

A FORM OF PLATONISM IN
SOUTHWESTERN PUEBLO SOCIETY

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The metaphysics of Plato is often seen as an attempt to resolve the tensions inherent in the views of Parmenides and Heraclitus. By this view Platonism is essentially a compromise between two otherwise contradictory theories and one great contribution of Plato is seen to be the development of a means whereby thought could progress beyond this point.

Such a view of Plato presupposes that his metaphysical position is basically unique to him and original. Unfortunately, it is not possible to test this supposition by considering the fragmentary material available to us from the Pre-Socratic era. However, an alternate test of the originality of Plato's views may be made if a similar philosophical tension can be discovered in some culture alien to the Western tradition. If a Platonic resolution is found in such a situation, it seems quite possible that a "Platonic" solution was also available to Plato within the preexisting Greek culture, in at least an implicit form.

In the Southwestern area of the United States such a test culture is found. It is generally referred to as 'Pueblo', from the Spanish word for 'town'. At the time when first encountered by Spanish explorers the Pueblo people lived in three groupings of neolithic or proto-urban villages which, while internally self-governing and speaking a number of unrelated languages, nevertheless differed culturally only in certain minor ways. The Pueblos formed and continue to form a single cultural unit.

Once the Spanish had established themselves in the Southwest, they began forcible conversion of the Pueblo people to Catholicism. However, the Pueblos actively resisted adopting the Catholic religion and in 1680 succeeded in driving the Spanish out of Pueblo territory. The Spanish were able to return only by granting significant concessions, particularly in the area of religion and the Pueblo people have continued to follow their own religion into the present period.²

Thus, while the Pueblo people are somewhat aware of the Platonism of Catholicism, they have not been assimilated into its belief system and continue to keep aboriginal and Spanish views separated.³ We may therefore treat those ideas which are solely Indian as alien to the Western tradition of philosophy and thus of interest to comparative philosophy.

The material in this paper on the metaphysical views of Pueblo culture derives from two sources. The first source is Alfonso Ortiz's book, The Tewa World,⁴ which is an analysis, after Levi-Strauss, of Ortiz's own culture of San Juan Pueblo. The second source is material taken from the author's experiences in teaching Pueblo people under various programs in New Mexico. This discussion, therefore, necessarily focuses more on the Eastern than the Western Pueblos and altogether excludes the Hopi, who live in Arizona.

The Pueblo people observe two basic metaphysical dialectics within the universe. The first functions in much the same way that gender does in Indo-European languages in that it is used to divide the material universe into two classes, Summer and Winter. Just as cars and houses are classed as masculine or feminine in French, colors and mountains are classed as Summer or Winter in Tewa.

The second dialectic derives verbally from the distinction between green and ripe fruit, in Tewa, 'ochu' and 'seh t's' (p. 16). This concept is expanded into a notion which appears to duplicate the tension in Western philosophy between being and becoming. The way such an expansion may occur is fairly obvious. A green ear of corn has not reached its final form. It cannot be used for the purpose for which it was planted. In Greek, it has not achieved the highest arete of which it is capable. The ripe ear, on the other hand, does have such arete. It is finished and as perfect as it can become. Insofar as any material object can be said to have being, the ripe ear of corn is in a state of being.

This distinction is extended to people (pp. 17-18). The conscious entities of the universe are divided into six groups, by two distinctions, that between green (tangible) and ripe (spirit). People in the tangible world are green. They are then divided into three classes based on the social and political position they currently occupy. In principle each person should progress through all three classes in the course of a lifetime, although in practice this is, of course, sometimes impossible. In the Spirit World, there is an exact parallel of three hierarchical classes. At death, an individual enters the Spirit World. Thus, at least in principle, each entity progresses from a state of maximum becoming to a state of maximum being (p. 122).

In addition, the Spirit World contains entities "who never became" (p. 17), such as corn mother dieties who have always been in a state of being. However, they are not creator dieties and no equivalent to the Demiurge is found in Pueblo thought. It is assumed that the tangible universe was at first "misty and green" and gradually became ripe enough to be lived in as a function of its nature, much the same way a fruit ripens.

Thus, we see that the notions of being and becoming are to be found in Pueblo thought. This dialectic is primarily found embedded in mythos, as indeed, it often is in Plato. The world of being is located in some specific geographical locale for each Pueblo, generally some body of water, such as Taos Pueblo's Blue Lake. In order to discover how this tension is perceived by Pueblo people, it is necessary to pursue the concept of the Spirit World beyond its customary mythical form. The question must be asked, "What is the Spirit World like?". If it emerges as a rather vague "happy hunting ground", its similarity to a Platonic realm of forms would be limited.

Ortiz, in speaking of the Spirit World, consistently uses phrases such as "model of...and model for...life cycle" (p. 57) and "linkage... between worlds" (p. 173) and so forth. Pueblo students easily grasp the idea of the parallelism of Plato's realm of forms if it is presented as being the Spirit World, and from this idea use the notion of the

forms correctly. Thus, the first characteristic of the realm of forms, its parallelism to the material world, is duplicated in Pueblo thought.

A second characteristic which Plato attributes to the realm of forms is that of virtue or arete. As we have seen, the very linguistic origin of the concept suggests that the Pueblo concept has this character. Further proof can be found by considering the problem of evil and the Spirit World. What happens to evil people, to witches, when they die? By Pueblo belief, they simply cease to exist, since by definition, they cannot exist exclusively in the Spirit World (p. 163). Thus, the parallel between the material and Spirit World is not perfect and as in Plato, only morally good entities are mirrored in the Spirit World. Likewise, evil came into existence only within the tangible world (p. 15).

The third characteristic that Plato ascribes to the realm of forms is the logical and existential primacy of the forms. Temporally, the Spirit World is certainly preexistent. The myth of beginning (pp. 13-16) begins with the Spirit World existing and the tangible world "misty and green". Only after each entity is appointed in the Spirit World, can it appear in the tangible world and thus begin to move towards the state of ripe being.

Logical preexistence is not dealt with so easily. It is difficult to establish whether logical primacy exists in an implicit system of thought. However, the creation myth suggests that the Spirit World is prior since the existence of an entity in the Spirit World is a necessary condition for its having any lasting reality. Entities, such as evil, which exist only in the world of becoming and which by nature can never ripen, have a sort of spurious existence which time must terminate.

The logical primacy of the Spirit World is also demonstrated by the attitudes of Pueblo students faced with the ideas of Plato. To them, as to Plato, the forms have the same logically preexistent character that is ascribed to the Demiurge or Corn dieties. Students are often confused until it is made clear to them that the forms are not created, but are preexistent logically as well as temporally. The forms in the Spirit World must exist by their nature and thus to discuss their coming into being is senseless.

Thus, we may see that Pueblo thought, like Platonism, has as one of its basic principles, the notion of the distinction of being and becoming. In working out the relationship between these two ideas, the cosmos is divided into a Spirit World and a tangible world, which correspond to Plato's realm of forms and realm of shadows. Up to this point, there is no particular reason to assume that Platonism is a particularly original idea.

However, the way in which the tension between these two worlds is resolved differs significantly between the Pueblo culture and Platonism. In Pueblo thought, both major dialectics are resolved in the same way, i.e., by synthesis. This is most clearly seen in the resolution of Summer and Winter (p. 16). Each Pueblo is divided into two moieties, Summer and Winter. However, the governmental and social structure of the groups as a whole depends upon the interaction of both groups to form the larger whole, the Pueblo. This synthesis is one of the few philosophical points having an explicit form in Tewa and Keresan culture.

However, the method of synthesis is not so successful when applied to being and becoming. When Pueblo thought attempts to assert that as becoming turns into being, a synthesis is formed, difficulties arise. First, as the Spirit World is existentially and logically prior and as being and becoming exhaust the available states of existence, there is no way to successfully create a synthesis. Rather, what results is a continuum with becoming at one end and being at the other. This creates the problem of how the intrinsic differences between being and becoming are to be resolved if they are simply ends of a continuum. At what point, for example, does becoming turn into being, and why does this happen?

In short, a synthesis could only succeed if some greater class of existence capable of absorbing both being and becoming were postulated. It is interesting to consider, however, whether some of the problems traditionally associated with Platonism, such as the third man problem would disappear if such an undertaking were successfully completed.

However, as the position is stated in Pueblo thought, the basic problem of the relationship between being and becoming remains unresolved. Plato's approach, in which the tangible world becomes a world of shadows, is quite possibly unique, and in spite of its well known problems, represents a significant step forward in the history of philosophy.

FOOTNOTES

1. Eggan, Fred. Organizacion Social de los Indios Pueblo del Oeste. Mexico: Instituto Indigenista Interamericano, 1971, p. 2.

2. Bancroft, Hubert Howe. History of Arizona and New Mexico. San Francisco: The History Company, 1890, pp. 174-224.

3. Ortiz, Alfonso. The Tewa World: Space, Time, Being and Becoming in a Pueblo Society. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1969.

4. Ibid. All page numbers in the text refer to the Ortiz book.