the good is, without exception, the end of all our acts and that it is for the purpose of the good that all the rest must be done, but not the good for the purpose of the rest [...] ? Is it not therefore for the purpose of good things that one should carry out all acts, including those that are pleasant, but not the good for the purpose of the pleasant? (499de,500a)

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For Callicles, to satisfy one's desires, assuming one can get away with it, is a clearer path to happiness than obedience to the law, which this proto-Nietzschean sees as the instrument of domination by the weak over the strong. All other things being equal, the "unjust" person who disobeys the law to promote his own satisfaction has the advantage over his obedient opposite number. But the unjust does evil, and evil is harmful, whence Socrates demonstrates that no one can knowingly be unjust. No one can intend the harmful, therefore knowingly do evil, even if the harmful is "pleasant." Any conflict on this point is not real but illusory, an error of ignorance.

Of the two arguments, it is rather Socrates' that strikes us as contrived. The question Socrates avoids is how he knows that "the good" is always the same for all. In the practical (ontic) world, the concepts of good and evil are "indexed"; what is good for me is not necessarily good for you. Indeed, if my good and your good involve the possession of an identical object—a person we both love, an honor we both covet—the two goods cannot be

identical. This is the very structure of mimetic rivalry. We will not be able to avert conflict merely by pronouncing some magic word ("good," "just," or "beautiful") as we might the name of a god in a rite.

There is nothing sacred in the words themselves. Plato's new sacred is the *concept*. At the time of the *Gorgias*, the Eidos/Idea/Form has not yet been conceived. But what Plato has already discovered is that the concept of the Good, to which the Just and the Beautiful are related (and which ancient philosophy never really distinguishes from it) contains something more than the meaning of the word. The eirenic sharing of the concept that founds the identity of your good with mine is not a product of the meaning of the word "good," but of its ethical content, a notion explainable only within the framework of an originary anthropology.

Plato's doctrine of the good-as-concept, the decisive moment of the forgetting of the sacred-ontological denounced by Heidegger, is not yet fully developed at the time of this not altogether persuasive refutation of the anti-idea of Callicles. When the latter's argument is taken up again by Thrasymachus in Book I of the *Republic*, the insufficiency of the old answer of the *Gorgias* motivates the displacement of the subject, in the sense of the Subject of the Good, from the individual human soul to the political collectivity. The capstone of Socrates' argument is that "no ruling authority works for his own benefit, but [...] for the benefit of him who is under his authority." (346e) This is the beginning of a necessary but incomplete return to the communal origin of the Idea, where alone the notion of a commonly possessed, conflict-deferring content makes sense.

What separates us from Plato is supposedly his "realism." But the reality of the Ideas is nothing but what we have been calling their "content." Let us forget for a moment the heaven where the Ideas with a capital "I" are supposed to dwell. Their reality has a more concrete meaning, which the lesson of the *Gorgias* can help us to uncover. A "real" idea is an idea that intervenes in reality between desiring beings. It is an apotropaic object that serves to defer potential conflict. The reality of the Idea is the substantiality that makes it capable of replacing the thing that provokes the conflict. It is because Callicles and Socrates possess in common the Idea of justice that they cannot rationally come to blows. Those who do are only the ignorant who do not possess the Idea, or rather, who are unaware that they do so.

The concept is a representation; ultimately, nothing more than a word. But the word is not a simple duplicate of the thing. The thing is unique, or, to speak more prudently: reproducible with difficulty. The word is multiple, or, let us say, reproducible with ease. Where we would have to divide the thing, we can share the totality of the word. Where, between you and me, the good-as-thing would pose a problem, the good-as-word would not; it is neither your word nor mine, but everyone's. As though a word could replace reality, the cynic will object. But it can, on the condition that the good-as-word acquire the reality that will transform it into a

concept, that is, an entity of another order, which is like the word infinitely shareable but which, being substituted for the good-as-thing, stands in the path of conflictual desire.

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### **The originary and the metaphysical *logos***

Plato does not seek, does not want to recognize the configuration of the originary scene of language in which alone such a substitution is conceivable. The linguistic sign comes into being to substitute for the thing that the multiplicity of appetites makes inaccessible—not forever, but for a certain time. The sign defers, this lesson we have learned well, but we forget that what it defers is in the first place the violence of the desires converging on a common object. The collective possession, division, and distribution of the thing are all deferred; the thing-totality remains only as the remembered referent of the sign. We need no psychoanalytic scenario to understand this idealization of the object as totality, to which we preferentially give the name of God.

The sign defers conflict, offers instead of the thing an imaginary substitute. One might object that this hypothetical sign is hardly the equivalent of Plato's Idea. Plato did not formulate an originary anthropology; on the contrary, his doctrine promoted the suppression of the originary anthropologies he knew in their ritual form. No doubt Plato retains, by attributing it to the concept, the essential function of the originary scene he denies: the deferral of conflict through representation. But in affirming the reality of the concept, he inverts the ontological priority of word and thing. The entire doctrine of Ideas that derives from this affirmation and that will be elaborated beginning with the *Cratylus*—to which I shall return—maintains this inversion, which prolongs and preserves in the form of an ontology the sacred difference attached to the scenic center. This prolongation, this fetishizing of the word in its difference from the thing, is an alternative, equivalent characterization of metaphysics.

In our hypothetical originary scene, the role of language is reduced to its strict minimum: the momentary hesitation between the (chaotic) beginning and the (minimally ordered) end of an act of collective appropriation. The minimal linguistic act is the re-presentation of an already-present object by means of an ostensive sign that will preserve the memory of the object after its disappearance. The ostensive word is not yet a concept; it is the name of an object-in-situation, a phenomenon that we can no doubt better understand as the “name of God.”<sup>[2]</sup> It is by means of the ostensive that we teach words to children; they subsequently learn to use these words as imperatives to make-appear objects designated in their absence, and finally to construct “complete sentences,” that is, declaratives. In the declarative sentence, language achieves its mature capacity to create imaginary models on the “other scene” of representation. We may then give a preliminary definition of the concept as the word/noun understood as necessarily an element of a declarative sentence, cut off from the

original act of naming. ("Noun," like "name," comes from the Latin *nomen*.) Metaphysics, by denying the existence of an utterance-form more primitive than the declarative, incarnates the refusal to think the origin of language as an event.

This metaphysical sacrifice of the elementary linguistic structures institutes "logocentrism" in the precise sense of domination by the declarative sentence or proposition, the strong meaning of the word *logos*. It is this, rather than the strategic marginalization of writing, that is the founding expulsion of Western philosophy. The ostensive exists only in situation; spoken or written, it cannot detach itself from the place in which it is uttered. The arrow on the signpost, the sign on a door of the toilet constitute an ostensive form of writing that presupposes on the part of its reader the same (virtual) copresence with the referent as the living word. The inaugural gesture of metaphysics, which makes possible analytic thought, suppresses the ostensive that attaches us to the trace of the historical presence we continue to commemorate under the name of God. The concept, the Platonic Idea, is something we all possess without having to point to it, that is, without needing to perform the ostensive sign that defers potential conflict among those who covet the same object. It is not in its role as a grammatical form that the ostensive is dangerous. What is protected against by its exclusion (and not merely from grammar books) is the renewal of its originary function of designating the sacred center of the communal circle.

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The fundamental circular structure of ritual reveals the connection, not obvious in the abstract, between ostensive language and religion. The oft-repeated notion that philosophical logocentrism is in complicity with religion misunderstands the communal operation of the sacred. Traditional metaphysics redefines the sacred in its own terms as a "first principle," as though the universe itself were deduced from a master proposition. The *logos* of the conceptual sacred of metaphysics, whose gods, beginning with the demiurge in the *Timaeus*, have never been worshiped by anyone, is not the *logos* of the historical religions. The deferred, discursive presence that presides over metaphysics is not the real presence that the rite claims to realize. The ostensive is banished by the linguistics of the philosophers, who replace faith in the divine presence it designates by confidence in the self-presence of philosophical language.[\[3\]](#)

The two *logoi*, that of religion and that of metaphysics, the one that refers to originary revelation and the other that denies it, can only be reconciled in the discourse of originary anthropology. There is, however, a fundamental parallelism between the conceptual "forgetting of Being" inaugurated by metaphysics and the new, similarly "declarative" conception of the name of the divinity that a few centuries earlier in Judea had become the point of departure for a religious revolution. Their common replacement of predeclarative linguistic structures by the declarative sentence establishes between Hebrew religion and Greek metaphysics the founding homology of Western culture.

I have proposed elsewhere an exegesis of the *ehyeh asher ehyeh* by which God names himself to Moses in Exodus 3.<sup>[4]</sup> By refusing the ostensive-imperative name by which the divinity can be called, Moses liberates his people from the sacrificial system that commands divine presence. God is the central being of the scene of representation that survives the disappearance of the central object of the originary scene; in the terms of *Originary Thinking*, he is the subsistence of the central locus of the scene remembered as a being. In Exodus, the divine being, whose concrete origin is recalled by the ritual fire of the burning bush, becomes “transcendental,” detaching itself from any specific historical locus. But this detachment itself is an event that takes place in a specific historical locus. The liberation provided by revelation has the strength and the weakness of never being able to deny its historicity. The two “universal” religions born from Judaism, Christianity and Islam, remain as attached as their ancestor to a historical place of foundation.

To eliminate the ostensive is to expunge the local historicity of the deferral of collective violence by means of the sign. The originary opposition between center and periphery that founds and is founded by language is the source and model of all the great philosophical dichotomies: word and thing, form and content, Idea and copy, ontological and ontic... But if all these oppositions are already latent in the sign as such, it is only from the time of the declarative sentence that they can be thematically expressed. To understand a declarative sentence, one situates it on an “other scene” that is not a simple prolongation of the present scene but a mental scene inhabited by imaginary objects.

The Mosaic revelation distances the corporeal presence of the divinity that was formerly accessible to invocation by means of the imperative. But in contrast to metaphysics, religion cannot demand the exclusiveness of the declarative. The God whose names himself “esoterically” as a sentence (*ehyeh asher ehyeh*) in Exodus 3 consents, in a second “exoteric” moment in Exodus 6, to condense this sentence into a single word/name (YHWH).<sup>[5]</sup> This inversion of the historical order of linguistic evolution is analogous to that of the grammar books, which define the imperative as a “transformation” of the declarative. But whereas the inversion of the grammars is a simple forgetting of linguistic origin, that brought about in Exodus puts linguistic form in a dialectical relationship with the divine will, for which it proposes a paradigmatic model. To the request for a (magical) name, the answer is a sentence, which is only then recondensed into a (religious) name. The God who maintains himself in the “other world” chooses to manifest himself to a man, to let himself be called by him. Our knowledge of God’s choice determines the nature of our address; we are no longer commanding God but appealing to him.

### **The *Euthyphro* and philosophy’s eventless ethic**

Although metaphysics is a fundamentally anti-religious mode of thought, as we have

observed, it has its own conception of God. It is not certain whether the metaphysical divinity was the God of Socrates but it was certainly that of Plato. Attempts have been made to associate the latter with the religious movements of his era: orphism, the Eleusinian mysteries, and the like. But from its earliest formulations, Platonic religion is essentially delocalized.

In the *Euthyphro*, Plato-Socrates attacks the traditional conception of the sacred that leads his interlocutor to bring an accusation of murder against his own father. Euthyphro affirms that his action is pious; Socrates asks him to inform him then as to the "form" (*eîdos, idéa*) that makes pious things (*ta hosía*) pious. Some have gone so far as to see in this manner of formulating the question a primitive version of the doctrine of Ideas. Euthyphro attempts to define the pious as what pleases the Gods, but lets himself be tricked by Socrates into agreeing that, on the contrary, an act only pleases the gods because it is pious. In the last analysis, the pious, like all the other virtues in the Socratic dialogues, is indistinguishable from the just (*dikaion*); the consequence is to eliminate from religion the very revealed element through which it preserves humanity's originary historicity.

For anyone who takes religion seriously, it is the divine will that determines what is pious and not the reverse. The god who would be satisfied with the Platonic definition of piety is one no longer capable of being worshiped. The fact that the metaphysical God has no proper name—not even the sentence-name revealed by Moses—is an indication of this. The philosophical divinity covers over a profound contradiction: he is a person-subject possessed of a will, yet this will, like the content of the Platonic concept, never reveals itself in any specific time or place. It is by means of this construction that metaphysics conjures away the paradoxicality of its "declarative" sacred.

Plato's God is a weapon against the narrow humanism of the Sophists, which he interprets as a radical individualism, indeed, an anarchism incompatible with maintenance of the social order. For the Plato of the *Theaetetus*, he who affirms that "man is the measure of all things" would deny all values that transcend the individual. In the face of this danger, Plato relocates the foundation of the human community outside of it, but this "outside" is no longer revealed in the localized history of religious revelation. In this manner, he creates the no-man's-land that metaphysics will inhabit for over twenty centuries—that it has not yet abandoned.

The *Euthyphro* is the only Platonic dialogue in which the argument is directed not at the opinions or attitudes of the interlocutor but at a specific act, an event of ethical significance. Euthyphro accuses his father of having brought about the death of a *thête* or dependent (of Euthyphro), who suffocated when the father had had him bound and imprisoned because this dependent had himself been guilty of the murder of a slave (of the father). Socrates is surprised that the death for which Euthyphro is requesting punishment was not that of a member of his family: only this would justify so great a lack of filial respect. Thus Plato gives

us to understand that the father's murder of a murderer through negligence should be left without punishment. No doubt the piety that demands this punishment is mechanical, formalistic, blind respect for tradition rather than true justice deserving of divine approval. Nonetheless, a man has perished. The traditional piety of Euthyphro recognizes in its own way, by speaking of "pollution" (*miasma*), a disequilibrium that Plato prefers not to acknowledge. In the place of the old logic of pollution, which obliged Orestes to appear before the Areopagus even though he too had only requited a murder, philosophy substitutes a logic of neutralization. In either case, we fall short of a moral judgment that views any murder as a crime against human reciprocity.

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The *Euthyphro* presents a paradigm of the opposition between philosophy/metaphysics and sacrificial religion. Where the latter prolongs the chain of revenge by making use of the very judicial institutions that were designed to break it, the former puts an equilibrium of injustice in the place of genuine moral reciprocity. Sacrifice consecrates the event of the murder; philosophy evacuates it. If one side finds it too easy to point the finger of accusation, the other finds it even easier to accuse no one. But the second case is not really any more eirenic than the first; the accuser finds himself accused in the place of the one whom he accuses. Not only is Euthyphro, like so many others, intellectually humiliated by Socrates; he is implicitly charged by him with a murderous design against his father.

Socrates himself, as Plato's readers will know, must answer an accusation of impiety before the archon, in whose palace his interlocutor is surprised to encounter him. To bring a lawsuit is to designate a victim, whereas, in its historical origin, metaphysics is the refusal to designate (the victim)—the refusal, at its Platonic point of departure, to participate in the sacrifice of Socrates. However, as the example of Euthyphro's father shows, to decline to bring an accusation does not prevent violence. In contrast with Judeo-Christian morality, whose refusal to designate a sacrificial victim goes together with an insistence on communal reconciliation, philosophy tacitly approves of an equilibrating violence.

Is it a simple matter of chance that in the example chosen by Plato as a counterexample to true piety, the father did not kill deliberately, or that his victim was both of inferior status and himself guilty of murder? In this manner, the original murder is punished without its perpetrator being designated as a criminal. Just as in ritual executions, where care is taken so that no individual be made "unclean" by the blood of the victim, justice has been done without any individual carrying out an overt act, or even a thought, of violence. He who would destroy this providential equilibrium is the patricidal son who accuses his father within the traditional ritual context.

Thus the judicial system of metaphysics eliminates the designation of the guilty party on analogy with the declarative proposition's elimination of the ostensive of religious



revelation. The suppression of the ostensive is magically compensated by a justice, and by extension a social order, that is both effective in punishing crime and yet non-violent. The evacuation of the event—which is in principle always a murder—permits the intellectual negation of Socrates' execution in the *Phaedo*. It is the suppression of *this* event that is the anti-evenemential origin of philosophy.

## **The *Cratylus* and the discovery of the signified**

The *Euthyphro* speaks of the *eidos* of piety, but only as a substrate for pious things, not as an Idea existing in itself. The order of composition of the dialogues will probably never be sufficiently well established to permit us to determine from historical evidence at exactly what point the doctrine of Ideas came into being; our hypothesis must consequently be based on the internal logic of Platonic thought. By this criterion, I shall follow those who locate the first appearance of the Ideas proper in the *Cratylus*.<sup>[6]</sup> Even if it is impossible to prove that this dialogue precedes the *Symposium* or the *Phaedo*, the progression from Cratylus' reflection on language to the Ideas is attractively parsimonious. It is logical that, at the moment when Plato is meditating on the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign, he should be led to separate explicitly the concept-signified from the word-signifier that designates it.

The *Cratylus* devotes a very long digression to the fabrication of "motivated" etymologies, the real significance of which is that most of them construct, like the God of Moses, names out of declarative sentences. To name is to designate, and as in Genesis, the distribution of names is carried out by a "legislator." But Socrates finds "primitive words" too distant and obscure to reveal their object clearly. In answer to this objection, Cratylus attempts to guarantee the revelatory power of names by appealing to the sacred, proposing a Heraclitean derivation of primitive names on the basis of universal movement.

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The *raison-d'être* of this derivation has never been satisfactorily explained. It is in fact a nascent semiotic that marks a crucial step in the dialectic leading from pre-Socratic thought to Platonic metaphysics. If names are given to things "insofar as they are borne and flowing and becoming" (411c), it is in order to permit us, since we are unable to immobilize this becoming, to observe it from a stable "Archimedian point." It is only when we possess the unchanging word "river" that we can affirm that we never put our foot in the same one twice. The Heraclitean flux generates in the sign its own antithesis. In this view of signification, the name preserves its ostensive function; it points to an ongoing worldly movement, as the just-quoted passage from 411c indicates—a remark made by Socrates himself, who informs us that he was in his youth a student of Cratylus.

But Socrates no longer accepts as univocal the Heraclitean derivation; basing himself on a few etymologies as apparently arbitrary as those which preceded them, he insists on the

equal plausibility of the derivation of words on the basis of “immobility.” By forgetting the implicit *raison-d’être* of the Cratylean-Heraclitean doctrine—the opposition between atemporal words and their temporal referents—Socrates slips from the idea that the name is made necessary by the impermanence of things to the idea that the name must “signify a movement and a translation,” that is, that rather than imposing its stability on the flux of things, the name must itself be a model of the thing-in-movement that it designates.

But if *this* is the point, then it is easy enough to find examples of word/things that are “immobile.” The still-ostensive name of Heraclitus thus becomes the conceptual name of Plato, which expresses or “contains” the quintessence of an action-movement or the stopping of movement—attributed to the thing by Socrates’ fantastic etymology. His first example of an “immobile” word says it all: it is the word *epistémè* (knowledge), which he would derive from *hístesin epí* (“[it] stops on,” “the sign that knowledge ‘stops’ our soul ‘on’ things” (437a). In order to refute the Heraclitean who claims that knowledge has a stable existence only in relation to the instability of the things to which it refers, Plato derives the very name of “knowledge” from the already-theorized action of knowledge-that-arrests-movement; like the God of Exodus, he arrives at the name only by the detour of the sentence.

The endpoint of Plato’s reasoning is the demonstration that, since nothing in the words themselves could universally impose a revelation of their referents as being either in movement or in repose, our sole source of knowledge concerning the accuracy of words is the things (*ta prâgmata*) themselves. But it is precisely at the moment in which Plato abandons words for things that he discovers the fundamental relationship between the word and the thing it designates. For the deconstruction of the originary opposition between the stable word and the unstable thing does not for all that render the things of this world capable of offering to the word the solid basis that would permit it to function within a semantic system. Once the semiotics of Cratylus-Heraclitus has been refuted by a declarative conception of language, Plato finds himself obliged to present a stable correlative for language that would not only be other than things-in-movement, but *of another nature* from them. As he puts it, in order that there be knowledge, there must exist not only beautiful and good things, but something that would be “beautiful and good in itself” (*ti ... autó kalón kai agathón*, 439c).

It is thus upon the stability of the *signified* that Plato constructs his theory of knowledge. Heraclitus, in remarking that things constantly “translate” themselves, would not have been able to think that this state of flux makes them incapable of functioning as correlatives of the linguistic sign. Heraclitean ostensive nomination depends in fact on a subjacent sacred model. The originary ostensive is not the name of an impermanent thing, but the name of permanence itself—the name of God. To rid himself of the sacred Being that lurks within the Heraclitean flux, Plato must ground the sign not upon its worldly referent but upon the signified, which is by nature in a state of extrawordly repose.<sup>[7]</sup> The impermanence of each

beauty is unimportant, provided that the Beautiful remain in place. Plato is the first real theoretician of signification. Without the signified, there can be no linguistic sign; Plato was the first to understand this capital fact, the foundation of all semiotics.<sup>[8]</sup> But metaphysics is not content to be a theory of the sign, nor a fortiori a linguistics; it wants to found an ontology. The signified “beautiful” will consequently be transported beyond the region of perishable things to become the Form-Idea “the Beautiful.”

## 8

Plato realizes that language cannot be explained on the basis of ontological monism. The word is something other than the thing, and not merely another variety of thing (an “imitation” like that of the artisan, for example). But lacking the possibility—ethical as well as intellectual—to return this dualism to its anthropological source, he fetishizes it and consequently degrades it. To affirm that the Ideas alone are real is not to distinguish them absolutely from worldly things, but on the contrary, to assimilate the two. As soon as one imagines a “heaven” inhabited by the Ideas, one makes them play the same role in the other world as things play in this one, just as they do in the myth of the Cave. The other world is in fact the “other scene,” the scene of representation, on which only signs appear.

What then is the relationship between the world of Ideas and the other world of souls, that imaginary locus consecrated by religion, described at length in the *Phaedo*? Let us not be too hasty to naturalize the religious heaven as an instrument of priestly manipulation of the credulous or as the fantastic wish-fulfillment of some inborn desire for immortality. Its model is clearly, as Plato reveals, the (signified of the) sign. But Plato fixes this model in a dualistic ontology by suppressing the originary link between signifier and referent, a connection the syntactic trace of which is precisely the ostensive.

So long as the sign serves as a means for the revelation of the central object of desire, the other world of permanent Being will appear to be inhabited by that object rather than by the sign itself. The originary model of immortality is that of the sacred center of the scene of representation. To use language is to institute a relationship that is from the beginning formal and consequently liberated from the force of time. Those who would put a transcendent Language in the place of the Christian or Hegelian *logos* forget that language is not, but that it is constructed, and that the point of departure for this construction cannot well be the declarative sentence that crowns it. No doubt some of the responsibility for this lapse is attributable to Saussure’s emphasis on signification at the expense of syntactic structure. But it is more profoundly the responsibility of metaphysics itself, whose disillusioned adepts believe even today that it must magically furnish them with the entire set of tools needed for its own deconstruction.

It is the formality of the linguistic signification-relation that engenders the world of the Forms. Immortality in this realm is not a beatific prolongation of lived time into eternity, but

an extratemporal form of being. Although he did not understand the other world to be originarily that of linguistic signification, Plato is the first to have realized that it is inhabited by beings accessible solely through meditation on the sign-beings that we call in a formalist vocabulary “signifieds,” but that merit their Hegelian name of *Begriff*, concept, for they “grasp” and preserve an originary content.

The concept is born when the formal immortality of signification becomes separated from its origin in ostensive designation. We proceed from immortal gods to immortal Ideas, in such a manner that when the gods themselves are invoked in the mythical passages of Plato, they are creatures rather than creators of language. The judges of the myth of Er at the end of the *Gorgias* are fictions that illustrate the idea of Justice, not gods who incarnate it. Their distributions of compensatory pleasures and pains reveal by the “logic of the supplement” the inefficacy of Socratic morality; the tyrant Archelaos suffers in the underworld in order to embody a moral truth that cannot be exemplified on earth.

### **Liberation from metaphysics?**

Now that we have seen by what dubious stratagems Plato imposes order on the seething Heraclitean universe, we can well understand the impatience of those who would liberate us from the grasp of metaphysics. The late Jean-Marie Benoist, in his *Tyrannie du logos* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1975), sets out the postmodern indictment. Socrates has only freed our language from Sophist “technocracy” in order to enslave us to a repressive *logos*. What a wonderful opportunity was lost for a linguistics of the signifier, for a community founded on the pleasure principle... The doctrine of the always-already remains haunted by a myth of origin, always the same: the myth of difference and desire “polymorphous and perverse”—the dream, inherited from modernism, of a Being anterior to language. It bears the influence of the Lacanian schema in which language imposes a paternal order on the fragmentary turbulence of “imaginary” desire.<sup>[9]</sup> However, in the model of historical evolution that Benoist follows, it is not the unmentioned origin of language, but that of metaphysics which institutes repression. This permits him to regret the repressive domination of metaphysics without admitting that its *logos* is human language itself.

### **9**

The originary-without-an-origin language of deconstructive thought is a free play of the signifier that, by returning us to the material reality of the sign, puts signification and therefore metaphysics into question. Heidegger could conceive of a “thinking of Being” that would stand opposed to metaphysics as the ostensive is to the declarative, that would designate Being itself rather than creating fictive models of it taken from the realm of the ontic. The disappearance of this pre-Socratic paradise in the postmodern era has relegated ostensivity to the religious domain in which it originated, and where no philosopher is likely to seek it out. As a consequence, Benoist has recourse to psychoanalysis as postmodernity’s

official originary anthropology—an anthropology in which the substitution of ontogenesis for phylogenesis permits the evacuation of the ethical. But *chassez le religieux, il revient au galop*: what psychoanalytic authority supplies is nothing other than a myth of origin. Within the horizon established by the author’s concluding reference to Heraclitus, the reign of the mythical is all the less contested for being entirely unavowed.[\[10\]](#)

It is time to return *la dépense* to the ritual context where Georges Bataille found it.[\[11\]](#) Benoist’s summary reference to the potlatch reflects a typical postmodern failure to understand—as Bataille did in his lucid moments—that this marvelous flux, this outpouring of energy beyond all reason, is born not in the delicious polymorphism of individual desire but in the ritual “cruelty” (to use Artaud’s term) of societies far removed from our intellectual utopias. The pre-Socratic chaos expelled by metaphysics is the decadence of a ritual order subject to a control far more rigid than latter-day metaphysics imagines. When Plato attempts to constrain the tyrannical excesses of individual desire, it is to avert crisis in a barely post-ritual society, not to put a phallocratic brake on the pristine appetites of originary humanity. Originary humanity already knows language and order in their most rigid sense; our dream of anarchy is conceivable only on this basis.

The metaphysical conception of language is defined by the expulsion of the elementary linguistic forms. But Plato does not expel the ostensive as such because he does not theorize it as such. Had he been able to theorize it, he would not have had to expel it. Plato fears the immediacy of language that itself acts on the world. The Sophists are dangerous because their rhetoric restores to language its originary power of creating meaning, but in a context where the speaker is no longer subject to the transcendent communal order incarnated in ritual. The stability of the Ideas that maintain the social order is founded on a deeper, albeit still mystified vision of the originary event and of the scene of representation that preserves it.

The formal logic of signification justifies the founding gesture of metaphysics. The concept is indeed immortal because it does not belong to the real world, whatever its point of entry into human language. But if the nominalized virtues of the early dialogues and the Ideas themselves of the later ones possessed only the formal immortality of the sign-in-general, they would fail to meet the ethical requirements that Platonic thought imposes on them. In attempting to find in language the basis of a conflict-free community, Plato creates a form of thought that effaces the historical origin of language as the human community’s means to defer conflict. In order for the concept to be immortal, it must be without origin and therefore without history. On the contrary, the real immortality of the concept is in its evocation of the scenic sharing of the sign in the originary event as a transtemporal guarantee of communal peace.

## Notes

1. The reader will recall that in *Originary Thinking*, I defined metaphysics as the way of thinking founded on the principle that the declarative sentence-the “proposition”-is the fundamental linguistic form.[\(back\)](#)
2. Our intuitive comprehension of this term is the simplest indication of the persistence of our attachment to the originary scene. We could not conceive the existence of God, even in order to deny it, without basing our conception on an experience of the sacred, an experience of which the name-of-God is the crystallization. (For further elaboration of this idea, see *Science and Faith* and particularly *Originary Thinking*, Chapter 2, “The Anthropological Idea of God.”) In contrast, the construction of a concept of God that needs no name is the task of metaphysics.[\(back\)](#)
3. As the original target of deconstruction, the phenomenological notion of the “self-presence” of speech refers to the speaker’s presumed relation to his utterance rather than to its specificity; for all the notion of “self-presence” tells us, he could be engaged in glossolalia. Only the context of philosophical discourse suggests that the referent of the utterance is situated on the “other scene” of the declarative. Where is self-presence in, for example, an imperative utterance that specifically designates what is experienced-as-absent? Only in the fact that (assuming I am not deaf) I hear myself speak, that is, my heard speech supplies me with feedback while I speak, not in anything relating to the specifics of human language. Only in the case of the metaphysical proposition, entirely contained within the imaginary scene of representation, can the *content* of the utterance be characterized either as absolutely present (to itself) or as absolutely absent (to the empirical world).[\(back\)](#)
4. See *Science and Faith*, Chapter 3.[\(back\)](#)
5. As I have pointed out elsewhere (see “The Unique Source of Religion and Morality,” *Anthropoetics* I, no. 1 (June 1995; URL: <http://www.humnet.ucla.edu/humnet/anthropoetics/>) and *Contagion* 3 (Spring 1996): 51-65, in the original revelation in Exodus 3:14, God already distinguishes between the full sentence by which he names himself to Moses and his instruction to tell the people “I am/will be (*ehyeh*) has sent me to you.”[\(back\)](#)
6. See Henry Teloh, *The Development of Plato’s Metaphysics* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1981): “The date of composition of the *Cratylus*, unfortunately, is in dispute. I do believe, however, that separate Forms appear at the end of the dialogue (439c-440d), but in a very rough and rudimentary manner, which indicates that Plato has just started to think about them” (p. 83). The fact that Teloh’s arguments are taken from the metaphysical tradition only adds strength to my own very different ones. On another point, it can hardly be a simple coincidence that the name of Euthyphro reappears in the *Cratylus* (and nowhere else in Plato), in an ironically marked fashion: “that [this onomastic “science”]



fell upon me, the one whom I consider responsible for this, Hermogenes, is above all Euthyphro..." (396d). Is this not a sign of the progression of Plato's reflection on the *eidos*? It is Euthyphro who is said to have inspired Socrates with his divine etymologies; we shall see that it is precisely these which lead the Platonic Socrates from Heraclitean Cratylism to the notion of the Idea-signified.[\(back\)](#)

11

7. In contrast, Plato is familiar enough with the plurality of "barbarian" languages to recognize the instability of the *signifier*; it is precisely for this reason that he denies the usefulness of the empirical search for "primitive" names.[\(back\)](#)

8. In contrast, Parmenides, the thinker of the One, of absolute permanence, is not a semiotician. The dialogue that bears his name and which is faithful to what we know of his thought shows that the One, far from being, like the Platonic Idea-signified, a fixed point between the contrary mobilities of signifier and referent, is as mobile as the world of Heraclitus. The word "One" designates an absolute totality that is unnameable—"One" is not a name but an attribute—and indeed, like the "set of all sets," properly inconceivable. As such it stands at the moment just prior to the emergence of metaphysics at which the sacred-ostensive component of Being has not yet been replaced by the abstract presence of the Ideas.[\(back\)](#)

9. But Lacan himself has no illusions concerning the freedom of the imaginary, which he describes on the contrary as enslaved to the desire of the Other.[\(back\)](#)

10. After the famous fragment 60: "War is the father, the king of all things..." the last Heraclitean passage Benoist quotes is: "Denizens of the night: magicians, bacchantes, lenai, myths; one is initiated sacrilegiously into the mysteries practiced among men." He then concludes, "Voici venir encore ces ombres et ces masques, ces figures de mauvais augure que l'on cache..." [Here they come again, those shadows and those masks, those hidden figures of evil portent...] (p. 181). Benoist would have done well to read Girard's remark on Heraclitus in *La violence et le sacré*, "N'est-ce pas la genèse même du mythe, l'engendrement des dieux et de la différence sous l'action de la violence [...] qui se trouve résumé dans le fragment 60?" [Is it not the very genesis of myth, the creation of the gods and of difference through the action of violence ... that is summed up in Fragment 60?] (p. 129).[\(back\)](#)

11. See especially Bataille's *La part maudite* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1967).[\(back\)](#)