An analysis of the Ideas akin to the Indo-Aryan concepts found in the Thoughts of Plato

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Any scholar with an open, fair and a genuine interest cannot but realize the kinship among many great ideas of the world. Therefore when studying the writings and thoughts of the Greek Philosophers, we are often reminded of the teachings of the Vedic seers. The above thoughts are especially in regard to the philosophy of Plato. It should be noted that this paper is not written with the intention of providing arguments for suggesting that the Greeks borrowed from the Indo Aryans or vice versa. It is only fair to believe the cosmic universe is rich enough to supply fundamental thoughts to all, abundantly. The need to borrow does not arise. Vital contributions to world thought would have risen from a single source. Namely direct vision. It is only then they

- (a) Could reach the same heights.
- (b) Perceive the same fundamental ideals and
- (c) Often define them in almost identical terms.

Plato (c. 427-347 BC) is regarded as the greatest of Greek philosophers. His philosophy is often epitomized by the schoolmen of the middle age as a philosophy of **Unum**, **Bonum** and **Verum** (of the one, the good and the truth). This immediately reminds us of the Indian counterpart, namely **Satyam**, **Sivam** and **Sundaram** that we come across in the philosophy of the **Upanishads**.

The Vedantha philosophy is that it is at the same time a religion and a philosophy. In India Philosophy as well Max Muller¹ as religion is striving after truth. According to Philosophy is looked upon as the natural outcome of religion; nay as its most precious flower and -Whether religion leads to philosophy or philosophy to religion, in India the two are fragrance. inseparable.

The Veda is the bible of the Brahmans. The Veda is recognized as the highest authority on all religious questions. Therefore, the Vedantha philosophy depends on the Veda, and oneness of religion and philosophy. Veda means knowledge; Vedantha means the end of the Veda or the Peak of knowledge.

The intention of this paper is to bring fourth and examine the thoughts in the philosophical ideas expressed by Plato in relation to some prominent Ideas that could be found in Indian thought. The method employed would be to state a fundamental idea in the Vedanta and provide a detailed discussion on similar ideas found in Plato.

None of the predecessors of **Plato** had constructed a system of philosophy. What they had produced were isolated philosophical ideas, partial theories, hints and suggestions. Plato was the first person in the history

of the western world to produce an all embracing system of philosophy. He had taken into consideration the entire heritage of Greek thought and made his own original contribution. Plato was the founder of the Academy, the first permanent institution devoted to philosophical research and teaching. He had written some twenty nine philosophical dialogues and his literary activity extended over half a century. A friend and associate of Socrates, he had been greatly influenced by him. Though forty years younger than Socrates, Plato had known him from a very early age. Socrates had not written down his philosophy. And the death of Socrates seems to have filled Plato with a passionate desire to preserve and protect his memory. He had done this by writing down in the form of dramatic dialogues the conversations in which Socrates had engaged in his life time. At first Plato may have written them simply to re-live his own feelings. They can be regarded as substantially accurate records of actual conversations. Plato used the Dialogues not only to perpetuate Socrates' memory, but also to vindicate it. And in the later works, he exposes his own philosophy through the Dialogues. The Dialogues have not come down to us dated and numbered. Several scholars have speculated on the sequence of Plato's works. They sometimes refute each other on certain points. This discussion is outside the scope of our study. Plato seems to be the only trust worthy writer who had presented us with a reliable account of Socrates and the philosophy. The concepts of Socrates and the philosophy of Plato are found fused with each other in the Dialogues. Therefore I present what is expressed about the concept of divinity in the dialogues, under Plato. Further, it is essential to remember when reading Plato that the **Dialogues** are not systematic expositions of his own doctrines. They are works of art, composed at various times and for social reasons which we can only guess. It is also extremely difficult to pin point Plato's ideas on a particular subject as they are found scattered throughout many works he had written. The Dialogues that had come down to us which amount to some twenty nine works of art, had been composed during a period exceeding fifty years. This gave him the occasion to explain, discuss, refute, or change the ideas expressed in an earlier dialogue as he matured in age and wisdom. Furthermore, Plato has sometimes touched on a certain subject in one dialogue, developed it in another and concluded the argument in still another dialogue.

Plato's ideas on religion and divinity are no exception. Plato's conception of a world of abstract self-existent ideas. Vedic conception of the Absolute out of which springs all relative manifestation. Both declare this source of being to be one and eternal.

The basis of Plato's philosophy consists mainly of the theory of Ideas or Forms. These Ideas were metaphysical substances which had an objective reality and existed independent of an individual mind. They were eternal in the sense that they were permanent and had an existence outside time and space. They were complete and therefore were absolutely perfect. Being absolutely real, they were the first principles of other things. They were rational. They did not meet our senses and could be reached only through reason. All that meets our senses are copies of these absolute realities. The necessary logical outcome of this system is that the Idea of the Good is the highest. For every Idea is perfection in its kind. What is common to these Ideas is perfection. So the supreme Idea which presides over all the perfect Ideas is perfection itself. There are two kinds of knowledge - higher and lower knowledge. Lower knowledge is

gained through sense perception. It is only when completely detached from external perception that true knowledge can be apprehended.

The above argument is found in **The Republic** of Plato.

'Our soul is immortal and never perishes'. The body on the other hand is of a worldly nature. It tends to distract our attention from the divine.

So long as we keep to the body and our soul is contaminated with this imperfection, there is no chance of our ever attaining satisfactorily to our object, which we assert to be Truth....The body fills us with loves and desires and fears and all sorts of fancies and a great deal of nonsense, with the result that we literally never get an opportunity to think at all about anything.

The body intrudes into our investigations, interrupting, disturbing, distracting, and preventing us from getting a glimpse of the truth.

If we are ever to have pure knowledge of anything, we must get rid of the body and contemplate things by themselves with the soul by itself.³

The body is a hindrance to the development of the mind and soul because it tends to concentrate on the senses instead of reason.

every pleasure or pain has a sort of rivet with which it fastens the soul to the body and pins it down and makes it corporeal, accepting as true whatever the body certifies

In the **Timaeus** Plato says that there are two mortal souls apart from the immortal soul. The seats of the mortal souls are the breast and the belly, the sources of emotion and appetite. The immortal soul is planted in the head with the hope of keeping it pure from the others. To realize this hope is a difficult task though there is the narrow neck in between to separate them.⁴

Knowledge of Brahman, the Supreme is the foundation of all knowledge.

The **Republic** speaks of Plato's concept of the good.

The highest form of knowledge is the knowledge of the form of the good, from which things that are just and so on derive their usefulness and value.⁵

In his simile of the sun Plato compares the good to the sun and points out, that though the sun is not itself sight, it is the cause of sight and is seen by the sight it causes.⁶

And adds that knowledge and truth are 'children of the good.⁷

The good has begotten it in its own likeness, and it bears the same relation to sight visible objects in the visible realm that good bears to intelligence and intelligible objects in the intelligible realm.⁸

The good being the cause and source of knowledge and truth is

even more splendid9

for,

It is right to think of knowledge and truth as being like the good, but wrong to think of either of them as being the good, whose position must be ranked still higher.

In Plato's philosophy the form of the good is the most superior of all.

The good therefore may be said to be the source not only of the intelligibility of the objects of knowledge, but also of their being and reality. Yet it is not itself that reality, but is beyond it, and superior to it in dignity and power.¹⁰

Therefore Plato has called the form of the good 'divine'. In the 'simile of the cave' Plato refers to philosophers who study the forms or Ideas as 'contemplating the divine'. And in Phaedo, Plato again expresses the opinion that the:¹¹

soul secures immunity from its desires by following Reason and abiding always in her company, and by contemplating the true and divine and unconjecturable, and drawing inspiration from it.

The true and divine that Plato refers to is the form of the good. If the supreme God that Plato speaks of is different from the highest Idea, then only two relations are possible, both which are equally objectionable.

(1) God may be the cause or, ground of the Idea of the Good. But this destroys the substantiality of the Idea and destroys Plato's whole system. For according to Plato the Idea owes it's reality to nothing else. It is the ultimate supreme reality.

(2) God and the Idea may be co-ordinated in the system as equally primordial independent ultimate realities. But this means that Plato has given two mutually inconsistent accounts of the ultimate realities, and that his system ends in dualism. As these theories cannot be maintained, it must be supposed that God is identical with the **Idea of the Good**; in which case God is not a personal God at all, since the Idea is not a person.

My argument is some-what different to the above theories. I do not think it is fair to say that 'God is merely a figurative term for the Idea'. For my opinion is that for Plato philosophy and religion could not be isolated from each other and put into separate compartments. The ultimate objective of philosophical training seems to go further. It is religious and this is the reason why Plato expresses it as he does. The realization of the ultimate truth, the vision of the good is a religious experience.

Sathyam, Sivam, Sundaram in Indian Thought - Unum, Bonum et Verum in Plato.

The first positive statement that Plato makes about God is that

In reality, God is good, and he must be so described. God is beneficial. It must be the cause of well being. 12

From this he goes on to conclude that

'nothing good can be harmful' and that 'the good is not the cause of everything, but only of states of well being and not of evil'. As a result, referring to the myth of two jars full of fates, one good, one evil and Zeus giving man a mixture of both, Plato states that 'we cannot let Homer make stupid mistakes about gods...¹³

To say so would be sinful, inexpedient and inconsistent. Plato's opinion is that

God should be represented as not giving suffering.¹⁴

And if by chance one did have to show that the gods were the cause of suffering, Plato's advice in the **Republic**, is that one should;

Show that Gods' acts were good and just and that the sufferers were benefitted by being punished... In punishing them God did them good.¹⁵

For, God is the cause, not of all things, but only of good. 16

The next characteristic that is stressed about God is, that he is perfect,

God and the things of God are entirely perfect.¹⁷

If this is so it is not logical for the Gods to change. They are unchanging,

Are not things in the best condition least liable to change or alteration by something else?¹⁸

Not only are the gods immutable, they are eternal as well.

Every god is perfect in beauty and goodness and remains in his own form without variation forever.¹⁹

In God, the Good, the Beautiful and the Perfect are united in to one.

Furthermore, gods are associated with truth. He says there is 'No falsehood at all in the realm of the spiritual and divine'. God is, therefore without deceit or falsehood in action or word, he does not change himself, nor deceive others, awake or dreaming, with visions or words or special signs.²⁰

Uncompromising is the claim that the highest type of conduct is inseparably bound up with the highest type of knowledge.

The relationship between religion and philosophy is clear in the emphasis given to the 'right kind of prayer'. In the Laws, Plato presents his argument:

You mean that a man should pray to have right desires, before he prays that his desires may be fulfilled: and that wisdom should be the first object of our prayers.²¹

Wisdom seems to be the key word. On each person's wisdom depends his relationship with the divine.

Every wise man ought to follow God. What life then is pleasing to God? There is an old saying that 'like agrees with like, measure with measure' and God ought to be our measure in all things. ²² There is a definite connection between knowledge. Wisdom and morals.

In Theaetetus, Plato points out that one should conform to the form of the good to become God like:

'.. escape lies in becoming as like God as possible. And that means becoming righteous and holy with the help of wisdom.²³

The connection that Plato draws between knowledge and morals on the one hand and between philosophy and religion on the other is evident. Man is not alienated from God. God is not unapproachable. He cannot be won over by ritual and prayers. Man has the capacity to be like the divine. This could be done by cultivating the soul. It is his choice and it is up to him to follow God. The responsibility lies with the individual. To understand the form of the good, knowledge and wisdom is necessary. Ignorance should be banished. This could be achieved through patient study and training. When the mind gradually advances by degrees, our understanding as well as our values undergo various changes. By the illustration of the divided line Plato presents us the different orders of reality and the state of mind in which we approach these realms. The two orders of reality are knowledge (**episteme**) and opinion (**doxa**). The mental states are comprised of four subdivisions.

- (d) **Illusion** (eikasia): the various illusions, impressions and opinions with which the minds of ordinary people are full.
- (c) **Belief** (**pistis**): Common sense beliefs on matters of both moral and physical spheres. These are a fair practical guide to life but have not been fully thought out.
- (b) **Reason** (dianoia): The procedure of mathematics which is purely deductive and uncritical of it's assumptions.
- (a) **Intelligence** (**noesis**): Full understanding, culminating in the vision of ultimate truth. This understanding is reached by philosophy.
- (d) and (c) belong to the visible or physical (**horaton**) realm. (b) and (a) belong to the intelligible (**to noeton**) realm. ²⁴

In the simile of the cave found in the **Republic** Plato likens those who, are in the visible realm and are absorbed in illusion and belief to prisoners tied in a cave, who think that the shadows on the wall opposite them are real.

In every way they would believe that the shadows of the objects we mentioned were the whole truth. 25

Indicating the difficulty of the training of the mind to contemplate and understand the truth, Plato says that if a prisoner was released and taken out of the cave, he would need to grow accustomed to the light before he could see things in the upper world outside the cave. First he would find it

easiest to look at shadows, next at reflections of men and other objects in water, later on objects themselves.²⁶ The thing he would be able to do last would be to look directly at the sun itself, and gaze at it.

The sun is compared to the ultimate truth.²⁷

Emphasis on the distinction between the spiritual and the physical.

To illustrate the unimportance of worldly matters to the person who has had a vision of truth, Plato says:

There was probably a certain amount of honour and glory to be among the prisoners, and prizes for keen sightedness for those best able to remember the order of sequence among the passing shadows. Will our released prisoner hanker after these prizes or envy this power or honour?

In the **Laws**, Plato combines a sermon and a law in one, blending secular punishment with the religious sanctions. He says, 'Of all human possessions the soul is most divine' and makes it the religious duty of every man to pursue virtue, banish ignorance and cultivate his soul.²⁸

There can be no true distinction so long as the feelings of 'I' and 'mine' dominates. Differences commonly originate in a disagreement between the term 'mine' and 'thine'.

In the **Republic** Plato speaks of the ideal life he recommends for the Guardian class or the philosopher rulers in his ideal state. One of the most significant requirements in it is the fact that they cannot have any possessions of their own. This applies to extremes such as not even having a family to call their own. The community had to be their family. If one allows the basic human ties, it seeks that they would not be able to concentrate on the welfare of the majority.²⁹ One thing that has to be noted is that the rulers were philosophers as well.

They shall have no private property beyond the barest essentials. Second, none of them shall possess a dwelling house or store house to which all have not the right of entry..... they shall eat together in messes and live together like soldiers in camp. They must be told that they have no need of mortal and material gold and silver, because they have in their hearts the heavenly gold and silver given them by the gods as a permanent possession.³⁰

On the results of private ownership Plato describes thus.

If they acquire private property in land, houses or money, they will become farmers and men of business instead of Guardians, and harsh tyrants instead of partners in their dealings with their fellow citizens, with whom they will live on terms of mutual hatred and suspicion; ³¹ Of the family unit where 'I' and 'mine' are the centre Plato speaks thus-

'-Our men and women Guardians should be forbidden by law to live together in seperate households, and all the women should be common to all the men; similarly, children should be held in common, and no parent should know its shild, or child its parent'.³²

This is work towards the rejection of the ego. However salvation of man is vested in the hands of the single individual. The two philosophies agree at this point as well. This applies to the doctrines regarding the physical bodies as well. As long as we are identified with the body we have no access to the domain of the soul. On the other hand we cannot gain vision by destroying the body either. It could be gained only by learning to discriminate between the spiritual and the physical, the eternal and the perishable and the transcending, shifting conditions of bodily life.

Release in both the Vedic and the Platonic Philosophies is not accompanied by bodily death. Mere dying does not bring it to us. One has to realize a life apart from the body while one is still in the body. This liberation from physical bondage cannot be gained by any other devise than a clear knowledge of the nature of our soul. One has to know how to separate the essential from the nonessential. In the Veda this is illustrated by the simile of the mythical swan 'Parama hansa' who knows how to discriminate milk from water.

The philosopher, as described by Plato in the Phaedo

keeps his attention directly as much as he can away from the body and towards the soul.³³

Souls' life is independent of the body. It does not die even when the body dies. A firm and definite belief in the pre-existence and reincarnation.

The soul is the most divine part of the human because it is immortal. Though the body of a man perishes at his death, the soul lives on to enter another body. Plato's argument in the **Phaedo** of Plato runs thus.

When death comes to a man, the mortal part of him dies, but the immortal part retires at the approach of death and escapes unharmed and indestructible.

... the soul is immortal and imperishable, and they will really exist in the next world.³⁴

Explains our present life in relation to some previous existence. In the cosmic universe nothing happens by chance. There is no effect without a cause. The unbroken continuity of life and of the unfailing working of just law will remove from the mind the idea that destiny of man is controlled by an arbitrary Destiny, or that we are the creatures of fate.

This includes wise choice and tedious training. The habits cultivated in one birth determines its next birth. Knowledge as well as the training is accumulated throughout the rebirths. This is expressed by Plato in the **Laws**.

It is left to the will of each one the acts that are responsible for is becoming such as he is. For every man's birth is determined by his desires and the character he is born with corresponds to the character his soul has already acquired.³⁵

Plato has also repeated this in the Phaedo.

.. It (the soul) takes nothing with it to the next world except its education and training: and these are of supreme importance in helping or harming the newly dead at the very beginning of his journey there.³⁶

In the life after death, Plato refers to the existence of several groups in the **Phaedo**.

- (a) Ghosts: 'the soul' which is deeply attached to the body ... hovers round it and visible world for a long time ³⁷ the corporeal is heavy, oppressive, earthly and visible. So the soul which is tainted by its presence is weighed down and dragged back into the visible world, ... and hovers about tombs and grave yards.³⁸
- (b) Unlucky births. souls which are attached to the same sort of character or nature they have developed during life, those who, have cultivated gluttony or selfishness or drunkenness, instead of taking pains to avoid them, are likely to assume the form of donkeys and other perverse animals, those who have deliberately preferred a life of irresponsible lawlessness and violence become wolves and hawks and kites.³⁹
- (c) Lucky births, 'who reach the best destination, those who have cultivated the goodness of an ordinary citizen-qualities such as self-control, and integrity without the help of philosophy and reason.
- (d) Those who reach the divine and is not born again.

This last stage (d) is the result of practicing philosophy and purifying ones soul to the highest degree.

If at its release the soul is pure and carries with it no contamination of the body, because it has never willingly associated with it in life, but has shunned it and kept itself separate as its regular practice - if it has pursued philosophy in the right way ... then it departs to that place which is, like itself, invisible, divine, immortal and wise: where on its arrival, happiness awaits it, and release from uncertainty and folly, from fears and uncontrolled desires, and all other human evils; and where it really spends the rest of time with God.⁴⁰

This is the reason for Socrates to say in the **Phaedo** - 'those who really apply themselves in the right way to philosophy are directly and of their own accord preparing themselves for dying and death. if this is true, and they have actually been looking forward to death all their lives, it would of course be absurd to be troubled when the thing comes for which they have so long been preparing and looking forward. ⁴¹

The concentration of the true philosopher would be away from the worldly pleasures and towards the divine. 42

- -'Do you think that it is right for a philosopher to concern himself with the nominal pleasures connected with food and drink?
- -'Certainly not Socrates' said Simias.
- -'What about sexual pleasures?'
- -'No, not at all'.

And what about the other attentions that we pay to our bodies? Do you think that a philosopher attaches any importance to them? I mean things like providing himself with smart clothes and shoes and other bodily ornaments; ...'

-'I think the true philosopher despises them'.

Immortality is not a mere dogma or theory that can be settled by argument or intellectual study. It can only be settled through whole hearted concentration. One who has not the realization of it, however much he may try to fortify himself by learning science is inadequate.

'.. body intrudes once more into our investigations, interrupting, disturbing, distracting, and preventing us from getting a glimpse of the truth if we are ever to have pure knowledge of anything, we must get rid of the body and contemplate things by themselves with the soul by itself If no pure knowledge is possible in the company of the body, then either it is totally impossible to acquire knowledge, or it is only possible after death, because it is only then that the soul will be separate and independent of the body'. 43

The process recommended by Plato is - to purify ourselves. To

'keep ourselves uncontaminated by the follies of the body, gain direct knowledge of all that is pure and uncontaminated, that is, presumably of Truth.⁴⁴

The myth of the soul as presented in the dialogue **Phaedrus** is an allegory to describe this upward struggle of the soul.

Let us liken the soul to a thing of composite nature, a chariot with two winged horses and a charioteer. In the gods horses and charioteer are all noble and of noble origin. In us the master has to drive a pair of horses, one of whom is a fine horse of noble character and birth, the other is the reverse. So that in our case the management is difficult and harassing.⁴⁵

The charioteer represents reason; the black horse is the symbol of the sensual or concupiscent element of human nature. The white horse represents the rational impulse. B. Jowett comments that Plato, for the first time perhaps in the history of philosophy, has represented to us the three fold division of psychology. The immortal steed always sides with reason. But both are dragged out of their course by the furious impulses of desire. 46

..Where gods chariots obedient to the rein, move easily in even balance, but it goes hard with the rest: for the horse who has evil in him labours heavily and drags down towards the earth any charioteer who has not thoroughly broken in.⁴⁷

Socrates who had practiced philosophy all his life has no reason to be scared of death.

'So this journey which is now ordained for me carries a happy prospect for any other man who believes that his mind has been prepared by purification.'48

Therefore Socrates asks his friends to offer a cock to Asclepius at his death. Asclepius who is the god of healing is offered scarifies for healing man of sickness. In death, Socrates seems to believe that he would be healed of the ills of life.

'Crito, we ought to offer a cock to Aeslepius'. 49 Are his famous last words.

This is **the method for us to be shorn of all fear of death.** When our spiritual sight is opened, we turn from all the non essentials. Our eye becomes single; and through this singleness of vision we are able to perceive the Divine. This is the final goal of all philosophy and all the religions of the world.

Discussion on the actual concept of the divine is outside the scope of this paper though I well understand the relevance and importance of it. The purpose of the study was to analyze the unity amidst the diversity while giving true recognition to the individuality of the respective philosophies. The attempt was to analyze in detail some of the general and basic ideas found in the philosophic ideas of Plato that are also found in the Vedic Philosophy of India. As mentioned earlier it should be clearly understood that I have made no attempt to even signify an influence of one philosophy on the other. The concentration has been on Plato and how his philosophic ideas came to provide mankind with basic values that are often associated with religion. On this particular occasion, a great philosophy cum religion of India.

We can conclude that Plato through his ideas of the good etc. had provided mankind with

- (a) A moral and a perfect Ideal which was the permanent as well as the active principle in the universe. An absolute reality, which they could look up to.
- (b) A way of life
- (c) An aim in life
- (d) The hope of becoming the best or the divine himself.

The most important point is that

(e) all this depended on the individual.

The responsibility was the individual's own.

An essential fact that has to be understood and appreciated is all philosophies like all religions are conceived and brought up in different culture. Hence the difference. But the common entities that they share at times are startling. As for example the notion that man is the maker of what he experiences. The path to ethical perfection is also the path to wisdom and truth. But the salvation of man is in the individual

in the hands of the single human being. And its' central focus the person's mind and his behavior as a result of its condition. The quest for the Good being synonymous with the quest for truth as well.

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