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Plato in Context:
The Republic and Allegory

JOSEPH SPENCER

In his early work, The Birth of Tragedy, Friedrich Nietzsche promoted the idea that Plato was the source of everything strait-laced in Western civilization. For Nietzsche, that meant that Plato had ruined the fun because he had repressed the Dionysian camp, casting himself prostrate before the Socratic altar. Because Nietzsche’s claim was well received in his era of continental confusion and soul-searching, scholarship since has inherited the prejudiced opinion that the ancient philosopher was more than a little tainted with predilections toward the clearly pious and saintly Apollonian Athenian.1 Hundreds of volumes written in the last century are built on the premise that Plato was as we say he was—that there was not much more to him than his Theory of Forms and a few other idealist propositions. Indeed, once a conclusion has been drawn, it is easy to simply insert it again and again into the primary texts. In recent years, a few scholars have spoken out against this view, highlighting the fact that Plato could not be ignorant towards the nature of Greek religion

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1. This is a rather direct reading of Nietzsche’s The Birth of Tragedy, as his antagonism towards Plato is a dramatic climax that allows him to discuss his more serious topic: how to help the German spirit reunite art with the Dionysian ideal. While Nietzsche is hardly the universally worshipped scholar, his same caricature of Plato is, however, extremely widespread outside of Plato scholarship itself. Introductory courses in philosophy and, even better, classes in English and History tend to present Nietzsche’s Plato. Nietzsche makes this view bluntly vivid.
and culture in his day. Such scholars have come to admit that there was more to Plato than meets the scholastically trained eye, that he was seriously involved in the religious discussion of his era. The purpose of this paper is to emphasize that Plato was a seeker of religious truth, rather than a mechanical mathematician producing work after monotonous work with the same thesis. I argue that the religious undertones of Plato’s dialogues reveal a highly synthetic dramatist caught up in a whirlwind of religious turmoil and confusion.

Preliminaries

To explore the topic at hand, a few of the most famous pages from Plato’s most popular work, his Republic, will suffice. First, however, a few comments must be made for the benefit of those not intimately acquainted with the ideas and works of Plato. His most famous philosophy is what has been commonly called the Theory of Forms. This is essentially the idea that universal terms used in language have existent metaphysical counterparts. In other words, there is an actual existing entity that we call “blueness,” or “justice.” According to Plato’s Phaedo and his Republic, these Forms exist in another sphere that is above and beyond this world of changing, shadowy images. The Forms are what impart real knowledge to man, for Ideas or Concepts like “courage” and “tallness” do not change, and only the unchangeable can communicate to man something that can be known with surety. Actual objects that have the Forms here in this world are always in a Heraclitean flux, and that which changes constantly can give only


fleeting or changing knowledge. The passages to be examined in this paper actually come from the very portion of the Republic where Plato develops most clearly the doctrine of the Forms. The majority of scholars have taken the Theory of Forms to be the central doctrine of Plato, though it is only touched upon briefly in a handful of his writings. The current emphasis on the Theory is likely due to its having been by far the most influential idea that Plato ever put forward, especially in its role as the basis of Augustine’s redefinitions of Christian doctrines in the fourth century. While these later readings of Plato have been extremely pervasive, the context discussed below demonstrates that the Theory of Forms was not exactly what Plato wanted others to believe.

Another important piece of information that must be understood before Plato’s actual text is to be considered regards the controversy over the existence of Socrates. All of Plato’s works are written as dialogues, and excepting the late Laws, the main character, or one of the main characters, is Socrates, the Athenian philosopher who was eventually forced to drink hemlock for his teachings. Since there were many philosophers and other writers at the time of Plato using Socrates as a main character in similar dialogues, it has been questioned whether there was a historical person of that name and nature. It has been suggested by some that Socrates was not a real person, though most scholars allow for his existence and claim that Plato was a close adherent to Socrates’ philosophy. The best arguments for the actuality of Socrates are found in Gregory Vlastos’ Socrates, Ironist and Moral Philosopher. Here, Vlastos uses literary evidence in Plato’s corpus to

4. Augustine recounts in his Confessions that he spent his early manhood seeking an understanding of the reality of evil, and this led him eventually to Platonism. When Christianity had finally stalked him long enough, he gave in to it, but he never gave up his Platonic concept of the Forms. He became the proverbial meeting place of Platonism and Christianity.

5. This fact alone ought to be enough evidence to the point that Socrates was a real person, since there are numerous accounts of the trial of Socrates at Athens. Plato’s version is the famous Apology. Plato also dramatizes Socrates’ death in the Phaedo. Aristophanes also wrote a play about Socrates—the Clouds.

6. The most influential work to this effect is Anton-Hermann Chroust Socrates Man and Myth (Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press, 1957).
show an evolution from doctrines that only could have been those of another thinker, to ideas that are categorically Plato's. As Socrates takes the more central role in the earlier dialogues, he shows that Socrates and Plato must have been two real people. This is of importance to the reader because the dialogue under consideration was written during Plato's "middle period," and the ideas, though they are found in the mouth of Socrates, are the concepts as understood and elucidated by Plato, likely never even conceived by Socrates himself. As reference is made to other dialogues throughout this paper, it is important to note that Plato's treatment of Greek religious and ritual practice develops from simple Socratic acceptance and adherence to Platonic exploration and mysterious discovery.

Within this framework, a discussion of the Republic may commence. The work is utopian in nature, as Plato propounds the ideal concept of the state, in order to make an analogy from such a society to the true definition of the universal term "justice." Somewhere along the way, the participants of the conversation (Socrates and the two brothers of Plato) veer down a dramatic side road that allows Socrates the opportunity to expound the famous Theory of Forms. As the ideas concerning the Theory develop, Plato employs a series of three allegories in order to illustrate the doctrine of the Forms. These allegories are, in order of appearance, the Allegory of the Sun, the simile of the Divided Line, and the famous Allegory of the Cave. While exploring Plato's subtleties in these three allegories, especially the religious subtleties, it will become evident that the author is not a simple, straight-thinking philosopher. In fact, Plato's treatment of metaphysics in the Republic betrays an important lack of axiomatic

8. The terms "Socratic" and "Platonic," then, refer to the philosophies found respectively in Plato's earlier works and Plato's later works.
9. Republic 368d–69a. All references to Plato are found in John M. Cooper, ed., Plato: Complete Works (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997). All references are given in stephanus notation and are given without mention of Plato's authorship.
10. This is found at the end of Book VI and the beginning of Book VII.
The Allegory of the Sun

As the interlocutors move through their political theory, the others stop Socrates to ask him what sort of good the perfect ruler or guardian of the state ought to be. Specifically, they questioned whether the good is "knowledge or pleasure or something else altogether."\(^{11}\) Socrates explains that their question is too lofty in nature, and so he tells them that rather than tackling the Good, they could deal with its offspring. Here it is that Plato moves his characters into the exposition of the first allegory in question. Here, the first (and really the only vital) premise is presented: Socrates makes a distinction between the "visible but not intelligible," and the "intelligible but not visible."\(^{12}\) This world, essentially, is the visible, while the world of thought and Forms is purely intelligible and not visible at all. This will become the major point of the Divided Line, but here it is only a granted premise. Plato equates the offspring of the Good with the visible in this allegory while the intelligible, or the father, is only implied by the analogy. Socrates and his companions begin to explore vision as one of the five senses, and they settle on it being special because, unlike the other four, it requires a third component: light.\(^{13}\) The allegory follows simply from this point, for as the sun provides the light that illuminates the visible things of the world, Socrates wants to convey that the "sun" of the Forms is the Good, and it gives light to the intelligible realm of the Forms, allowing the mind to "see" them clearly.\(^{14}\)

While the allegory seems very clear and straightforward, the English rendering can obscure some of Plato's implied meaning. After presenting the idea that light is the third component of vision (in addition to the object and the eye), Socrates asks, "Which of the gods in heaven would you name as the cause and

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1. Republic 506b.
2. Ibid., 507b.
3. Ibid., 507c.
4. Ibid., 508c.
controller of this, the one whose light causes our sight to see in the best way and the visible things to be seen?15 The response given is the sun, but note the response is in answer to the question, “which of the gods?” The answer is Apollo, not merely the sun as the modern Westerner sees it.16 Buried in the allegory is a careful reference to Apollo, a vital and important figure in Plato’s Athens. Apollo had been universally recognized as the sun god of Greek religion only for several decades at this time,17 and this then—recent usurpation had placed Apollo in dire opposition to Dionysus and Dionysian beliefs.18 Plato’s short analogy carries with it more than meets the modern eye.

Plato’s own day and location was a crossroads of religious upheaval and controversy,19 and standing in a central role in all of this was the stalemate between Apollonian restraint and Dionysian moral freedom. The Dionysian cult centered its activities around wine festivals, frenzy, and mantic revelation, while the Apollonian sect centered its more reserved nature around the Delphic oracle, held to be the very center of the universe in Greek terms.20 Indeed, Delphi holds a sacred and central role in the early dialogues, for according to the Apology, Socrates’ main defense rested on a statement communicated by Apollo to Chaerephon through the Pythian at the Delphic temple.21 His defense further rested on his attestation that he knew nothing, which was entirely in line with, and likely inspired by, the Apollonian tradition.22

15. Ibid., 508a.
16. The Greek is actually “Helios,” but textual evidence suggests that Plato uses this term to refer to the god Apollo. Besides Apollo’s then recent ascension to popular godhood, Plato’s account ends with “Glauccon comically [saying]: By Apollo, what a daemonic superiority!” Republic 509c. This direct reference, combined with other nuances mentioned below, suggests that Apollo is referred to by “Helios” in this context.
17. Greek Religion, 149.
22. Greek Religion, 148. Burkert explains that the phrase “know thyself” that was written on the temple at Delphi was to be understood as a divine mandate to man to recognize that they were not gods, and that the knowledge there bestowed upon them through the oracle was truth revealed from above. This plays directly into Socrates’ disavowal of knowledge throughout the early dialogues, but is made more conspicuous in the Apology.
Plato seems to be responding to the controversy, but in very careful and couched terms so as not to cause an overly obvious uproar or unfavorable response towards philosophy.

What Plato seems to argue with the allegory, then, is as follows: Since Apollo is what gives light and allows men to see only the crass, physical, and visible things of the world, he is merely the offspring of the Good, which allows the mind to see the intelligible, eternal Forms. Plato points out, still locked into the explication of the offspring, that “the sun [Apollo, the god] not only provides visible things with the power to be seen but also with coming to be, growth, and nourishment.” If he is only the offspring to a much higher power and truth, then Apollo is merely the giver of life to the lower physical things, while the Good is the power of existence to the intelligible and real. Apollo is, at least in some sense, diminished by the analogy. Its purpose is visibly two-fold. It communicates the relationship of the Forms to the Good, but it also places the popularized Greek cult of restraint in a lower sphere than these more important philosophical truths.

This is, however, far from a declarative stance on the controversy between the Apollonian and Dionysian followings. It is clear from the *Phaedrus*, a Platonic dialogue roughly contemporary with the *Republic*, that Dionysian frenzy is also an analogy for the process of attaining to the higher truths of the Forms and of the Good. Between these two statements, Plato appears to avoid taking a particular stand on religious ideals, except to say that he is above and beyond them if he has the true *gnosis*—not unlike the message of Athen’s famed Eleusinian mysteries. As McPherran points out, there was no official religion in Greece, but rather a loose set of rituals, obedience to which constituted piety. This means that Plato’s obedient attitude implies adherence to both traditions, while his interpretation of their meaning may have seemed unorthodox or radical. The Allegory of the Sun gives the first glimpse of the profile of Plato as a seeker, one confused by

23. Republic 509b.
24. This is essentially the argument of an entire chapter in *Platonic Piety*, 158–87.
25. *The Religion of Socrates*, 20–21
Athenian devotional oscillation and looking for something solid and universal in the resultant religious melee.

The Divided Line

This leads directly into the discussion of the simile that follows the first allegory. Predicated on the distinction drawn at the outset of the Allegory of the Sun, Plato next builds on the nature of the relationship between the two analogues.\(^{26}\) He openly states that the realm that is higher and "sovereign" is the realm of the Forms. This is not unlike the traditions surrounding Eleusis, which taught that though death prevailed, "there is another kind of life, and this, at all events, is good."\(^{27}\) Lundquist has explored the motif among ancient civilizations that the other realm is higher, or more real, than this present one: "Thus the purpose of life is to return to heaven, to the Real."\(^{28}\) Plato unambiguously frames the realm of the Forms as "the Real" in his reiterated distinction between visible and intelligible. All this is compacted into a simple diagram that demonstrates the transcendent nature of the Forms, hinting again at another motif of Eleusis and other mystery rites, namely, ascension.\(^{29}\) This diagram is the Divided Line, a line divided into four parts, each more significant than the last, and each division increasingly larger and truer. The lower two sections of the divided line Socrates labels the visible, the upper two, the intelligible.\(^{30}\) The lower section has as its two subsections images and objects, respectively, one murkier than the other. The higher section has as its two subsections thought and understanding, paralleling the lower.\(^{31}\)

\(^{26}\) Republic 509d. Socrates restates the distinction very clearly: "Understand, then, that, as we said, there are these two things, one sovereign of the intelligible kind and place, the other visible. . . . In any case, you have two kinds of things, visible and intelligible."

\(^{27}\) Greek Religion, 289.


\(^{29}\) This motif is even more apparent in Diotima's conversation with Socrates as reported in the Symposium. There, he literally ascends to the Form of Beauty through the mysterious rites of love. See note 30 below.

\(^{30}\) Republic 509d.

\(^{31}\) Republic 509d–11e.
Having laid out this picture, Plato moves along to discuss why the lower section drives one to the higher. This focus on ascent suggests that the Divided Line is a discussion of ritual. Socrates states that in geometry and science, an analogy is drawn as a figure. Though this does not always represent the actual figure or measurement at stake, it allows the mathematician or geometer to grasp the calculations necessary to finish his project. Plato compares this to the crass and physical nature of the lower part of the divided line. His companion, restating their entire argument, explains, "those who study the objects of [the] sciences are forced to do so by means of thought rather than sense perception." In other words, the physical is an analogy for the spiritual, and by examining the physical world, the philosopher is driven on to the higher world of the mysterious Forms and Truths. In terms of the context of religious ritual controversy, this discussion takes on an important religious light. The divided line explains the purpose of physical or crass ritual: to teach the higher principles that transcend the actual physical work.

This proposition further complicates the symbolism of the previous allegory. Socrates is intimately connected with the Apollonian ideals in the early dialogues, which seem here to be redefined as inferior by Plato's handling. Apparently, Plato implies by this discussion that Socrates has a sort of ritual, something crass, simple, and monotonous, in order to drive away the uninitiated and drive the true philosopher to truth. There are important hints of this idea in this dialogue's general structure, as well as in other contemporary dialogues. The first book of the Republic is a classic Socratic dialogue, through which the stubborn Thrasymachus is driven, wild with rage, from the conversation, while the others have their appetites whetted by the discussion. The first part of the dialogue, then, works as an initiation ritual for

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34. Republic 511c.
35. Ironically, these exact words describe the opinions of most first-time readers of the Socratic dialogues.
the desirous, much as the initiation rites that were performed as the opening to the Eleusinian mysteries. Similar initiation approaches appear in the *Meno, Symposium,* and other dialogues. Some further evidence may be brought to this point; both McPherran and Morgan have interpreted the elenchus, the Socratic form of question-asking in a nearly monotonous and (as is often pointed out by interlocutors) obnoxious manner, as a sort of ritual. This attitude is present in one of Plato's last works, the *Laws,* in which Socrates does not even appear. Here, as Burkert sums up, Plato's ideal city has a general system of law demanding that "none may forsake cultic service," or, as Morgan says, "to orient their attention and practice to the gods in appropriate ways... most people require a regimen of rituals and celebrations." Simply put, in Plato's ideal city, laws require physical ritual so that the simple and unlearned might order and organize themselves in preparation for the higher mysteries that will follow, if indeed the common folk ever attain those mysteries. This deliberate purpose of ritual practice emerges in other dialogues as well. Essentially, Socrates was for Plato the philosophical ritual, and his work would initiate one into the higher mysteries, or, as Plato models it in the later *Theaetetus,* Socrates is the midwife that delivers babies into a new world, though he cannot do any more than that. The Apollonian ties to Socrates suggest that the Allegory of the Sun makes the same analogy to the Sun God himself.

**The Allegory of the Cave**

The Allegory of the Sun and of the Divided Line provide the initiated reader with the understanding that Greek religion has

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36. *The Meno* is essentially broken into two halves, one of which is a classic "Socratic" dialogue. After that, however, Meno has proven himself worthy of the discussion that ensues. Further, all characters found at the discussion in the *Symposium* are initiated by the Dionysian wine festival speeches that proceed Socrates' great speech at the end.


38. *Greek Religion,* 336.


40. See *Phaedo* 69a–d, and *Meno* 76e.

41. See *Theaetetus* 149a+. 
some important downfalls which impel the thinker to a lower understanding than the realm of the Forms. Further, readers are given to understand that Socrates exemplifies, in himself, a sort of ritual practice, according to that lower, physical Greek religion. Finally, such physical religious practice, whether in Socrates or in cultic worship, is a process that allows one to approach the revelation of the real and the divine, embodied in what Plato calls the Good. All of these ideas are reiterated in Plato’s most exalting and interesting analogy yet—the Allegory of the Cave.

The Allegory of the Cave, found in Book VII of the Republic, is rather simple. Socrates invites his listeners to picture a great multitude dwelling within a cave, locked into chairs and forced to look only forward at a wall of the cave. Falling onto that wall are shadows and images that are cast by real objects. These objects are carried along a path between the multitude and a great fire, located at some distance behind those in the seats. The people in the chairs grow up believing that the shadows and any sounds that reflect off the wall from behind are the truth. Socrates then asks what the effect would be if one of those people in the chairs were to be released and should turn around and gaze upon the path, puppets, and fire. Further, what if he were to be dragged, against his will, from the cave into the actual sunlight? He asks which is the truer, and the obvious answer is that anything without the cave is the more true. Socrates also asks about the soul who is forced to return to the cave, after having adjusted over time to the real world, in order to bring other souls from their chairs to the real world. The result of such an action, Plato pointedly observes in dramatic fashion, would be the killing of the philosopher who returns. From this discussion, Plato moves rather nonchalantly to the subject of education, for the guardians of the Republic would have traveled, metaphorically, out of the cave, and hence would be attempting to teach the enslaved cave-dwellers.

This allegory provides a wealth of interesting allusions and further synthesis of the ideas presented in the previous analogies.

42. Republic 514a–15c.
43. Republic 515d–17a.
The allegory is a sort of corollary to the Allegory of the Sun, as it is the sun that the philosopher emerges from the earth to see. The sun is still offspring, and Apollo is again condemned to the lower portion of the divided line, but this allegory is clearly a further, more complicated explication of the above-mentioned allegories. There are, however, some interesting religious ties to caves that suggest that perhaps Apollo is better understood as dwelling there. From early times, the Greeks believed that caves were the home of the gods, such as Pan, perhaps suggesting that Apollo would rest in this cave. This may link him with the pitiful fire that casts the shadows in the cave, rather than with the sun that crosses the sky without. The ascension from darkness to light is an obvious symbol, but in these terms it may mean that Apollo is more darkness than the light of the Good. But these allusions are matters for more careful interpretation, while some clearer allusions to Greek religious practice are available.

Morgan points out in an extensive argument that the majority of the Republic contains allusions to education rituals, such as the Eleusinian mysteries mentioned earlier. According to his explanation, most of the allusions are critical of then-current Greek practices. Education, however, takes a positive turn at this allegory. The definitive ritual of education is the classic initiation rite, to which this allegory clearly alludes. It is explained that Pythagoras, a philosopher to whom Plato shows great affinities, descended into a cave, in which he was initiated into the highest mysteries, physically symbolized by his being clothed in black wool. Further legends about the mysterious Pythagoras claim

44. Greek Religion, 24.
45. Platonic Piety, 100–57.
46. Pythagorean doctrines of the afterlife, soul, and mathematical realism begin to appear in Plato's Meno, considered by Vlastos to be one of the first dialogues written after Plato sheds his Socratic skin. After that, a great deal of the doctrine that Plato propounds was first introduced by Pythagoras, a good time before Plato was even born. The most telling moment in the dialogues that shows Plato's conviction towards Pythagoreanism is in the Timaeus, where Socrates himself is given a seat through the whole, in order to allow a Pythagorean philosopher from Southern Italy a chance to explain a religious creation myth.
47. Greek Religion, 280.
that he descended into the underworld, and then returned, in order to prove the immortality of man, which also shows something of a direct allusion in Plato's Allegory of the Cave. The breaking of an individual's bonds within the cave is the ritual of the elenchus, as is implied by the returning philosopher who must convince others of the errors inherent in their blissful forward gaze, which further implies that philosophical initiation also takes place within the cave of mysteries. This important tie to Pythagoras highlights the later, very devoted attachment to Pythagorean doctrines in Plato's work. Here, Plato suggests that the individual must be initiated as Pythagoras was, to be able to subsequently learn the doctrines that Pythagoras taught.

As yet, this discussion does not seem to complicate the doctrines presented by the previous two analogies at all. Rather, it further clarifies and synthesizes them. The mysteries, the truths to be found in the upper portion of the Divided Line, are simply the truths that had been taught by Pythagoras and that would be taught by Plato. Apollo worship remains the physical cult of the lower part of the Divided Line, as Socrates initiates the desirous through the elenchus, so that those in the cave might break free from the chains within the cave and make the ritual ascent to the above world of Pythagorean Forms. It is allusion to the cave initiation in this allegory, however, that makes the application of all of the philosophy propounded plainly connected with actual physical ritual. This makes it clear that initiation takes place in the lower section of the divided line, that it is the physical that leads one to the spiritual. The Allegory of the Cave basically defines all of the terms used throughout these three analogies that expound the Theory of Forms. This places the real meaning of the allegory well within the education ritual context

48. Greek Religion, 299.
49. A late commentator on Heraclitus, Iamblichus, wrote: "Things seen and heard in sacred rites are introduced for the tendance of the soul in us and to keep within bounds the evils which birth has caused to grow about it, to set us free and release us from bonds. Hence Heraclitus rightly called them cures" (emphasis added). On Mysteries, 1.11. As in Richard D. McKirahan, Philosophy before Socrates (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1994), 126.
that Morgan explains in his article. From this point of the *Republic* on, the ritual of education is limited to, and clarified as, a Pythagorean initiation rite, allowing the learner to approach the mysteries as Plato understood them at the time.

With all of this understood, Plato’s three allegories that propound the Forms do not fall outside of the “political” agenda of the *Republic*. They no longer appear as a side note or tangent in the course of explicating a comprehensive political theory. Rather, they make up a most vital explanation of the relationship between the governing philosopher-king and his subjects, how he is to educate and teach. From this, it also follows that the *Laws* does not contradict the ideology of the *Republic*. The *Laws* is simply a systematic and direct approach to the same problem, while the *Republic* is dealing more directly with the analogue of the dialogue: Justice. This last allegory brings all of these things into one unified progression, and Plato’s thesis becomes clear at last.

**Conclusion**

Hence, Plato is not the frowning philosophical follower that Nietzsche and narrowly dogmatic classicists have made him out to be. He is a vitally interested, confused, and wondering philosopher of his time. He follows in the tradition of the natural philosophers before him, like Parmenides and Empedocles, who wrote their philosophical treatises as revelations from the gods and goddesses. Plato was merely trying to understand the nature of the philosophical in terms of his naturally pious culture. Nothing in his philosophy suggests that he is rupturing the history of Greek religion, and nothing in his philosophy suggests that he is the silent, pious type that remains bowed all day at the altar. The exegesis in this essay has shown him to be an inquisitor. Plato sought to understand the implications of Pythagorean

philosophy. He sought to understand how it could be true, while he still held to the religious ritual of his day. These three allegories, placed at the very center of Plato’s *Republic*, do not change the modern interpretation of the Theory of Forms, but give it the more particular religious significance that Plato likely felt it deserved. Plato remains, then, the greatest theologian of his era and locale, providing insight and invitation to his fellow initiates.

51. Walter Burkert has made it abundantly clear that Pythagorean philosophy was all but unified. Pythagoras may have been little more than a good man to whom a great deal was attributed. However, it is clear that by Plato’s time, there were groups of Pythagoreans, and traditions and legends surrounding the historical figure were already plentiful. I work on the assumption that Plato was trying to unify a great deal of vague concepts in his philosophy, as well as making hints that others would recognize, though Pythagoreanism was not universal or well organized. Walter Burkert, *Lore and Science in Early Pythagoreanism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972).