Plato, by Ptolemais of Cyrene

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This piece was selected for this editorial feature solely by Editors-in-Chief, Celena McCabe and Abhishek Manhas. Without Son's vision, dedication, and leadership, the revival and success of the journal would not have been possible. Both in his philosophical pursuits and in his personal character, Son exemplifies excellence. He will be deeply missed, and we are proud to honor and represent his work.

I mounted the steps leading up to the Academy as the evening was falling, having it in mind to seek an audience with Plato, the scholarch, who was said by some to have taken ill the day before. On my way to the door, I was greeted by the sight of a large crowd of youths, unusual indeed for the lateness of the hour, who was taking temporary refuge in the courtyard, some looking anxious to distract each other with minute conversations, others pacing about uncomfortably. Eventually, noticing the direction towards which I was heading, one of them approached me and, pointing at a man of great stature who was standing solemnly beside the door to the Academy, informed me that Speusippus, son of Eurymedon, had been refusing them entry on account of his uncle's request for silence, but had not elaborated on the state of the latter's health, which they had journeyed there most keenly to find out. I realized then that I might have arrived too late. As I was debating with myself about whether to make my approach anyway in light of the long and arduous journey that I had undertaken, however, another youth, this time coming from within the Academy, greeted Speusippus and whispered something into his ear as the latter's eyes, alert suddenly by what was told, travelled indiscriminately across the low murmurs of the crowd and the fragrances in the air until they landed finally on the flute that I was carrying with me for the purpose of my visit. Speusippus headed in my direction with a stern but curious look on his face.

SPEUSIPPUS — Are you the slave from Thrace?

PTOLEMAIS — I beg you to repeat.

SPEUSIPPUS — I asked if you were the Thracian slave from Demosthenes' household who was supposed to be coming this evening to perform for the gathering, but I see now that the ears of you musicians, too ready to be moved by the gods, are not especially receptive to the speech of us mortals. Hasten inside—they are expecting you.

Having said this, Speusippus signaled for the geese standing guard to clear the way as I followed the youth inside, passing by the gymnasium and the peristyle, until we both reached the garden where stood the shrine of the Muses. Amid the rising breezes of the fast approaching night, two figures sat beside the fountain in the center of the garden, the younger of whom was holding an oil lamp whose motions he seemed to be examining with great interest, while the older man was hunching forward, eyes fixed to the ground, hands resting firmly on his cane. The youth who was accompanying me begged that I continue on my own, as he had to go back and fetch wine for the gathering. Thus, guided by the light of the dimly lit lamp and the scent of iris along the path which were carrying me towards the fountain, I ventured to introduce myself to the shared silence in which they sat. Noticing me nearing, the younger man stood up and introduced himself as Pyrrho of Elis, while the older man remained quiet, eyes closed, brows furrowed. Pyrrho told me that the man, who was none other than Plato, had been keeping to himself, rarely acknowledging anyone else except for the occasional requests for wine and companions ever since he had suddenly taken ill, delirious with fever, the night before while staying at his brother's residence in Collytus. Pyrrho further told me that the morning after Plato had woken *up* from that long night, it was alleged that he got out of bed with his strength and clarity of mind given back to him as if nothing had happened, and yet from the heaviness with which he carried himself and the sudden refusal to resume his usual business at the Academy, it was evident that something had changed.

Pyrrho then allowed himself to pause, as if expecting a response, and his inquisitive glance further deepened the state of bewilderment in which I had already found myself in. Not knowing what to say, I did what I thought best able to do in that situation. I raised my flute and played the melody which I had composed not long ago, incidentally the very music which I had come to Athens seeking to play in Plato's presence, for reasons that would become clear later on. As I was playing my piece,

I noticed the old man's gaze gradually lifting off the ground. With his eyes still closed and brows still furrowed, I felt his weary attention placed upon the world to which the three of us were increasingly bound, one instant after the next—the world which I was meticulously building, brick by brick, by the air that was flowing ever intensely through my flute. Suddenly he opened his eyes; and in place of the softness that I was expecting from the gaze of someone tamed by the sensitive motions of music, he looked as if his soul had just been kidnapped by Hades.

PLATO — By the gods, who taught you to play music like that?

PTOLEMAIS — Nobody that you might be acquainted with, Plato.

PLATO — Why, of that I am rather certain. For the long duration of a life has not given the pleasure of knowing a man who walks with an uneven cadence, who has it in mind to do one thing and ends up doing another, who appears to make noises which do not amount to words—and yet it seems to me that if one were to become an instructor in the art that you have just demonstrated to us, this is what one would have to become, and more.

PYRRHO — It was not so bad, Plato.

PLATO — I envy youths like you, Pyrrho, whose inexperience with higher beauty allows you to take pleasure in such unmoderated displays of the passions, and whose untamed curiosity for the novel and the exciting overwhelms your desire to root yourself in the path of nature and the pursuit of truth, deceiving you into thinking that it is possible for one to be content while abandoning oneself to the sensuousness of the world flow. Once you get to my age, Pyrrho—mark my words well—you will, given regular training in wrestling and in music, find yourself transported ever further on the one hand by the grace and restraint of an expression which seeks, as precisely as possible, to assimilate itself into nature by obeying her ways, and revolted on the

other hand by one which, inattentive to the integrity by which she rules over us, seeks in vain to assert itself outside of her laws.

PTOLEMAIS — I am but a simple musician, Plato, who is not wise enough to grasp that which you seem to be asserting so eloquently. Did you not find my piece to your liking?

PLATO — It is not about my liking, flute bearer, nor even is it about the pleasure that it may give. For as we have seen with Pyrrho here, that someone more youthful in years, more ready to throw themselves to the passions, may find pleasure in novel rhythms and be drawn to strange melodies, and this speaks but of the inexperience on the listener's part and their lack of intimacy as regards the way nature herself moves. A better question, if I may put it to you, would be about that which you intend by the letting go of such a melody despite the fact that, unable to coalesce at the last moment with the whole of nature, it would eventually disperse into the wind and be carried by the latter into oblivion. And all this, I put to you, having been told by Demosthenes that you were an extraordinary musician who once performed with Agathon, putting to motion his wondrous poems across Athens.

PTOLEMAIS — I fear that I am not the musician of whom you speak, Plato. For I come rather from Cyrene, on the other side of the sea, and the music that I played was made in the image of Cyrenians and of our way of walking and talking, which, easygoing, adventurous, and true to our liking for festivities and the simpler pleasures of the moment, might have found your Athenian ears, which are made rather for politics and fine speeches, in disagreement.

At this point Plato's eyes lit up, his frown replaced by an expression of joy.

PLATO — So it is true, the gods be good, that you have come, and that I may learn from you.

PTOLEMAIS — What do you mean, Plato?

PYRRHO — May we first be acquainted with your name, fair flute bearer of Cyrene?

PTOLEMAIS — I am Ptolemais, daughter of Poseidonius.

PLATO — This is what I mean, dear Ptolemais. One evening—it must have been many days ago—while I was enjoying the company of solitude and the taste of fresh goat cheese by the steps of the Academy, it occurred to me with the suddenness with which summer ends that the life to which I have dedicated myself, the life of the vessel, has, for a long time now, been devoid of motion. And I mean that, when you will have lived for as long as I have lived, and will have professed the many arts and sciences that I do for as long as I have been doing, there comes a point, and you will not have noticed it, where conversations with one's peers and the youths under one's care, instructive as they may be to them, stop being instructive to oneself, whether that be due to the steadfastness with which one has planted one's feet in the earth, or the numbness and apathy that slowly cultivate within one, despite oneself, from the repetitive nature of the questions and problems that one encounters in life that, once exciting and captivating in youth, lose their force from those countless times which one has put oneself laboriously to solving, and from which one has emerged, in the end, without an answer.

This is how I realized that the vessel that I am has not been any closer to the promised shore than it was a great many years ago; but everyone knows that the shore, from which we came in birth and to which we will return in death, can only be reached in this life by means of philosophy and by the silence and solace that it provides. This realization had tormented me with great anguish, Ptolemais, until it happened that yesterday, as the height of my nostalgia became too much to bear and as its heat hitherto suppressed ruptured and encompassed my body, I came down with an illness so beautiful that I thought myself ready to let go, that I may once again be one with nature. But as I was delirious and barely conscious in fever, in my waking dream that

voice from another time came back to me, the voice of my teacher, Socrates, who told me that all this would pass, and that in the morning when I woke, I were to pick myself up one last time, despite the great suffering in which I would find myself, and to dignify when the moment would arrive the presence of a great teacher, who would come to inspire within me once again the joy of wisdom. And this teacher, I believe, is none other than you, noble Ptolemais from Cyrene, who will, with your strange rhythms and turns of mind and before the final hour, show this dying man a glimpse of the truth which he has been pursuing.

PTOLEMAIS — All this is very fascinating, Plato, but I am not certain to possess the kind of wisdom of which you speak. Indeed, it is in search of wisdom that I have journeyed—initially across the treacherous sea that stands between Cyrene and Delphi, where I was told that Appollo would keep his silence against me, and then from Delphi to Athens in the company of a travelling merchant—to seek an audience with you and to consult you on the meaning of the piece of music which I had composed. You see, I did not tell you the whole truth when I said that the strangeness of my music was due to the differences in worldly practices between the Cyrenians and the Athenians, although this was in practice at least partially the truth.

Indeed, there was also an aspect that is, to my mind, otherworldly, that aspect in which the melody originated. I speak here of something with which all musicians are acquainted, something akin to a waking dream—to a nest, if you will, where all great melodies, incubated in the silence that stands between the barrenness of reality and the wonderful worlds of our imagination, are thus released. The thing with this melody that I am bringing you today, however, is the intensity of the silence which surrounded its conception, and which has troubled me since.

PLATO — What do you mean by silence, Ptolemais? Do you mean the absence of sound?

PTOLEMAIS — Not at all; for the coming to know of such a silence would be an impossibility, unless the wheels of the world were to halt and rebegin. Rather, what I mean is this. Usually for us musicians, it is the case that, starting with something such as a proposed theme, an idea in our head, or indeed a certain way that we feel, compelled by the divine quality of the moment, we seize upon these beginnings and animate their lives in time and space as if we were completely in control, completely responsible for that which we were creating. It may be said, in these instances, that we are engaging in the creation of something from something. On the other hand, it is reported to have happened to some—and, as I believe, was what happened to me in the deliberation which gave rise to this piece—that every once in a while, a musician who either by chance or by training was able to find, if only for a brief and ecstatic moment, a refuge in the inner silence of their soul that pits itself impossibly against the ever flowing currents of the world, would also be able to find there the sweetest and purest music of all; and if they have the intention and talent to put this inexplicable motion to sound, then perhaps we can say of them that they have created something out of nothing.

The difficulty for such a musician, however, as I see it, and as I have come to you for help, you whose intimacy with the gods are alleged to rival that of the Pythia of Delphi, is this. In the execution of a piece of art which does not have a beginning, the musician is themselves left in the dark as regards the beauty of their creation. Unlike a beautiful melody about spring that is to be judged against its semblables, and a melody composed in honor of Dionysus that is to earn its merit by how close it comes to capturing his legend and spirit, one which lacks a beginning lacks a way to be judged. There is, as you well know, little difference in appearance between the madness that creates and the madness that destroys, one that is given to us by the gods and the other that moves us away from them, and a musician who is wanting in courage, uncertain of

themselves and of the way of truth, is left in suspension from possibilities to possibilities, unable to tell if their creation is a product of divine inspiration or of imbalances in the head; and thus they seek in vain to find confirmation in the judgment of the crowd, who, unacquainted with the secret and divine silence of their soul, cannot but criticize them for pointlessness, unconventionality, or, in extreme cases, for the danger that they pose to the moral and sentimental education of the youths.

PLATO — Indeed, Ptolemais, I will not lie to you in saying that these were not thoughts that I had while listening to your piece. On the other hand, I find in your incredibly inspired speech something which resembles the demise of Socrates, which, though for the most part was about the charge of corrupting the youths, was also due to his tendency to tell people about the voice that he, and he alone, could hear, offending others by, among other things, the injustice in the idea of a deity that is not accessible to all. But do go on, and tell us more about your inquietude.

PTOLEMAIS — Let me confess to you then, Plato, that I am no different from such a musician who could not rely on their own judgment, but who would feel the need to share their creation with the world in order to find there affirmation for the beauty of their work. I roamed from Euesperides to Apollonia, and from there to Barce, and everywhere in Cyrene where I would go and play my music, both in the streets and in private residences, people would think me insane. Musicians with whom I had played, and with whom for the most part I shared a common way of life, would try to persuade me to abandon the idea. And so for a while I was afflicted with this uneasiness of being able so distinctly to feel the beauty of something that, at the same time, was rejected by others. This is no small torment for musicians, Plato, for indeed our ability to create and willingness to rejoice in the fruit of our imagination are both due to the trustworthiness of the standards that we have for ourselves.

PLATO — I applaud you for your courage, Ptolemais, though I admit to being unable to understand your pain, since unlike you, I have not sufficiently familiarized myself with the elevated way the Muses speak—that which you have just emulated with talent befitting Orpheus. I see now, however, that we are perfectly suited to teach each other; for it is also this secret and singular experience with which you are acquainted whose nature I ache to know more about, having taken refuge all my life in the certainty of an eternal uniformness of the universe, and by contrast it is precisely this certainty that you seem to me to be seeking.

PTOLEMAIS — Indeed.

PLATO — Let us begin with something you said, namely that the differences in our worldly ways of life are, if not wholly, then at least partially responsible for whether we would consider something strange. Or is this not what you said?

PTOLEMAIS — That is what I said, Plato.

PLATO — And this goes not only for strangeness, but also for beauty and ugliness?

PTOLEMAIS — Indeed.

PLATO — Does all this imply, then, that when we say of something that it is beautiful, or ugly, or strange, or captivating, we are not saying anything about the thing itself, but rather about us, and our ways of living?

PTOLEMAIS — It does not imply that, no.

PLATO — So in these cases, we are saying something about the thing itself?

PTOLEMAIS — That appears more sensible to my mind.

PLATO — But surely something cannot be both strange and not strange at the same time.

PTOLEMAIS — It cannot.

PLATO — How do you explain, then, dear Ptolemais, that something such as your flute can be beautiful to one and not beautiful to another, and your music strange to one and not strange to another, when these differences are to be found within the thing itself, as opposed to outside of it, for example, in the way in which we interact with it?

PTOLEMAIS — Well, Plato, if a beautiful flute and an ugly flute are two distinct things, then it seems that words are indeed playing tricks on our mind, when we find ourselves saying things such as there being a single flute which appears to one to be beautiful and to another ugly.

PLATO — What do you mean?

PTOLEMAIS — I mean, Plato, that we simply cannot consider these vastly different experiences to be of the same thing. The feeling one has when confronted with beauty can hardly be mistaken with that with which we greet ugliness.

PLATO — So when two people, casting their eyes in the same direction, one saying of what they see that it is beautiful, and another saying of what they see that it is not, they are, according to you, talking about two different things altogether?

PTOLEMAIS — It appears so, Plato. But it is important nonetheless to state that this is the case only when both of them are sincere in what they are saying, that is, when each believes what they are saying to be true and can explain to themselves why they believe it.

PLATO — My dear Ptolemais, what a wonderful world in which your elevated soul dwells. A world that, it seems to me, would have no war, no conflict, no disagreement of any kind, where

everyone lives in harmony. It would also be a world where no moral or sentimental progress is possible, for no one would deign to admit to others that they are wrong. But these do not strike me to be features of our world, in any case.

PTOLEMAIS — Not necessarily so, Plato. What I have just said does not render impossible disagreement. Seeing something a certain way, one is not thereby prevented from seeing something else in another way; and it is ultimately in the claim that this something should be identical to that something else that lies disagreement. My disagreement with you about whether, for example, the flute is beautiful or ugly, is in a stricter sense a disagreement about whether the beautiful flute that I see is the ugly flute that you see, given that I can be made to understand the latter. So long as both of us have a way to explain to ourselves how our respective claim is true, there is always the possibility that, in the end, given willingness, the two of us may settle our disagreement by acknowledging the being of both a certain beautiful flute and a certain ugly flute. And so, I say, "I see now why you might think that it is ugly," without the success of this effort to understand undermining my conviction in the truth of my original saying.

PLATO — Very eloquently put. But indulge me in being clearer about why you speak of being.

PTOLEMAIS — I mean simply that to say that the flute is beautiful is to say that there is a beautiful flute, and to say that the flute is ugly is to say that there is an ugly flute.

PLATO — Well then, what if the disagreement is not over whether there is a beautiful flute or an ugly flute, or whether there is a black flute or a grey flute, but is rather over whether there is a flute?

PTOLEMAIS — Why would anyone disagree about that, Plato? Is it not plain for all to see?

PLATO — I am not so certain. Once when I went fishing in Kalaureia, I was careless and lost both of my sandals to the depth of the sea. Not wanting to take the journey back to Athens barefoot, I visited the agora on the island looking for footwear, and this is when I was introduced to the horrendous local display of handicraft. There was indeed nothing among what the local artisan had made and put up for sale that I would call sandals. The position of the straps, the thickness of the leather, none of the usual qualities of sandals was present. Would you not say that in such a case, there is disagreement over whether there are sandals?

PTOLEMAIS — I see now what you mean. In that case, yes, there is a disagreement over whether there are sandals.

PLATO — Furthermore, disagreement over whether there are sandals seems to be different altogether from disagreement over whether there are beautiful sandals?

PTOLEMAIS — Enlighten me.

PLATO — What I mean is this. When I disagree with someone else about whether there is some specific pair of sandals in a specific place, the disagreement seems to be about the way that we use the name, "sandals," and this seems to proceed according to plainly communicable principles. Thus, I can communicate not only to myself that this is or is not a pair of sandals, but also to others. Eventually, it is the latter sort of communication that is decisive, since the way that everything which we use the name "sandals" for all have something in common is because they all share in one thing, and this is the form of sandals. So, there is a fact of the matter about whether there is a pair of sandals. On the other hand, when I disagree with someone else about whether there is some specific pair of beautiful sandals in a specific place, provided that

sandalhood is not in question, then the disagreement is chiefly over whether one can communicate to oneself why the pair is beautiful.

PTOLEMAIS — Yes, there seems indeed to be such a difference.

PLATO — Back to our original question. Which kind of disagreement, then, do you consider to be due to differences in ways of living? Would not the one more in touch with the rules of naming and the way in which the many comes together into one in the activity of naming be more detached from differences in ways of living, whereas the one whose explanation is more personal and lends itself less readily to universals would be less so?

PTOLEMAIS — I do not see that following immediately from what you have just said. For though it is the case that there are differences in judgment that are based on the rules according to which we interact with the world while there are others that are not, there are surely also things we say of beautiful things which are far from arbitrary or dependent on how we are taught to live and to think, but seem to be common to all humans insofar as they are humans, as these judgments are more rooted, I believe, in something which is altogether different from the roots by which we cling to the world. And I do not mean, note well, that it is expected that people agree on a certain set of things as beautiful, for again, beauty does play a role in the identification of these things rather than being clothed onto them as an afterthought. What I mean is that, despite all these wonderful differences between you and me, beauty affects and transports us in the very same manner, akin to the way that, being given squares of different lengths and widths and asked to draw within each square a circle such that the squares would coincide with the circles at exactly four points, we would, though starting from vastly different squares and arriving at vastly different circles, carry out the very same rule. This is what it means for beauty to be both universal and personal. In other words, beauty is universal despite our finding different things to

be beautiful, because “beauty,” insofar as it is found to be such in the person who speaks, is a rule of speech that is not any different from “sandals.”

PLATO — Quite so.

PYRRHO — But what are these roots of which you speak, Ptolemais, and why is that in which beauty is rooted altogether unique and different from the rest?

PTOLEMAIS — It is so because I feel it to be so, Pyrrho! I must once again expose myself as nothing but a simple musician, unfamiliar with the way in which words move. My sand goes only as far as my eyes can see and my art is to walk along the shore and lose myself in the propping up of figures and edifices, until the water would come, and it always comes, to wash everything back to nothingness. Beauty is fair but fickle, and we are all afflicted with it insofar as we draw breath, as we dine and drink and sleep and love. In any case, I suspect that the answer to your question about beauty must do, indeed, with that other one about silence and the singular nature of creative expression, which I do not believe we are in a position to solve.

As regards ordinary things, let me tell you about a comforting dream that would come to me every now and then, usually unannounced, and seldom when I was asleep. In this dream, this fountain and its water, that shrine, the flame that you are holding, the shade of the evening and the scents in the air, these are all identified and understood by names, occasioned by specific rules. And since names are understood through each other, a fact plain to everyone who used to be a child and who is still learning new names for things every day due to their knowledge of other names, things are in like manner and in consequence also understood through each other. Now, in dialogues with others and with ourselves in which we seek to learn more about things around us, it is evident that whatever we can learn and understand about that which we have

designated by these names—which need not be fixed—are framed by these names and their rules. As is also the case, our activity of learning about the world and of our place within it is not done in one fishing net [amphiblestron] of names and ideas, but indeed of many. Thus, there is one fishing net, that which the musician casts before him, in which we speak of the world as an endless melody, and there is another, that of the poet, in which the world is a stage, and there is yet another, that of the philosopher, in which the world lies waiting for the sun. And when questions arise such as "but in the end, what is?," or "which net is in the end most fitting for us to cast over the truth?," we seem almost compelled to laugh at its absurdity. For the answer is simply that everything is; some are in this way, and others are in that way, but no single way of being is more fundamental or more real than others.

Taking notes of these ways of being, we can say that there is a togetherness in the being of certain things; and taking note of this coherence between them, we can indeed speak no longer of a single environment in which things flourish—of a single cosmos—but must rather abandon ourselves to the multiplicity of worlds, containing equally real beings, with equally just claims to the truth. These worlds, dear Pyrrho, are what I referred to earlier as roots; for it is truly by the necessity of explaining our experiences to ourselves that we have come to create them and to ensure their coherence, such that, conversely, it is by making worlds [cosmos] and inventing these stories [historia] that we may get to know our experiences of the truth [aletheia, "reality"] and to root ourselves, like a young tree reaching down underneath the earth which nourishes it to find there the source that will quench its thirst, steadfastly in the truth.

PLATO — How marvelous you have spoken, Ptolemais, and how divinely inspired your dream is, that one can hardly believe that you have not up to now been acquainted in the way of philosophy! But talk to me—for your dream captivates me so and I wish not to stand content in

its beautiful mist, but to greet it in the intimacy of clarity—and tell me about beginnings. How does the dream begin?

PTOLEMAIS — You have asked the hardest question, Plato, for often when one falls asleep, one is not able to distinguish between the last moment of waking life and the first moment of the dream. The case is infinitely more complicated with a waking dream. I fear that I can only tell you one way in which the dream begins, and as regards the other way, the only thing I can do is to suggest it. Does this sound good to you, and which one do you wish to discuss first?

PLATO — Let us start with that one which is easier to see.

PTOLEMAIS — Very well. The beginning which I now relate will be that of things. According to the way in which things begin, my dream has its beginning in the following principle: that what is, is, if and only if it is regarded as an individual in our experience. Now all things which have ever been and which we have wanted to learn more about, it seems to me, are things which have first appeared in our experience. Or is this not so?

PLATO — The reasons for believing this are good; and yet as a first principle of a story, it does worry me somewhat, dear Ptolemais.

Does it mean then that the activity of making things out to be individuals in our experience is not only necessary for the being of these things, that is, without this activity there would not be things, but it is also sufficient for their being, that is, this activity alone guarantees their being?

PTOLEMAIS — Quite so.

PLATO — But surely what is must also have being before it is individuated, for otherwise how do we individuate it, and it specifically, if it only comes into being after our activity?

PTOLEMAIS — Those seem to be two different worries, Plato, and both irrelevant in their own way to the principle of which I spoke. The fact that something is individuated as you experience it at a certain time and place does not mean that it did not have being prior to this. Indeed, there must be a variety of things flying around in the air that you and I are breathing in right now that we do not yet possess the tool to individuate, and yet, when the time comes when our children, skilled and learned, are better able to study such airborne beings, they will be able to say of us now, "Plato, Ptolemais, and Pyrrho, in the garden of the Muses, without them knowing it, were inhaling fire dust." But what is fire dust, Plato?

PLATO — I am ashamed not to have heard of it before.

PTOLEMAIS — And yet our children will have heard of it; and they will hear of it precisely because they are better able to explain to themselves their experiences, and there will be to them a world full of fire dust that moves Magnesian stones and pulls things down to the ground. But not yet to us. In this sense, fire dust does not exist until we have a theoretical need for it to explain something. Then, and only then, is it said to have being. Your second worry, I sense, is not about being, but rather about the nature of the understanding. For you are asking if there is a way to say that the product of our activity of individuation is adequate to that which we seek to individuate, and you have predicted that the answer is no: that there is no such way, since the thing that we seek to individuate did not yet have presence in our understanding prior to the labor that we would eventually undertake. And all this is well and good, Plato, and resembles the axioms in mathematics and the definitions in philosophy, which are mere stipulations that find their truth not in their correspondence to something else, but in the coherence of the whole to which they collectively give birth.

PLATO — But what are we to say then about the activity of individuation itself? Does this activity have being? And if it does have being, does it have being before, during, or after we individuate it, that is, individuate this activity of individuation?

PTOLEMAIS — Philosophers of great age and experience like you have a way with words, Plato, and words are like wings that take you up to the abode of the gods, where temporarily you sit in their eternal banquet halls and drink wines that have aged since the beginning of the world. But once again, you see that words also transport you far away from the moment, whereas the moment is indeed the mark of the world flux. It is across moments, is it not, that there is motion?

PLATO — Certainly.

PTOLEMAIS — And learning is a kind of motion, that is, from ignorance to knowledge?

PLATO — That is agreeable.

PTOLEMAIS — And forgetting is a kind of motion from knowledge to ignorance?

PLATO — By Zeus, it is so.

PTOLEMAIS — And individuation is a kind of motion from nothing to something?

PLATO — Quite right.

PTOLEMAIS — Then it appears, Plato, that words are playing tricks on you again, for to say that the individuation needs individuating for it to have being is akin to saying that the motion of the chariot needs moving for the chariot to move. But the motion of the chariot does not need moving, Plato—the chariot does. And when the chariot needs moving and is moved, it is in motion, and whether this motion is then moved, whatever changes that may make to the original

motion, does not add anything more to the mere fact of its original motion, and the latter is all that is needed to say that it moves.

PLATO — Interesting argument, Ptolemais, but tell me: would you give the same defense for the being of humans? For it is one thing that individuation is already a kind of individuating and thus has being concurrent to and by virtue of individuating, but is the being of humans not supposed to be a precondition for individuating and thus must indubitably have being before individuation?

PYRRHO — Can I attempt this question?

PLATO — Yes, Pyrrho! Spring forth with your wisdom.

PYRRHO — I imagine that Ptolemais would say the following: that the being of humans are not strictly speaking a temporally anterior event to the being of the activity of individuation, but can simply also be concurrent to it. For the major difference between the difficulty with the being of individuation and that with the being of humans is that the latter is diverse and seems to need the kind of distinctions which can only be provided by individuation, which makes it even more difficult to hold that humans do not have being prior to the thinking activity in which they engage. To this, we can simply state, in plain Platonic fashion, I believe, that the various humans are but aspects of the one, human, whose universal consciousness, there is no problem to say, is concurrent with the activity of individuation.

PLATO — That is a possible response, Pyrrho, and you are correct to note that I would probably respond in such a manner. However, I do not imagine this to be Ptolemais' response, since, if we recall well, she wishes to say that differences in the circumstance-specific cultivation of ourselves as individuals, rooted in certain ways of living and certain surroundings, play a role in

potential differences in our individuating of things. In any case, I had my mind towards another difficulty which did not necessarily have to do with the diverse being of humans, but with the necessity that there be humans at all. If worlds are created in the understanding of the human, and in worlds dwell things, then can things not just dwell in worlds without any involvement from the human? Are world-accounts not already enough for the being of things, or do we really need, in addition to these, someone who tell these accounts?

PTOLEMAIS — I applaud your courage, Pyrrho, but fear that in this Plato is right. For actually this is not hard to see, that different people from different lands have radically different ways of approaching the same "something," which we leave ineffable before the individuation act, and admit to be varied after the individuation act. On the other hand, Plato, befitting your legends, you were quite sensitive to the idea of the rootedness of culture, or what is the same thing, of cultivation, after only hearing it once. Indeed, the response that I will give is in that direction: in harkening back to my point about the multiplicity of worlds, I will say that different people from different cultures are inhabitants of different sets of worlds; they root themselves, in other words, in certain ways of being-among-things but not others, and in this fact resides the meaning of their difference. For someone who traverses a certain set of worlds, equipped with certain ways of living which are not acting in separation but are fused together harmoniously in practice, will arrive at different ways of individuating than someone else. So, in a sense, the difference between the various facets of being in humans only has being, itself, after the first world has been born.

On the other hand, as is the case with beauty, which we have discussed, a limited number of things are universal to all humans insofar as they are humans, and this is, namely, our shared ability to recognize the faces of the good, the beautiful, and the true, such that, despite us opting in the end to think of different things as good, as beautiful, and as true, the feeling that they give

us does not vary across people. When we think of something as beautiful, for example, there is a certain elevated feeling that one gets in contemplating the beautiful thing, a certain respect that one has for its dignity, and so on. Now this is, no doubt, an all too general response to give, especially when it concerns feelings, which vary considerably between us, but it is also clear that these feelings do not come about arbitrarily but are a feature of the uniqueness of these qualities as torches which guide us in our journey towards the truth [aletheia].

As regards the question of whether the being of humans is strictly necessary for the being of things, or if stories are already enough without the need for people to tell them, I think the focus on storytellers in this specific instance is impressing more force upon us than it turns out to have and preventing us from seeing the simple response. Indeed, it is rather the story hearers which we must focus on. Stories are conceived due to the necessity of explaining a certain experience to someone qua hearer, and usually done by themselves qua teller. Thought of this way, and minding the usual metaphor of storytelling, though we can say that the teller is not strictly necessary for the being of a story, it is significantly more doubtful if there can be said to be any story at all without the hearer. For to explain something is not merely to describe. The explanatory account, to be considered as such, must succeed in inspiring the true notion in the mind of the hearer.

PLATO — Marvelous answers, Ptolemais. And what, finally, do we say of the truth? I am curious to know this, because I have a nagging suspicion that it is eventually here that we will find the answer to our original question about silence, which has since taken us far, far away on its wings, and we must now find our way back.

PTOLEMAIS — What do we say of aletheia, Plato? And what can we say of it? Well, for one, perhaps the tension that you wish to raise in asking this question is between these two ideas: that

on the one hand, aletheia seems to be said to be beyond all worlds, since it is, in the dream which I have intimated, that which is the original inspiration and beginning of our storytelling activity. In a sense, we may even understand this to be the only being that is, since it has being absolutely and by necessity, untethered to human activity. On the other hand, aletheia is, within my story, itself a term of the story, and it is by virtue of this story that one might explain aletheia to oneself, and by virtue of this story that it has being. But these, as you may have noticed, look to be two radically different ways in which something can be said to have being.

I can try to give you the answer, Plato, but I am certain that it will not satisfy you, nor does the answer that I am about to give you satisfy myself. My answer is this. Aletheia is always there, implied by all instances of individuation. By this I mean that, whenever we individuate in our experience a bird, we get, in effect, two things: the bird, and aletheia in the background. Thought of in this way, it looks to be improbable that aletheia should have a sense, and that it should be readily understandable to us, since even if we, hypothetically, were to individuate non-aletheia, we would also get aletheia, and this would be absurd. But this hypothesis is not something with which we need to concern ourselves, for it is, to begin with, an impossibility. For there is nothing which we can say about non-aletheia that may be true, as this very truth would make the idea, indeed, a part of aletheia.

PLATO — Very good. You are speaking of an idea which used to be given voice to by Parmenides, and which I find sensible.

PTOLEMAIS — And so since aletheia is at the same that which is the All and that which must be accorded a sense, we must treat it as a special case: not as an exception to the individuation criterion, but as something which must be understood to have more being than the word is able to give it. This, Plato, I think, is only fitting, given that it is both the birth and the life of our

individuating activity. I think now is the right moment to talk to you about the second kind of beginning, one which does not begin with things, but with aletheia itself. For though aletheia is the All, to us, it is more appropriately regarded as nothingness, since it is that about which we can say nothing, and so we must keep silent. And yet it always troubles me greatly, Plato, that this whole elaborate dream should turn out to be just another illusion if this one specific point in the story does not hold: that it is possible, in the first place, to get something from nothing: to pit ourselves against the nothingness that is the world in the first moment and to suddenly get trees, and marketplaces, and fishermen, and the sea, and suddenly to hear the beating of its waves, to feel the resistance of its wind and to recognize the glimmering of the sun afar. How do we get all this, Plato? I fear that this kind of beginning does not make itself known merely as a fairy tale, but rather as an absolute necessity if my dream is to prove true. And so it is to this one encounter with the divine in the singular expression of music that I have clung to like a newborn the umbilical cord that is to separate it from its source, fearing that she will lose it forever.

PLATO — Once again, you have spoken with the cadence of Orpheus and the wisdom of Socrates. I am ashamed, dear Ptolemais, that I do not have the wisdom to cure your terrible malady, but I can give you some counsels as to the way of the world, that tomorrow you may return to the road, as you always do, and let yourself be one with its sensuous flux once again as your unsettled soul resumes its voyage. I will say, first, that there is indeed something in this act of creation with which musicians are well acquainted that resembles the inventive act of contemplation, since both take hold of the All and, by giving something truly novel to it, seek with the most sublime pretension to renew it. You are also right in saying that this resembles a motion from nothing to something. But here is what I will say, Ptolemais, and what the wisdom of my age allows me to confirm to be true: that the world itself has a soul, indeed a very old soul,

> older, perhaps, than the first human. And this soul moves ever slowly, imperceptible to us humans, our entire lives being but mere instants compared to it, and once in a while the times change, and they always change because of an ecstatic expression—an expression that is conceived outside of the day proper, and indeed it must be outside of the day in order, eventually, to topple the certainty and arrogance with which we have built the day and announce a new age. And the ecstatic expression in this instance is, in my lifetime, unfailingly an expression of the strange, for indeed it is the strange that may truly challenge the day without being assimilated back into it. And so Ptolemais, I will say what no philosopher should say, and in the presence only of Pyrrho, who will not speak of this to anyone, and of you: embrace irrationality and strangeness; do not reject the discomfort of solitude that comes naturally with embracing them; and finally, ignore the confusions of the crowd. For you have taught us this and are right to do so: that the silence with which one comes to know the divine in this life is profoundly personal and ineffable, and one can only find justification for this within oneself. And you were also right to teach us that it is in silence that the knowledge of all things past comes back to us once again and soothes our nostalgia, if only ever as a reminder for the weary philosopher of the beauty of their striving, and as a temporary refuge where they may rest before taking to the road once more, journeying towards the truth.

I exchanged my gratitude for the advice. In grace was the day drawing to an end, and Plato excused himself, wishing to return to his residence in Collytus, seeking rest. Pyrrho invited me to dine with his family and to spend the night in the guest chamber before I departed Athens. In the early hours of the morning, the youth whom I had met at the Academy came to inform us that Plato had passed, and that he had passed in peace, without struggle or sign of regret that might betray the weariness of his old soul.

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