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Platonism and the Natural World: How far do Plato or later Platonists appreciate the Beauties of Nature?

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Abstract. Does the philosopher Plato, despite his elevation to a supreme position in the intelligible world of the Beautiful itself, or the Idea of Beauty, really exhibit any appreciation of the beauties of nature, or Natural Beauty? The omission of any mention of the beauties of Nature in Diotima's ladder of ascent to the Beautiful Itself in the *Symposium* leads me to propose that Plato, in line with the sensibility of Greeks of the Classical period in general, does not possess what would later be termed an 'Arcadian' view of the beauties of the natural world; and even in the later Platonist tradition there is little evidence of such sensibility.

Keywords: Platonic concept of beauty; beauties of Nature; 'Arcadian' view of natural beauty.

Does the philosopher Plato, despite his elevation to a supreme position in the intelligible world of the Beautiful itself, or the Idea of Beauty, really exhibit any appreciation of the beauties of nature, or Natural Beauty? I have long been provoked to ask this troublesome question by the observation that, in Diotima's Ladder of Ascent to the Beautiful, in *Symposium* 210c-d, she is made to portray the progress of the lover upwards from the appreciation of beautiful bodies not, as one might have expected, to the appreciation of the beauties of the natural world, but rather to those of 'institutions and laws' (*epitêdeumata kai nomoi*) – Nature does not get a look in at any stage of the Ascent.

Now one might argue that Diotima here is deliberately focusing on types and levels of beauty that are directly connected to human beings and their activities, and are the results of rational and orderly behaviour; but that will not quite do,

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I think. The ultimate level, after all, the 'great sea' (*polu pelagos*) of Beauty, quite transcends human beauty and the beauties generated by human achievements, and the implication surely is that one's ultimate vision is attained by working one's way through all the levels of beauty that there are – the beauties of nature not being among them.

Be that as it may, reflection on this passage has led me to enquire whether, anywhere else in his work, Plato can be seen to permit any of his characters, from Socrates on down, to express admiration for the beauties of Nature; and that in turn has led me to explore the attitudes to Nature of later adherents of the Platonist tradition..

As regards Plato himself, a passage from the dialogues that might immediately spring to mind is the beginning of the *Phaedrus,* a portrayal of Socrates' reactions on the only occasion that he is presented in the dialogues as straying out from his haunts in the city into the countryside. Socrates, we may note, is initially portrayed as agreeing with Phaedrus that a walk in the countryside is more 'invigorating' (*akopôteros,* 227a6) than perambulating around the city streets or arcades. This, however, is not commendation of the beauty of the countryside as such, but only of its relative freedom from dust and smog.

Things develop further, however. As the pair wander up the Ilissus, Socrates spots an ideal place to settle down and listen to the speech of Lysias:

> "Upon my word, a delightful resting place (*kalê ge hê katagôgê*), with this tall, spreading plane, and a lovely (*pankalon*) shade from the high branches of the chaste-tree (*agnos*). Now that it's in full flower, it will make the place ever so fragrant. And what a lovely (*khariestatê*) stream under the plane tree, and how cool it is to the feet! Judging by the statuettes and images, I should say it's consecrated to Achelous and some of the nymphs. And then too, isn't the freshness of the air most welcome and pleasant, and the shrill summery music of the cicada choir! And as crowning delight the grass, thick enough on a gentle slope to rest your head on most comfortably. In fact, my dear Phaedrus, you have been the perfect guide!" (230b2-c6, trans. Hackforth, slightly emended.)

This is certainly a ringing endorsement of this delightful corner of the Attic countryside, but if we consider it closely, we may note, I think, some limitations in the scope of Socrates' praise of the beauties of Nature. What I think we may note, specifically, is that each of the features remarked on is being praised, not for its abstract or autonomous beauty, but rather for its *usefulness,* its contribution to Socrates' comfort. The plane tree provides shade, as does the chaste-tree; the stream is cool to the feet; the air is invigorating; and, lastly, the grass provides an excellent support for the head. No feature is being praised for its *abstract* beauty.

Again, near the commencement of *The Laws* (Book I, 625b-c), when the Athenian Visitor proposes to Cleinias and Megillus a walk out of Cnossos up to the sanctuary of Zeus, no mention is made of the inspiring panorama that would be opened up to them by such a journey, but only, once again, of the pleasant shade that would be afforded by the marvellous tallness and gracefulness (*hypsê kai kallê thaumasia*) of the cypress trees along the route, and the opportunity for rest afforded by the meadows.

And that, I think, is the nearest we are going to get to an appreciation of Nature in the Platonic corpus. Socrates is happiest hanging about the Agora, or one or other of the gymnasia that adorn the city; Nature and the countryside make him uncomfortable.[1] However, this obliviousness to the beauties of Nature is not by any means an aesthetic defect peculiar to Plato, if the arguments of a number of distinguished scholars of Classical antiquity are to be credited.[2] The truth seems to be that Greeks of the Archaic or Classical ages were simply too close to Nature in their daily lives to develop any *aesthetic* appreciation of its charms.[3] Even in a comparatively large city such as Athens, nearly every citizen had a close connection with the countryside, in the form of a country estate, or at least an allotment, which involved them in regular visits to a rural environment for practical purposes – including, of course, fairly regular warfare. Only, it would seem, in the Hellenistic era, when cities grew larger and inter-*polis* warfare largely ceased, did the possibility arise of, on the one hand, becoming sufficiently isolated from the countryside to begin to feel romantic about it, and, on the other, of being able to visit the countryside without having a strictly practical purpose, or incurring any degree of danger. Only in such circumstances, as T. G. Rosenmeyer and other authorities would

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[1] At *Phdr.* 230d, he declares, "You must forgive me, dear friend! I'm a lover of learning (*philomathês*), and trees and open country won't teach me anything."

[2] I am indebted here in particular to the fine book of my former Berkeley colleague, T. G. Rosenmeyer, *The Green Cabinet* (1969), in which, with great learning, he explores the origins of the genre of pastoral poetry, and in the process connects it (adducing various earlier authorities) with the development of a new appreciation of the beauties of the countryside and rural life in the Greek consciousness. Noteworthy also is ch. 13 of Bruno Snell's work, *The Discovery of the Mind* (1953), 'Arcadia: The discovery of a spiritual heritage'—though he attributes the actual formulation of an 'Arcadian' attitude to Nature to Vergil (looking back to Theocritus).

[3] It has been pointed out to me, by my old friend Prof. James Clauss, of the University of Washington in Seattle, that what is arguably the archetypal encomium of a natural feature in Greek literature, Homer's description of the Garden of Alcinous in *Odyssey* 7. 112ff., in fact emphasises the *practical utility* of every aspect of the Garden, not its abstract beauty.

argue, can a 'bucolic' or 'Arcadian' sensibility arise, such as we do not find in the prose or poetry of Plato's time or before.

When, then, if at all, might we hope to see such a sensibility manifest itself in the Platonist tradition? We have, alas, no texts surviving from either the later Old Academy,[4] nor yet of the New Academy, but a most interesting echo of the sylvan scene from the *Phaedrus*, as it happens, occurs in the *De Oratore* of Cicero,[5] composed in the later 50's B.C., but set in 91 B.C., at the Tusculan villa of M. Licinius Crassus, where he and a number of his noble friends have taken refuge from the bustle of the Ludi Romani. On the second day of their stay, the guests are perambulating in Crassus' garden, when his friend Scaevola makes a proposition, as follows (*De Orat.*1, 28-9) :

> "Crassus, why do we not imitate Socrates as he appears in the *Phaedrus* of Plato? For your plane tree has suggested this comparison to my mind, casting as it does, with its spreading branches, as deep a shade over this spot, as that one cast whose shelter Socrates sought – which to me seems to owe its eminence less to the 'little rivulet' described by Plato than to the language of his dialogue – and what Socrates did, whose feet were thoroughly hardened, when he threw himself down on the grass, and so began the talk which philosophers say was divinely inspired – such ease may more reasonably be conceded to my own feet."
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> To which Crassus replied: "Nay, but we will make things more comfortable still" – whereupon, according to Cotta, he called for cushions, and they all sat down together on the benches that were under the plane tree. (trans. E.W. Sutton)

This scene seems delightfully to encapsulate the difference in sensibility between the nobles of late Republican Rome and the Greeks of the Classical Age. In the *Phaedrus,* all is natural; in the *De Oratore,* all is artifice – a well-kept garden, benches, *and cushions!* Furthermore, the outdoor, rural setting is being appreciated *in its own right,* not from a utilitarian perspective – though it is, admittedly, a thoroughly manicured environment, as opposed to a wild one.

This is, of course, not by any means the only passage in Cicero's works where a love of nature is manifested. As a further nice example, I would like to highlight a passage from his work *De Legibus,* which consists of a series of dialogues between Cicero, his brother Quintus, and his old friend Atticus, which take place in Cicero's

[4] The dialogues of Heraclides of Pontus might have been of interest in this connection, but we have only minimal information as to their content.

[5] Cicero may reasonably be claimed as an adherent of the doctrines of the New Academy, which is the allegiance he would prefer himself, but also to some extent a follower of Antiochus of Ascalon, re-founder of the dogmatic tradition of the Old Academy – though Cicero held himself always at one remove from Platonist dogmatism.

country estate at Arpinum. The discussion begins in a grove which contains, among other features, the 'Marian Oak', to which Atticus draws attention at the beginning of the whole dialogue (I 1), but which Quintus somewhat undercuts by claiming that its main distinction is its having featured in Cicero's poem *Marius*. However, at the beginning of the second book (II 1-7), Atticus (who is, admittedly, an Epicurean by conviction, not a Platonist) returns to the topic of the beauties of their environment in a most notable way. At the outset, he makes the following proposal to Cicero:[6]

> "As we have now had a sufficiently long walk, and you are about to begin a new part of the discussion, shall we not leave this place and go to the island in the Fibrenus (for I believe that is the name of the river), and sit there while we finish the conversation?"

Cicero agrees warmly to this proposal, declaring that the island is indeed "a favourite haunt of mine, for meditation, writing and reading."

Atticus then proceeds to expand on his commendation of the environment, most significantly for our theme:

> "Indeed I cannot get enough of this place, especially as I have come at this season of the year, and I scorn luxurious country-places, marbled walks and panelled ceilings. Take those artificial streams which some of our friends call 'Niles' or 'Euripuses' – who, after seeing what we have before us, would not laugh at them? And so, just as you, a moment ago, in your discussion of law and justice, traced everything back to Nature, in the same way Nature is absolutely supreme in the things that men seek for the recreation and delight of the soul. Hence I used to be surprised (for I had the idea that there was nothing in this vicinity except rocks and mountains, and both your speeches and your poems encouraged me in that opinion) – I was surprised, I say, that you enjoyed this place so much; now, on the other hand, I wonder that you ever prefer to go elsewhere, when you leave Rome."

– to which Cicero replies (II 3):

> "Indeed, whenever it is possible for me to be out of town for several days, especially at this time of the year, I do come to this lovely and healthful spot; it is rarely possible, however."

We have here, I think, a pretty full-blooded praise of Nature, from what one might reasonably characterize as an 'Arcadian' or 'pastoral' perspective, such as, I would maintain, is not to be found in the works of Plato himself – and this despite the fact that Cicero, as he admits himself (ibid.), is not a native of the city of Rome, but a 'country boy' from Arpinum. Nonetheless, he is urbanized enough by now to have acquired a properly 'pastoral' perspective on the beauties of the countryside.

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[6] I borrow here the Loeb translation of Clinton Walker Keyes.

Atticus now turns his attention back to the island (II 6) – to which, presumably (though this is not mentioned), access would have been available over a little bridge from the estate:

> "But here we are on the island – surely nothing could be more lovely (*amoenius*)! It cuts the Fibrenus like the beak of a ship, and the stream, divided into two equal parts, bathes these banks, flows swiftly past, and then comes quickly together again, leaving only enough space for a *palaestra*[7] of moderate size. Then, after accomplishing this, as if its only duty and function were to provide us with a seat for our discussion, it immediately plunges into the Liris, and, as if it had entered a patrician family, loses its less famous name and makes the water of the Liris much colder."

And he ends with a rather nice dig at Plato's portrayal of Socrates' commendation of his surroundings at the beginning of the *Phaedrus*:

> "For though I have visited many, I have never once come upon a river which was colder than this one; so that I could hardly bear to try the temperature with my foot, as Socrates did in Plato's *Phaedrus*."

In other words, Socrates' 'little spring' may have been pleasantly cool, but the Fibrenus is just bloody freezing!

Here, then, we have a portrayal of the beauties of Nature that seems to me to differ significantly from anything that we can find in the pages of Plato himself. Can more such passages be found, we may ask, in the works of other later Platonists?

If we turn next to that remarkable figure, the Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria, in the generation or so after Cicero, we find a number of interesting passages of some relevance to our theme. Now Philo himself would have bristled at the idea of being included in the Platonist tradition – in his own mind he was a follower rather of Moses, as interpreted by himself with the aid of (chiefly Stoic) allegorical exegesis – but he is certainly part of the tradition in at least a broad sense; and he does come up with a number of significant remarks at various points in his considerable corpus. I select two passages from a work of his with which I have recently been concerned, in cooperation with Dr. Ellen Birnbaum, his treatise *On the Life of Abraham*.[8]

In the first passage (*Abr.* 22-23), Philo is contrasting the life-styles of the 'bad' (*phaulos*) and the 'good' (*asteios*) man: the bad man loves the *agora,* theatres and

[7] This would normally have the meaning of 'wrestling-ground', but it can also denote a place for philosophical discussion, as in the Academy park in Athens.

[8] Birnbaum, Dillon 2021. It is in fact Dr. Birnbaum who has reminded me of these passages.

law-courts and other meeting-places where the many gather, and where he can conspire and cause trouble; the good man, on the other hand,

> ".. becoming a devotee of the quiet life, withdraws and embraces solitude, wishing to escape the notice of the multitude, not through any hatred of humanity (*misanthrôpia*) – for he is a lover of humanity, if anyone is – but owing to having rejected that evil which is welcomed by the common throng, who take pleasure in what should rightly cause them lamentation, and grieve at what should properly give them joy. For this reason he mostly shuts himself up at home and stays there, hardly crossing his threshold, or indeed, if beset by too many visitors, he heads out of the city and spends his time on some isolated farm (*monagria*), consorting more happily with those best of the whole human race, whose bodies may have been dissolved by time, but whose excellences shine forth through their surviving works both poetry and prose, from which the soul may naturally derive improvement."

Now this, it must be admitted, is only incidentally a retreat to the beauties of Nature – and indeed, if one considers the immediate environment of Alexandria, there is really not much in the way of spectacular natural beauties to be enjoyed! Philo, in retiring to his country estate, is merely seeking relief from the relentless social round, and solitude for the purpose of catching up on his reading. He may well have spent most of his time in his study. There is no praise of nature as such; but other passages add nuances to his position.

Later in the treatise, at s. 159, in the course of an encomium of the sense of sight, he has this to say:

> "Wherefore it is by using the finest of all gifts, that of light, that people view the contents of the universe, earth, plants, living things, fruits, the surging of the seas, rivers both spring-fed and swollen by rain and melted snow, and various kinds of springs, some pouring forth cold water, others hot, and the natures of all things that come to be in the air – forms which are untellable and incomprehensible by reason – and above all the heaven, which in truth has been wrought as a cosmos within a cosmos, and the beauties (*kallê*) and divine glories within the heaven. What one of the other senses can boast ever to traverse such a range of objects?"

There is a recognition here, I think, that Nature contains sights worth contemplating – the emphasis on the flow of water is interesting, as coming from an inhabitant of Egypt – but the only actual mention of beauty relates to the heavenly bodies, which, though part of Nature, are not quite what I have in mind.

Apart from these passages, there are very slim pickings in the Philonic corpus. The distinguished Philo scholar David Runia has brought to my attention a number of other passages, such as *Opif.* 38-44 (his description of the creation of the physical world), his praise of the harmonious variegation of the natural world at *Somn.* 1. 203, or his commendation of the art of husbandry at *Agr.* 5-7, but, as Runia himself

admits, there is always a firmly practical cast to these descriptions. There is not much indication, it must be admitted, that Philo was a lover of nature.

If we turn to Plutarch, something less than a century later, we can find some slight traces of an 'Arcadian' view of the beauties of nature, though, once again, like Cicero, Plutarch was not a native of the capital, but a country gentleman, from Chaeroneia in Boeotia -- though also, like Cicero, he spent much of his time in the capital. Once again, there are rather slim pickings to be garnered, but in Book II 6 of his *Table Talk,* we find a picture of a rather different sort of garden to that of Cicero, though still a somewhat philosophical one. This is the garden of Soclarus, a friend and possibly relation of Plutarch's, in Chaeroneia, where we hear of a gathering of philosophers and other intellectuals, including Plutarch himself*:*

> "Soclarus, while entertaining us in his gardens bordered by the Cephisus River, showed us trees which had been fancified in all sorts of ways by what is called 'grafting' (*enophthalmismos*). We saw olives growing upon mastic-trees, and pomegranates upon the myrtle; and there were oaks which bore good pears, plane trees which had received grafts of apples, and figs grafts of mulberries, and other mixtures of trees mastered to the point of producing fruit."

The rest of the company are inclined to tease Soclarus for wreaking such havoc on nature, but one guest, Craton (a relation of Plutarch's, and a doctor – so therefore a sort of philosopher) proposes a quasi-philosophical *quaestio* for discussion, raising the problem as to why evergreens, alone of trees, will not take grafts. So the company fall to discussing that, in the best philosophical manner, and come up with various solutions that we need not bother with now.

Here, however, we find a garden setting continuing to feature as a location for philosophers and other intellectuals to gather and deliberate. In the climate of the Mediterranean, of course, there is nothing very strange about that. What is perhaps of some significance, though, is how the concept of the garden develops throughout antiquity from the largely natural environment of Classical Athens, where a little shade and a natural water source were enough, to the much more elaborately structured gardens of Republican Rome and then of the Empire. We may note, however, that nowhere else in the nine books of *Table Talk,* nor yet in settings of his major dialogues, do we find any recognition by Plutarch of the beauties of Nature as such.[9]

I end, however, a century and a half later again, with the philosopher Plotinus – a native of Egypt and long-time student in Alexandria, but latterly, of course,

[9] We do, in *Quaestiones Naturales* 29, find a warm encomium of the beauties of the heavens, but that does not count for my purpose.

established in Rome, in a house belonging to a noble lady by the name of Gemina (probably, but not certainly, the widow of the Emperor Trebonian). Now, Plotinus' own writings are not such as to give an indication of the surroundings in which they were composed or uttered, but they do contain occasional references to beauty, including the beauties of nature. We also know, from Porphyry's *Life* of him (chs. 2; 7), that he enjoyed spending time on the country estates of various well-to-do disciples, such as the Roman nobleman Castricius Firmus and the Arab aristocrat Zethus, both in the vicinity of Minturnae in Campania, where he liked to spend his summers (ch. 5), and in the latter of which he died, in 270 A.D.

Plotinus composed two treatises on Beauty, I 6 and V 8, the former (his earliest composition, in Porphyry's listing) on Beauty in general, the latter (part of a larger treatise, setting out the main features of his doctrine in opposition to the Gnostics, divided into four parts by Porphyry) ostensibly on Intelligible Beauty, but both in fact in pursuit of the true, intelligible source of beauty which informs physical manifestations of beauty. In ch. 2 of the latter treatise, in the process of searching out the true source of beauty in physical objects, he turns from beauty as observed in works of art to the beauty that resides in the originals of these – primarily, it must be said, human and animal forms, but by implication beauties of nature as well:

> "But let us leave the arts; and let us contemplate those things whose works they are said to imitate, which come into existence naturally as beauties, and are so called, all the rational and irrational living creatures, and especially those among them which have succeeded since the Craftsman who formed them dominated the matter and gave it the form he wished. What, then, is the beauty in these? Certainly not the blood and the menstrual fluid; rather the colour of those is different, and their shape is either no shape or a shapeless shape, or like that which delimits something simple... Is not this beauty everywhere Form (*eidos*), which comes from the maker upon that which he has brought into being, as in the arts it was said to come from the arts upon their works?" (V 8, 2.1-17, trans. Armstrong)

Now here Plotinus is primarily concerned to emphasise that the beauty arising in nature, as well as in human beings, derives from the form rather than the matter, but at least he recognises that there is beauty in natural objects, resulting from the imposition of Form. And that, I'm afraid, is about as much as we are going to derive from Plotinus in praise of the beauties of Nature.[10]

[10] There is a fine recent discussion of Plotinus' theory of beauty in Ota Gál, 'Beyond Unified Multiplicity: Beauty and the Illumination by the Good in Plotinus', in *Ancient Philosophy* 43:1 (2023), pp. 143-67.

My conclusion, therefore, from what is admittedly a less than comprehensive survey of the possible evidence, is that, despite the development, in generations after Plato, of what has been termed an 'Arcadian' sensibility towards the beauties of Nature, there was never a manifestation, in the Platonic tradition, of a full-blooded acknowledgement of such beauty, and that may be explained adequately by the above quotation from Plotinus, and indeed from the whole context of *Ennead* V 8: *On the Intelligible Beauty.* For Platonists in general, beauty does indeed reside in the Intelligible, not the physical world, and any intimations of beauty that manifest themselves in Nature are simply the result of the imposition of intelligible Form.

Appendix

By way of an appendix to this discussion, I offer an interesting passage from the *De Trinitate* of St. Augustine, brought to my attention by my friend Mateusz Stróżyński. Here, Augustine does seem to acknowledge a degree of beauty present in features of the natural world, such as mountains and plains – although, even here, the emphasis is on its *goodness,* rather than its beauty as such. Nonetheless, it does seem to constitute something of an advance on anything derivable from the purely Platonist tradition, and Stróżyński may well be right as attributing this to Augustine's Christian perspective:

> "Thou certainly dost not love anything except what is good (*bonum*), since good is the earth, with the loftiness of its mountains, and the due measure of its hills, and the level surface of its plains; and good is an estate that is pleasant and fertile; and good is a house that is arranged in due proportions, and is spacious and bright; and good are animal and animate bodies; and good is air that is temperate and salubrious; and good is food that is agreeable and fit for health; and good is health, without pains or lassitude; and good is the countenance of man that is disposed in fit proportions, and is cheerful in look, and bright in colour; and good is the mind of a friend, with the sweetness of agreement, and with the confidence of love; and good is a righteous man; and good are riches, since they are readily useful; and good is the heaven, with its sun, and moon, and stars." (*De Trin.* VIII 3. 4, trans. A. W. Haddan)

There is also a possibly relevant remark, as Stróżyński suggeste, in the famous passage in his *Confessions* concerning his theft of the pears (II 6, 12), which seems to indicate an appreciation of the beauties of the natural world; fleeting and incidental as it is, it does, I think, bear witness to a certain appreciation of the beauties of Nature:

> "And now, O Lord my God, now that I ask what pleasure I had in that theft, I find that it had no beauty to attract me. I do not mean beauty of the sort that justice and prudence possess, nor the beauty that is in man's mind and in his memory and in the life that animates him, nor the beauty of the stars in their allotted places, or of the earth and sea, teeming with new life born to replace the old as it passes away." (trans. R.S. Pine-Coffin)

Here, the earth and sea, as the containers of multitudinous living things, are accorded a certain degree of beauty, but it is really not much to go on – and in any case, Augustine, with all respect to him, can only be regarded as marginal to the Platonist tradition – nor would he wish it otherwise!

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