The Philosopher’s Quest and the Universal Mind

For all its devotion to dialectical precision and intellectual rigor, Plato’s philosophy was permeated with a kind of religious romanticism that affected both its ontological categories and its epistemological strategy. As in his discussion of Eros in the Symposium, Plato described the Ideas not so much as neutral objects of dispassionate rational apprehension but as transcendent essences that, when directly experienced by the pure philosopher, evoke intense emotional response and even mystical rapture. The philosopher is literally a “lover of wisdom” and approaches his intellectual task as a romantic quest of universal significance. For Plato, the ultimate reality is not only ethical and rational in nature, but also aesthetic. The Good, the True, and the Beautiful are effectively united in the supreme creative principle, at once commanding moral affirmation, intellectual allegiance, and aesthetic surrender. As the most accessible of the Forms, visible in part even to the physical eye, Beauty opens up human awareness to the existence of the other Forms, drawing the philosopher toward the beatific vision and knowledge of the True and the Good. Hence Plato suggested that the highest philosophical vision is possible only to one with the temperament of a lover. The philosopher must permit himself to be inwardly grasped by the most sublime form of Eros—that universal passion to restore a former unity, to overcome the separation from the divine and become one with it.

Plato described knowledge of the divine as being implicit in every soul, but forgotten. The soul, immortal, experiences direct and intimate contact with the eternal realities prior to birth, but the postnatal human condition of bodily imprisonment causes the soul to forget the true state of affairs. The goal of philosophy is to free the soul from this deluded condition in which it
is deceived by the finite imitation and veiling of the eternal. The philosopher’s task is to “recollect” the transcendent Ideas, to recover a direct knowledge of the true causes and sources of all things.

In the Republic, Plato illustrated the difference between authentic knowledge of reality and the illusion of appearances with a striking image. Human beings are like prisoners chained to the wall of a dark subterranean cave, where they can never turn around to see the light of a fire that is higher up and at a distance behind them. When objects outside the cave pass in front of the light, the prisoners mistake as real what are merely shadows created on the wall. Only one who is freed from his chains and leaves the cave to enter into the world beyond can glimpse true reality, though when first exposed to the light he may be so overwhelmed by its dazzling luminosity as to be unable to recognize its actual character. Yet once he habituates himself to the light and comes to recognize the true causes of things, he would hold precious the clarity of his new understanding. Recalling his former fate among the other prisoners, where all incessantly devote their minds to the understanding of mere illusions, he would, like Homer, prefer to endure anything in the real world rather than be forced to live in the underworld of shadows. Indeed, were he required to return to the cave and, unaccustomed to its darkness, contend with the others in their usual activity of “understanding” the shadows, he would likely only provoke their ridicule, and be unable to persuade them that what they were perceiving was only a dim reflection of reality.

For Plato, then, the great task facing the philosopher was to emerge from the cave of ephemeral shadows and bring his darkened mind back into the archetypal light, the true source of being. When speaking of this higher reality, Plato repeatedly linked light, truth, and goodness. In the Republic, he described the Idea of the Good as being to the intelligible realm what the Sun is to the visible realm, in the same way that the Sun allows objects of the visible world to grow and to be visible, so does the Good grant to all objects of reason their existence and their intelligibility. The philosopher’s attainment of virtue consists in his discovering that luminous knowledge which brings harmony between the human soul and the cosmic order of archetypes, an order governed and illuminated by the supreme Idea of the Good.
Yet to achieve liberation from the unenlightened state requires extraordinarily sustained intellectual and moral effort, so that the intellect—considered by Plato the highest part of the soul—can rise above the merely sensible and physical to reattain the lost knowledge of the Ideas. In some dialogues (such as the Republic), Plato emphasized the power of dialectic, or rigorously self-critical logic, to accomplish this aim, while elsewhere (such as in the Symposium and the Seventh Letter), he spoke more of a spontaneous recognition by the intuitive intellect—a visitation or moment of grace, as it were, after long discipline. In either case, the recollection of the Ideas is both the means and the goal of true knowledge.

And so Plato’s primary directive for philosophy focused on the strenuous development of the intellect and will, motivated by a ceaseless desire to reattain the lost union with the eternal. Through the labor of philosophical recollection, the human mind can bring to birth the divine wisdom that was its former possession. Education, therefore, is in the service of the soul and the divine, and not, as for the Sophists, of the secular and human alone. Moreover, education is a process through which truth is not introduced into the mind from without, but is “led out” from within. The mind then finds revealed within itself a knowledge both of its own nature and of the universe, a knowledge otherwise clouded by the obscurities of mundane existence. Under Plato’s guidance, the classical paideia assumed the deeper metaphysical and spiritual dimensions of the Academy, an institution as much monastery as university, holding forth the ideal of inner perfection realized through disciplined education.

Philosophical illumination, then, is a reawakening to and remembrance of forgotten knowledge, a reestablishment of the soul’s happy intimacy with the transcendent Ideas that inhere in all things. Here Plato asserted the redemptive aspect of philosophy, for it is the soul’s direct encounter with eternal Ideas that reveals to the soul its own eternity. In Plato’s account of Socrates’s last hours, it would appear that Socrates so highly valued this state of archetypal awareness transcending physical existence that he expressed equanimity, even eagerness, in anticipation of his death by hemlock. His entire life, he declared, had been directed toward this moment of embracing death, when the soul could at last return to the glory of its immortal state. Such passionately affirmed confidence in the reality of the eternal,
accompanied by the dialogues’ frequent references to myth and the sacred mysteries, suggests that Socrates and Plato themselves may have been intimately involved with the Greek mystery religions. In the Platonic vision, not only did the divine exist, as in traditional Greek public religion, but through the philosophical path the human soul could attain knowledge of its own divine immortality. Such a belief set Plato apart from the Homeric tradition, which had kept relatively strict limits between mortal humans and eternal gods, and placed him rather in the company of the mystery religions, in which initiation brought a revelation of immortality, and in the company of the Pythagoreans, for whom philosophy itself provided the highest path to mystical illumination and assimilation to the divine. Plato’s affinity with such groups was also reflected in his belief that the highest truths should not be communicated to all, lest they be abused. Hence he preferred not the straightforward treatise, but the more ambiguous dialogue, which could conceal—and, for the properly prepared, reveal—the deepest truths of his philosophy.

It could be said that the dualism of the characteristic Platonic values—the philosopher over the common man, the mind and soul over matter, the pre-existing ideal Forms over the phenomenal world, the absolute over the relative, the posthumous spiritual life over the present physical life—reflected Plato’s reaction to the political, moral, and intellectual crises of Athens during his lifetime. Whereas the fifth century at its height during the Periclean age had embraced the notion of mankind’s autonomous achievement of progress from primitive ignorance to civilized sophistication, Plato often tended toward the earlier Greek view, set forth by Hesiod, that mankind’s state had gradually degenerated from an earlier golden age. Plato saw not only contemporary man’s technical progress but also his moral decline from the simpler innocence of the men of old, “who were better than ourselves and dwelt nearer the gods.” Human achievement per se was relative and precarious. Only a society founded on divine principles and governed by divinely informed philosophers could save mankind from its destructive irrationality; and the best life was one directed away from mundane life and toward the world of the eternal Ideas. The changeless spiritual realm preceded and would forever be superior to whatever human beings tried to accomplish in the temporal world. The
spiritual alone held genuine truth and value.

Yet for all his seeming antiworldly pessimism, Plato’s outlook was marked by a certain cosmic optimism, for behind the obscure flux of events he posited the providential design of divine wisdom. And despite, or rather underlying, his flights of rhapsodic mysticism, Plato’s philosophy was fundamentally rationalist in character—though his rationalism rested on what he regarded as a universal and divine foundation rather than a merely human logicality. For at the heart of Plato’s conception of the world was the notion of a transcendent intelligence that rules and orders all things: divine Reason is “the king of heaven and earth.” The universe is ultimately ruled not by chance, materialistic mechanics, or blind necessity, but rather by “a wondrous regulating intelligence.”

Plato also recognized in the world’s composition an irreducible element of stubborn errancy and irrationality, which he referred to as anankē or Necessity. In the Platonic understanding, the irrational was associated with matter, with the sensible world, and with instinctual desire, while the rational was associated with mind, with the transcendent, and with spiritual desire. Anankē, the refractory purposelessness and random irrationality in the universe, resists full conformity to the creative Reason. It shadows the archetypal perfection, obscuring its pure expression in the concrete world. Reason overrules Necessity in the greatest part of the world so that it conforms to good purpose, but on some points Reason cannot overcome the errant cause—hence the existence of evil and disorder in the world. As a finite creation, the world is necessarily imperfect. Yet precisely because of its problematic nature, anankē serves as an impulsion for the philosopher’s ascent from the visible to the transcendent. Although wayward chance and irrational necessity are real and have their place, they exist within a greater structure informed and governed by the universal intelligence, Reason, which moves all things in accordance with an ultimate wisdom, the Idea of the Good.

Here Plato made fully articulate the principle that had been broached in earlier Greek philosophy, and that would play a central role in its subsequent development. Anaxagoras in Periclean Athens had proposed that Nous, or Mind, was the transcendent source of the cosmic order. Both Socrates and Plato were attracted by Anaxagoras’s first principle, with its
suggestion of a rational teleology as the basis of the universe’s existence. They were disappointed, however, as was Aristotle later, that Anaxagoras had not developed the principle further in his own philosophy (which was predominantly materialistic, like that of the atomists), and particularly that he had not made explicit the intentional goodness of the universal mind. But about a half-century before Anaxagoras, the poet-philosopher Xenophanes, having criticized the anthropomorphic deities of naive popular tradition, had posited instead a single supreme God, a universal divinity who influenced the world through pure intellection, and who was in essence identified with the world itself. Shortly afterward, another Presocratic philosopher, the solitary and enigmatic Heraclitus, introduced a similarly immanent conception of divine intelligence with his use of the term logos (originally meaning word, speech, or thought) to signify the rational principle governing the cosmos. All things are in constant flux, and yet are fundamentally related and ordered through the universal Logos, which is also manifest in the human being’s power of reason. Heraclitus associated the Logos with the element of fire, which, like the Heraclitean world as a whole, is born of strife, ever-consuming, and in constant movement. It is the law of the universal Logos that everything is defined by, tends toward, and is ultimately balanced by its opposite, so that all opposites ultimately constitute a unity. The finest harmony is composed of elements that are in tension with each other. Heraclitus asserted that most human beings, by not understanding the Logos, live as if asleep in a false dream of the world, and consequently in a state of constant disharmony. Human beings should seek to comprehend the Logos of life, and thereby awaken to a life of intelligent cooperation with the universe’s deeper order.

But it was the Pythagoreans, perhaps above all other philosophical schools, who stressed the world’s intelligibility, and especially taught the spiritual value of scientifically penetrating its mysteries to achieve ecstatic union between the human soul and the divine cosmos. For Pythagoreans, as later for Platonists, the mathematical patterns discoverable in the natural world secreted, as it were, a deeper meaning that led the philosopher beyond the material level of reality. To uncover the regulative mathematical forms in nature was to reveal the divine intelligence itself, governing its creation with transcendent perfection and order. The Pythagorean discovery
that the harmonics of music were mathematical, that harmonious tones were produced by strings whose measurements were determined by simple numerical ratios, was regarded as a religious revelation. Those mathematical harmonies maintained a timeless existence as spiritual exemplars, from which all audible musical tones derived. The Pythagoreans believed that the universe in its entirety, especially the heavens, was ordered according to esoteric principles of harmony, mathematical configurations that expressed a celestial music. To understand mathematics was to have found the key to the divine creative wisdom.

Pythagoreans also taught that these forms are brought to light first in the human mind, and then in the cosmos. The mathematical laws of numbers and figures are recognized in the external world only after they have been established by the human intelligence. By this means the human soul discovers its own essence and intelligence to be the same as that hidden within nature. Only then does the meaning of the cosmos dawn within the soul. Through intellectual and moral discipline, the human mind can arrive at the existence and properties of the mathematical Forms, and then begin to unravel the mysteries of nature and the human soul. The word kosmos, which signified a peculiarly Greek combination of order, structural perfection, and beauty, was traditionally supposed to have been first applied to the world by Pythagoras, after whose time it was frequently understood in that Pythagorean sense. As restated by Plato, to discover kosmos in the world was to reveal kosmos in one’s own soul. In the thought life of man, the world spirit revealed itself. Here the Socratic dictum “Know thyself” was seen not as the creed of an introspective subjectivist, but as a directive to universal understanding.

The belief that the universe possesses and is governed according to a comprehensive regulating intelligence, and that this same intelligence is reflected in the human mind, rendering it capable of knowing the cosmic order, was one of the most characteristic and recurring principles in the central tradition of Hellenic thought. After Plato, the terms logos and nous were both regularly associated with philosophical conceptions of human knowledge and the universal order, and through Aristotle, the Stoics, and later Platonists, their meanings were increasingly elaborated. As ancient philosophy progressed, logos and nous were variously employed to signify
mind, reason, intellect, organizing principle, thought, word, speech, wisdom, and meaning, in each case relative to both human reason and a universal intelligence. The two terms eventually came to denote the transcendent source of all archetypes, as well as the providential principle of cosmic order that, through the archetypes, continuously permeates the created world. As the means by which human intelligence could attain universal understanding, the Logos was a divine revelatory principle, simultaneously operative within the human mind and the natural world. The highest quest of the philosopher was to achieve inner realization of this archetypal world Reason, to grasp and be grasped by this supreme rational-spiritual principle that both ordered and revealed.
The Problem of the Planets

Among many other significant themes and concepts discussed in the Platonic dialogues, one in particular requires our present attention. For this aspect of Plato’s thought was to prove uniquely consequential for the evolution of the Western world view, not only forming a basis for the cosmology of the later classical world, but emerging again as a crucial force in the birth of modern science. It may well have been the single most important factor giving both dynamism and continuity to the Western mind’s attempt to comprehend the physical cosmos.

Plato repeatedly recommended one area of study, astronomy, as especially important for the attainment of philosophical wisdom, and in this study he specified one outstanding problem that especially required solution. Moreover, this problem—how to explain mathematically the erratic movements of the planets—was so significant for Plato that he described the need for its resolution as if it were a matter of religious urgency. The nature of the problem—indeed, its very existence—clearly illuminates the character of Plato’s world view, underscoring not only its own inner tensions, but also its pivotal position between the ancient mythological cosmos and the universe of modern science. For the riddle of the planets as formulated by Plato, and the long and arduous intellectual struggle to solve it, would culminate two thousand years later in the work of Copernicus and Kepler and their initiation of the Scientific Revolution.

But to pursue this remarkable line of thinking from Plato to Kepler, we must first briefly attempt to reconstruct the ancient view of the heavens prior to Plato, specifically that associated with the earliest astronomer-astrologers from the ancient Mesopotamian kingdom of Babylonia. For it
was from these distant origins nearly two millennia before Christ that the cosmology of the West would first emerge.

It would appear that from very early times ancient observers noticed a fundamental distinction between the celestial and terrestrial realms. While earthly life was everywhere marked by change, unpredictability, generation and decay, the heavens seemed to possess an eternal regularity and luminous beauty that established them as a realm of an entirely different and superior order. While observations of the heavens continued to disclose this unchanging regularity and incorruptibility night after night, century after century, observations of mundane existence by contrast revealed incessant change—with plants and animals, the seas and the weather undergoing ceaseless alteration, with human beings dying and being born, with entire civilizations rising and passing away. The heavens appeared to possess an order of time that transcended human time, an order of time suggestive of eternity itself. It was also evident that the movements of the heavenly bodies influenced earthly existence in various ways—bringing dawn after every night, for example, or spring after every winter, with unfailing constancy. Certain major seasonal fluctuations in climatic conditions, droughts, floods, and tides seemed to coincide with specific phenomena in the heavens. And while the heavens appeared as a vast distant space beyond human reach, populated by insubstantial, jewel-like points of bright light, the earthly environment was immediate, tangible, and composed of patently grosser materials like rock and dirt. The celestial realm seemed to express—indeed it seemed to be—the very image of transcendence. Perhaps because the heavens were distinguished by these extraordinary qualities—luminous appearance, timeless order, transcendent location, terrestrial effects, and an all-encompassing majesty—the ancients viewed the celestial realm as the residence of the gods. The starry sky reigned above as an eternal revolving illustration of the mythic deities, their visible incarnation. From this perspective, the heavens were not so much a metaphor for the divine, but rather the divine’s very embodiment.

The divine character of the heavens compelled human attention to the patterns and movements of the stars, with significant events in the celestial realm considered indicative of parallel events in terrestrial life. In the
imperial cities of ancient Babylonia, centuries of continuous and increasingly precise observations, for omens as well as for calendrical calculations, gave rise to a large body of systematic astronomical records. But when these observations, as well as their mythological correspondences, reached the cultural environment of the early Greek philosophers, and there met the Hellenic demand for coherent rational and natural explanation, a fundamentally new dimension in cosmological speculation was created. While for other contemporary cultures the heavens remained, like the overall world view, principally a mythological phenomenon, for the Greeks the heavens became linked as well to geometrical constructions and physical explanations, which in turn became basic components of their evolving cosmology. The Greeks thereby bestowed to the West a tradition which demanded that a cosmology not only must satisfy the human need to exist in a meaningful universe—a need already served by the archaic mythological systems—but must also delineate a coherent physical and mathematical structure of the universe accounting for detailed systematic observations of the heavens.\textsuperscript{8}

In accord with their newly naturalistic outlook, early Greek philosophers such as the Ionians and the atomists began regarding the heavens as composed of various material substances whose movements were mechanically determined. But the evidence that the celestial motions maintained a consistent order in perfect conformity to mathematical patterns was for many Greeks a fact pregnant with significance. For Plato in particular, that mathematical order revealed the heavens as the visible expression of the divine Reason and the embodiment of the anima mundi, the living soul of the universe. In his cosmological dialogue, the Timaeus, Plato described the stars and planets as visible images of immortal deities whose perfectly regulated movements were paradigms of the transcendent order. God, the primordial artist and craftsman (Demiurge) who had formed the world from a chaos of primordial matter, had created the heavens as a moving image of eternity, revolving precisely according to perfect mathematical Ideas, which in turn created and established the patterns of time. Plato believed it was man’s encounter with the celestial movements that had first given rise to human reasoning about the nature of things, to the divisions of the day and the year, to numbers and mathematics, and even
to philosophy itself, that most liberating of the gods’ gifts to mankind. The universe was the living manifestation of divine Reason, and nowhere was that Reason more fully manifest than in the heavens. If earlier philosophers had thought the latter comprised nothing more than material objects in space, for Plato their evident mathematical order proved otherwise. Far from being merely a soulless domain of moving stones and dirt, the heavens contained the very sources of the world order.

Plato therefore stressed the value of studying the movements of the heavens, for the harmonious symmetry of the celestial revolutions constituted a spiritual perfection directly accessible to human understanding. By devoting himself to things divine, the philosopher could awaken divinity within himself and bring his own life into intelligent harmony with the celestial order. In the spirit of his Pythagorean forebears, Plato elevated astronomy to high status among those studies demanded in his ideal education for the philosopher–ruler, for astronomy revealed the eternal Forms and divinities governing the cosmos. Only the person who had fully applied himself to such studies, and through his long labor of education comprehended the divine ordering of things both in the heavens and on Earth, could be capable of being the just guardian of a political state. An unthinking traditional belief in the existence of the gods was acceptable for the masses, but a prospective ruler should be expected to have mastered all possible proofs of the universe’s divinity. He must be able to regard the many and perceive the one, the divine intelligent unity of design behind all apparent diversity. The paradigmatic field for this philosophical imperative was astronomy, for above all the passing phenomena of the world stood the timeless perfection of the heavens, whose manifest intelligence could inform the philosopher’s life and awaken wisdom in his soul.

Beginning with Thales (renowned for having predicted an eclipse) and Pythagoras (credited with being the first to conclude that the Earth was a sphere, rather than a flat circular disc as in Homer and Hesiod), each of the major Greek philosophers had brought new insights concerning the apparent structure and character of the cosmos. By Plato’s time, the continuing observations of the heavens had revealed a cosmos that seemed
to most thoughtful observers to be structured in two concentric spheres, with the vast outer sphere of stars revolving diurnally westward around the much smaller sphere of the Earth, and with the Earth stationary in the exact center of the universe. The Sun, Moon, and planets revolved in approximate synchrony with the outer starry sphere, moving in a space somewhere between the Earth and the stars. The conceptual clarity of this two-sphere scheme, which readily explained the overall diurnal motion of the heavens, gradually allowed Greek astronomers to discern what Babylonians had earlier observed but what was to the Greeks, with their passion for lucid geometrical understanding, a disturbing phenomenon. Indeed, the phenomenon now fully revealed was so problematic as to challenge the entire science of astronomy and to place the divine scheme of the heavens in jeopardy. For it had become evident that several celestial bodies did not move with the same eternal regularity as did the rest, but instead they “wandered” (the Greek root for the word “planet,” planētēs, meant “wanderer,” and signified the Sun and Moon as well as the other five visible planets—Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn). Not only did the Sun (in the course of a year) and the Moon (in a month) move gradually eastward across the starry sphere in an opposite direction from the westward diurnal movement of the entire heavens. More puzzling, the other five planets had glaringly inconsistent cycles in which they completed those eastward orbits, periodically appearing to speed up or slow down relative to the fixed stars, and sometimes to stop altogether and reverse direction while emitting varying degrees of brightness. The planets were inexplicably defying the perfect symmetry and circular uniformity of the heavenly motions.

Because of his equation of divinity with order, of intelligence and soul with perfect mathematical regularity, the paradox of the planetary movements seems to have been felt most acutely by Plato, who first articulated the problem and gave directions for its solution. To Plato, the proof of divinity in the universe was of the utmost importance, for only with such certainty could human ethical and political activity have a firm foundation. In the Laws, he cited two reasons for belief in divinity—his theory of the soul (that all being and motion is caused by soul, which is immortal and superior to the physical things it animates), and his conception
of the heavens as divine bodies governed by a supreme intelligence and world soul. The planetary irregularities and multiple wanderings seemingly contradicted that perfect divine order, thereby endangering human faith in the divinity of the universe. Therein lay the significance of the problem. Part of the religious bulwark of Platonic philosophy was at stake. Indeed, Plato considered it blasphemous to call any celestial bodies “wanderers.”

But Plato not only isolated the problem and defined its significance. He also advanced, with remarkable confidence, a specific—and in the long run extremely fruitful—hypothesis: namely, that the planets, in apparent contradiction to the empirical evidence, actually move in single uniform orbits of perfect regularity. Although there would seem to have been little but Plato’s faith in mathematics and the heavens’ divinity that could have supported such a belief, he enjoined future philosophers to grapple with the planetary data and find “what are the uniform and ordered movements by the assumption of which the apparent movements of the planets can be accounted for”—i.e., to discover the ideal mathematical forms that would resolve the empirical discrepancies and reveal the true motions. Astronomy and mathematics were to be mastered in order to penetrate the riddle of the heavens and comprehend their divine intelligence. Naive empiricism, which took the appearance of erratic and multiple planetary movements at face value, was to be overcome by critical mathematical reasoning, thereby revealing the simple, uniform, and transcendent essence of the celestial motions. The philosopher’s task was to “save the phenomena”—to redeem the apparent disorder of the empirical heavens through theoretical insight and the power of mathematics.

Of course, “saving the phenomena” was in some sense the main goal of all Platonic philosophy, to discover the eternal behind the temporal, to know the truth hidden within the apparent, to glimpse the absolute Ideas that reign supreme behind and within the flux of the empirical world. But here Plato’s philosophy was put on the line, so to speak, in open confrontation with a specific empirical problem under the full gaze of future generations. The problem itself was significant only because of the Greeks’, and particularly Plato’s, assumptions about geometry and divinity—that the two were intrinsically associated with each other and with the heavens. But the long-term consequences of those assumptions—consequences that would
develop directly from the centuries-long struggle with the planetary movements—were to be singularly antithetical to their Platonic foundation.

Here, then, we find many of the most characteristic elements of Platonic philosophy, the search for and belief in the absolute and unitary over the relative and diverse, the divinization of order and the rejection of disorder, the tension between empirical observation and ideal Forms, the consequently ambivalent attitude toward empiricism as something to be employed only to be overcome, the juxtaposition of the primordial mythic deities with the mathematical and rational Forms, the further juxtaposition of the many gods (the celestial deities) with the single God (the Creator and supreme Intelligence), the religious significance of scientific research, and finally the complex and even antithetical consequences which Plato’s thought would hold for later developments in Western culture.

Before moving onward past Plato, let us briefly review the various methods for acquiring knowledge suggested in the course of the Platonic dialogues. Knowledge of the transcendent Ideas that were the governing principles of the divine intelligence was the foundation of Platonic philosophy, and access to this archetypal knowledge was said to be mediated by several different (and usually overlapping) cognitive modes, involving different degrees of experiential directness. The Ideas could be known most directly through an intuitive leap of immediate apprehension, which was also considered to be a recollection of the immortal soul’s prior knowledge. The logical necessity of the Ideas could also be discovered by meticulous intellectual analysis of the world of empirical experience, both through dialectic and through mathematics. In addition, the transcendent reality could be encountered through the astronomical contemplation and understanding of the heavens, which displayed the moving geometry of the visible gods. The transcendent could also be approached through myth and the poetic imagination, as well as by attending to a kind of aesthetic resonance within the psyche touched off by the presence of the archetypal in veiled form within the phenomenal world. Thus intuition, memory, aesthetics, imagination, logic, mathematics, and empirical observation each played a specific role in Plato’s epistemology, as did spiritual desire and
moral virtue. But of all these, the empirical was typically depreciated and, at least in its uncritical employment, considered more hindrance than help in the philosophical enterprise. This was the legacy that Plato passed on to his most brilliant pupil, Aristotle, who studied for twenty years in Plato’s Academy before setting forth his own distinctive philosophy.