

Japanese Philosophers on Plato's Ideas¹

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Abstract

Although Plato studies occupy an important place in academia, the empiricist stance in considering reality, the modern epistemology of the self-identical *ego*, the devaluation of the image and imagination, and the restrictions on philosophy within academic research sometimes cause us to lose sight of the essence of Plato's texts and thought when analysing them. Discussing Plato from a Japanese perspective, this paper will introduce three Japanese thinkers, Sakabe Megumi, Izutsu Toshihiko, and Ino-ue Tadashi, who have critically examined modern Western philosophy from their own philosophical backgrounds and provided valuable suggestions. Taking into account the arguments of these Japanese thinkers, this paper emphasizes the notions of separation, purification, and transcendence as core concepts of Plato's philosophy.

1. Reading Plato in the Twenty-First Century

Plato (427–347 BC) has long been one of the most important philosophers, and is even regarded as the greatest philosopher in Western Europe and North America. He has also been a major figure in Eastern Europe, Latin America, the Near East and Middle East, and East Asia. In this paper, I will discuss Plato from a Japanese perspective. My discussion will show that, although Platonic studies are an important part of philosophical activities in the academic world, modern readers miss some essential elements in analysing Plato's texts and thoughts.

What I believe we are missing is the correct understanding of his central thesis. People acknowledge the theory of Ideas (transcendent Forms)² as a major contribution to the history of philosophy. In the

¹ This paper was presented online for *The London Lectures 2021: Expanding Horizons*, the Royal Institute of Philosophy, 25 November 2021. I thank Julian Baggini for the kind invitation and valuable discussion. The names of the Japanese authors are given in the order of family name first and then given name.

² In the history of philosophy, the term 'idea' is ambiguous. While modern philosophers use it as an innate concept in our minds, Plato, the inventor of this philosophical concept, thought of it as a separate entity that

middle dialogues,³ Plato suggested that the real entities, such as the beautiful itself and the just itself, which he called the ‘Idea of Beauty’ and ‘Idea of Justice’, exist beyond the world we experience and that they are causes of beautiful things and just states and people in this world. This theory has had much influence on the history of Western philosophy, but only a few philosophers ascribe to it any actual role in contemporary philosophy. It appears to be considered simply as a bizarre doctrine that ignores our reality. What is called Platonic ‘transcendence’ or ‘dualism’ is regarded as a negative heritage to be overcome in modern philosophy.⁴ If it is only of historical interest, the relevance of Plato to our philosophy today is clearly greatly diminished. However, I hope that my Japanese background will help to shed some light on how to read Plato today.⁵ In this paper, I’ll first examine some preconceptions of modern philosophy that prevent us from correctly understanding the theory of Ideas.

The theory of Ideas has long been a target of severe criticism by many philosophers, from Aristotle to Nietzsche and postmodernism.⁶ Of several types of criticisms, the most important and regularly recurring one is that the Ideas are redundant metaphysical entities, unnecessarily added to this world; therefore, the theory is mistaken. The first critic, Aristotle (384–322 BC), raised twenty-three points against the theory of Ideas in the *Metaphysics*.⁷ He argued that Plato added extra entities to the things in our world by positing ‘one Idea over many things’. This corresponds, for example, to the hypotheses of Ideas stated in the *Phaedo*. The speaker Socrates first hypothesizes that the ‘beautiful itself by itself’, that is, the Idea of

exists beyond our sensible world. The Greek ‘idea’ (*idea*) and ‘form’ (*eidos*) were ordinary words for shape and appearance. Plato used these words almost synonymously, but Aristotle distinguished ‘idea’ (transcendent entity) from ‘form’ (immanent entity).

³ The dialogues that are supposed to have been written in the middle period of Plato’s life, i.e. between 386 and 367 BC, include the *Symposium*, *Phaedo*, *Republic*, *Phaedrus* and *Cratylus*. The characteristic feature of these dialogues is their discussion of transcendental Ideas.

⁴ In particular, many twentieth-century philosophers, influenced by Friedrich Nietzsche, have criticised Plato as an idealist and mind-body dualist. Karl Popper also criticised him as a totalitarian.

⁵ I also discuss the reception of Plato in modern Japan in Notomi (2015, 2017, and 2021).

⁶ Notomi (2015) examines the criticisms of Aristotle, Nietzsche, and Karl Popper, and offers answers on behalf of Plato.

⁷ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* A9 990a34–b8, M4 1078b34–1079a4.

Japanese Philosophers on Plato's Ideas

Beauty, exists, and that 'if anything else is beautiful besides the beautiful itself, it is beautiful for no reason at all other than that it participates in that beautiful'.⁸ Here Socrates appears to add an extra entity to things already existent in our world. According to the principle of the economy of thought or Ockham's razor, the hypothesis of Ideas as separate entities is philosophically weak and mistaken. In this way, the *separation* of Ideas from sensible things became a focus of Aristotle's criticism.

Modern philosophers raise similar questions to Plato. For example, Gail Fine, scholar of ancient philosophy, in examining the theory of Ideas, says that, 'if, as Aristotle and I believe, forms are universals, then to say that they are separate is to say they can exist uninstantiated by sensible particulars' (Fine, 2003, p. 32).⁹ However, I believe that such a question as 'are there universals, independently of sensible objects?' fails to grasp the core of Plato's philosophy. But before judging the validity of this criticism, we should note on what assumptions the criticism is based. I examine the four main background assumptions, which I will outline in turn: first, the empiricist stance in considering reality; second, the modern epistemology of the self-identical *ego*; third, the devaluation of the image and imagination; and fourth, the restrictions on philosophy within academic research.

First, we find Aristotle, whom Fine mentions, firmly promoting the empiricist stance in considering reality. The philosophical position called empiricism assumes that reality is what we perceive and experience and nothing else. Aristotle argues that 'this particular man' or 'this particular horse' is a primary being, while kinds like 'man', 'horse', and 'animal' are secondary.¹⁰ Accordingly, he criticised the theory of Ideas, and regarded mathematical objects as mere abstractions from concrete things, in contrast to Plato, who placed them at a higher level than sensible things. Generally speaking, the empiricist position, which includes modern Anglo-analytic philosophy, is reluctant to admit anything other than what we experience and perceive in this world with our senses.

Second, modern philosophers are inclined to accept this criticism because of another assumption. After Descartes separated the *ego* or *res cogitans* from external things, called *res extensa*, the former

⁸ Plato, *Phaedo* 100B–C.

⁹ Cf. Fine (2003, pp. 252–300).

¹⁰ In his *Categories*, Aristotle distinguished between substances (e.g. horse, man) and attributes (e.g. white, one meter long), and between the individual (*kath' hekaston*) and the universal (*katholou*). He considered the Platonic Ideas as universal.

became the fixed viewpoint from which the world is perceived. The *ego* is a non-corporeal 'I' and thus a pure subject detached from the outer world. In this way, modern philosophy posits the cognitive subject 'I' which perceives objects and experiences the world. This was typically presented in Kant's notion of 'Apperzeption' or 'Ich selbst' and Husserl's 'transzendente Subjektivität'. These modern conceptions assume that the 'I' subject is self-identical, absolute, yet plays a cognitive role, like the viewpoint in perspective.

These background assumptions together raise a severe criticism of Platonic Ideas. If the cognitive subject is fixed as self-identical, and if reality is what we experience in this world, then the Ideas are nothing but abstract objects postulated in vain. They are redundant, and the theory is erroneous. Seen from this modern empiricist point of view, Plato's dualism is simply doubling realities. However, what is missing in modern epistemology (theory of knowledge) is a consideration of the possibility of change or a transformation of the 'I', whereas Plato believed that the subject 'I' will change in doing philosophy and see the world differently. He also believed that under different states of cognition, the world may also change. It should be noted that continental philosophers such as Hegel, Nietzsche, and Heidegger also considered this possibility.

The third modern assumption that prevents us from understanding the theory of Ideas is the devaluation of the image and imagination:¹¹ that is, to regard the image as meaningless in relation to reality, and to treat imagination as an inferior capacity. Although we know that Plato has been criticised as an 'iconoclastic' philosopher in the history of Western philosophy, since, in addition to the notorious criticism of poets in *Republic* Book X, he located the power of imagining at the lowest level of the four stages of our knowledge and cognition in Book VI, it is not Plato but we, modern readers who are deeply involved in sustaining this negative view of the image, assuming that it derives from Plato's metaphysics. To approach Plato's Ideas, however, we need to reform our conception of the image and imagination.

Fourth, the notion of 'philosophy' is different between Plato and our contemporary world. Modern universities across the world have departments of philosophy in which professional philosophers and students engage in academic research on philosophical problems and the history of philosophy. However, in antiquity, philosophy was

¹¹ 'Image' is a copy or a likeness of the original: e.g. a picture, a sculpture, a shadow, and a mental image. 'Imagination' is the capacity of making images.

not so much academic research as a way of life.¹² So while the theory of Ideas was not just a pure theory but a practice of living well, we can scarcely find any philosopher reading it in this way in contemporary universities.

By reconsidering these four background assumptions of modern philosophy, we may be able to understand Plato's Ideas more adequately. To this end, Japanese philosophers who have critically examined modern Western philosophy from their philosophical backgrounds can provide valuable insights.

2. Plato's Philosophy as Shaking our Conception of Reality

Sakabe Megumi (坂部恵, 1936–2009) taught at the Department of Philosophy at the University of Tokyo and re-evaluated Japanese traditional thought to reconsider modern Western philosophy. His main academic subject was Immanuel Kant, but he was one of the academic scholars who first introduced postmodern philosophers into Japan and took their attempts seriously. From this postmodern perspective, he was naturally critical towards Platonism, which he sought to overturn. But instead of replacing the traditional Platonic thinking with a new trend, Sakabe tried to shake its foundations by recalling the deep unconscious cultural resources that are common in Europe, especially in ancient Greece, and the East. He also pursued the philosophical potentiality of the Japanese language, including *Yamato-kotoba*, namely, native Japanese words, to reconsider or relativize Western philosophy.

In the collection of essays, *Hermeneutics of the Mask* (仮面の解釈学), published in 1976, Sakabe argued that modern Western philosophers assume the self-identical *ego* and take the world as 're-presentation' to the subject (what is called 'metaphysics of presence'). This modern obsession misses the important sense of *metamorphosis* (transformation) in philosophy. He presented our current situation as follows:

It is not simple for us today to awaken and recollect such experiences or feelings that shake our ordinary flat sense of 'real thing' and its 'shadow' in a deeper phase; experiences where we suffer some mixed feelings of awe and fear in recognising the higher revelation of reality in one's 'avatar', 'other', and 'shadow', which are most deeply related to one's own self; and situations

¹² Pierre Hadot discussed and demonstrated this point.

Noburu Notomi

where our ordinary flat sense of reality is reversed between light and dark (*yin-yang* 陰陽), and where a part of ‘shadow’ which is passed unnoticed in everyday life starts to speak with a vivid sense of reality. (Sakabe, 1976, p. 25, ‘A Sketch on *Kage*’, my translation)

To put forward an alternative, Sakabe examined the Japanese word ‘*kage*’ (shadow 影、陰、蔭). We may sometimes recognise in *kage* an appearance of a higher reality, as one may see there a part and the ‘other’ of our own self (*alter ego*). He then reminded us of Plato’s Simile of the Cave along with the ‘material imagination’ of Gaston Bachelard’s *L’eau et les rêves* (Sakabe, 1976, pp. 26–40, ‘A Sketch on *Kage*’). Sakabe suggested a fusion or interchange between *kage* and reality. *Kage* is not just an inferior appearance of the real object but contains the potential power of fundamentally shaking our consciousness and ordinary sense of reality; it awakens us and may lead us back to our origin.

The Japanese *kage* means ‘shadow’ or ‘image’, but also ‘light’. On the surface of water, it reflects (*utsu-su*) the world. Sakabe discussed the etymological connotation of ‘*utsu-shi*’, which comes from ‘*utsu-ru*’ (to transfer 写、映、移、遷、憑) (Sakabe, 1976, p. 191, ‘*Utsushi-mi*’). *Utsu-ru* basically means something emerging at another place with the same form and content. Therefore, its basic meaning is, first, a projection of the very form or shape on another place, second, a colour or scent transfers to another thing, and third, an evil spirit possesses something. In the last sense, *utsu-ru* may imply an emergence of the divine or a soul through divination, and a mysterious experience that someone becomes another. Its derivative word ‘*utsu-tsu* (現)’ means reality, but Sakabe noted that it does not correspond to ‘presence’ in Western traditional metaphysics. Rather, it signifies a transition or interaction between absence and presence, life and death, the invisible or formless and the visible and form. Between these, we see no absolute hierarchy since they reflect each other and transform between themselves to maintain an identity of *utsu-tsu*. Therefore, *utsu-tsu* occasionally overlaps with, or changes into, *yume* (夢, dream), as in the phrase ‘*yume utsu-tsu*’ (half asleep, half awake, or trance). This dynamic relation and balance constitute a reality, and therefore, transfer or metaphor (*metaphora*) is an essential factor of our world.

For Sakabe, although Plato is still the origin of Western metaphysics, he is at the same time a rich source of alternatives, just as Sakabe saw in old Japanese thoughts. His criticism of Western philosophy sheds light on Plato as its origin. With reference to the Simile

of the Cave, Sakabe pursued the interaction and transfer (*metaphora*) between thing and shadow, and self and object. The 'self' is not self-identical, as modern Western philosophers assume. This dynamic and flexible view on reality and the 'self' points to a philosophical motivation of Plato: that is, to shake our ordinary sense of reality, to reveal another phase, and to intimate another possibility of 'I'. This dynamism is what Sakabe believed philosophy should consider.

On the other hand, he tried to avoid hierarchical structuring of beings and rejected any idea of fixing the different stages, in particular Platonism as traditionally understood. So he went so far as to suggest radical interpenetration or fusion between thing and shadow, self and other, and reality and dream, which represents a typically Japanese way of thinking, as we see in Noh plays (能楽). The Noh mask is at once a face to cover reality and to reveal reality, or the mask itself is the reality that changes (Sakabe, 1976, pp. 3–23, 'An Essay on Hermeneutics of *Omote*'). Mask is '*omote*', which means front, surface, and face.

3. Plato's Philosophy as Experiencing the Ideas

Izutsu Toshihiko (井筒俊彦, 1914–1993) taught at Keio University in Tokyo, the Iranian Research Institute of Philosophy in Tehran, and McGill University in Montreal. As an active participant in Eranos (an intellectual discussion group meeting held in Switzerland since 1933) from Japan, he obtained a global reputation as a specialist in Sufism and Eastern Philosophy. In his first monograph *Mystic Philosophy: A Study on Greek Philosophy* (神秘哲学ギリシアの部), published in 1949,¹³ he tried to interpret Greek thought in terms of mysticism. This original approach illuminates one important aspect of Plato that has been neglected in Western scholarship: namely, Idea-experience as transformation of our soul.

Izutsu was born and brought up in the strong familial atmosphere of the 'East (東洋)'. In his youth, he discovered in Greek philosophy the crucial hints for transferring religious experiences into words (*logos*). In Eastern philosophy, especially Zen Buddhism, words or speech tend to be disbelieved and avoided; they say *Gonsen-fukyu* (言詮不及), that truth cannot be reached through words and

¹³ This book was first published in 1949 by Hikari-no-shobo. A later revised edition by Izutsu into two volumes was published by Jinbun-shoin in 1978. The two versions have been reprinted four times. I use the first version reprinted by Iwanami in 2019.

speech, and *Furyu-monji* (不立文字), that Spiritual enlightenment cannot be attained with words and letters. However, Izutsu believed that Greek thinkers had similar spiritual experiences as Eastern mystics, but unlike the latter, they succeeded in making their experiences ‘philosophy’ by means of *logos* (Izutsu, 2019, pp. 3–13). Therefore, he called the fusion of the conflicting elements of mysticism and philosophy ‘mystic philosophy (神秘哲学)’.

Izutsu treated Plato as the first culmination of Greek mystic philosophy. Plato’s philosophy completed the Orphic and Pythagorean mysticism of salvation of the soul. Taking the theory of Ideas as realisation of mystic philosophy, Izutsu claimed that ‘Plato’s dialecticians are nothing other than mystics’ (Izutsu, 2019, p. 108), and that ‘Idea-experiences must precede the theory of Ideas’ (Izutsu, 2019, p. 119).

Studying the mystical tradition in both the West and the East, Izutsu rehabilitated the philosophical role of the image. In his masterpiece *Consciousness and Essence* (意識と本質), published in 1983, he classified and examined three types of ‘Oriental’, of which the second is the symbolist philosophy that includes different forms of mysticism. He argued that this tradition takes the archetypal images in the subconscious domain to be the universal essence of reality, to be evoked through poetic or mythopoetic imagination. Izutsu first pointed out that human consciousness (意識) as a whole is image-productive and full of images.

The mystic tradition of Oriental philosophy sees the image experience as a kind of reality experience: for example, Shamanism experiences the real world as appearing as the world of images. Izutsu introduced the notion of the ‘imaginal world’,¹⁴ which is *more real* than what we ordinarily see as the ‘real world’, as a core in the mystic and Platonist philosophy of Suhrawardi (1154–1191). Izutsu discussed the image as follows:

For men of common sense who see things from the empirical basis, the ‘metaphor’ which lacks the material basis is nothing but the ‘likeness’, i.e. a shadowy thing. But from another viewpoint, this shadowy entity turns out to have far denser existence than real things in our empirical world. For Suhrawardi – and thinkers of Shamanism, Gnosticism, Tantrism – the things in what we call the ‘real world’ are nothing but literally ‘shadowy

¹⁴ This word ‘*mundus imaginalis*’ was coined by Henry Corbin in explaining Suhrawardi, the twelfth-century Persian Sufi philosopher, as opposed to the common adjective ‘imaginary’, which has always been treated negatively, i.e. as something *unreal*, in Western philosophy.

entities', or shadows of shadow. The true weight of reality lies in the 'metaphor'. Otherwise, how can we explain the overwhelming *reality*, for example, of the Tantric Mandala Space, which consists only of images? (Izutsu, 1991, pp. 203–204, section VIII, my translation)

In the hierarchy of realities, Suhrawardi posited the independent intermediary world that is governed by the cognitive power of imagination but which is nevertheless *more real* than the sensible world. From this, Izutsu took inspiration to rehabilitate the notion of images for understanding our deep consciousness. He pointed out the interesting fact that several philosophers of Islamic mysticism, namely Suhrawardi, Ibun Arabi, and Molla Sadra, regarded themselves as followers of Plato's philosophy and as interpreting his theory of Ideas in a new way.

By examining different stages or levels of reality and the self, based on Eastern philosophies, Izutsu aimed to return to a deeper phase of the undifferentiated state of our unconsciousness (無意識), far below our ordinary consciousness. He showed another extreme direction of Platonism, which ends in mystic unification with the Absolute.

4. Plato's Philosophy as Encounter with Ideas

Ino-ue Tadashi (井上忠, 1926–2014) lectured at Komaba Campus of the University of Tokyo and engaged with Plato and Aristotle in philosophically challenging ways. Unlike Sakabe and Izutsu, Ino-ue was a specialist in Greek Philosophy. He first studied Plato's later dialogues intensively, and his main research articles on these dialogues are included in his first book *Challenge from Konkyo* (根拠よりの挑戦), published in 1974.

Ino-ue's attitude towards the philosophy of Plato is clearly stated in one of his essays:

Of course, I seek a way to understand the Ideas (イデア理解の途). But the approach to it is not to discuss what the 'Ideas' are in the history of philosophy. That is only a reference and a point to consider. What counts is that we should truly *encounter* them '*ide-a-u* (出て遭う)', and that we clearly see what we encounter in the way of doing philosophy. (Ino-ue, 1985, p. 90, 'Revival of the Dead', my translation)

He identified the true philosophy with '*ide-ai* (出て遭い)', namely encounter with the Ideas. The Ideas are what grounds our reality

and are therefore called *Konkyo* (根拠, *archē*, ground or origin).¹⁵ Our reality is based or grounded on *that thing* behind, and we are grasped by that *Konkyo*. Ino-ue argued that philosophers, therefore, must recognise that we ourselves are a part of it.

The world of facts in which we live is *different* from what we seek in philosophy, i.e. *Konkyo*. This is how Ino-ue interpreted Plato's theory of Ideas. Plato suggested that we should separate ourselves from the confusing world of generation, and encounter another horizon of reality, namely Ideas. Ino-ue understood that 'separation' and 'participation' – the two key concepts of Platonic philosophy – indicate the relation between our factual world (a part) and the grounding *Konkyo* (the whole). He proposed that participation (*meta-echein*) means 'being grasped from behind (背後)' (Ino-ue, 1974, p. 141, 'Practice for *Ideai*').

We must recognise that 'separated-ness (離存性)', and '*koto-nari* (異なり)' (difference, *heteron*, *thateron*) from our horizon lie in the Ideas (*ideai*), which *are not* on our side, being separated from us. (Ino-ue, 1974, p. 143, 'Practice for *Ideai*', my translation)

Ino-ue devised many puns in the Japanese language and '*ide-a-i* (出で遭い)' is one of them: the plural of the Greek word 'Idea' and the Japanese word 'to encounter'. He took our philosophical mission as to respond to the challenge from *Konkyo* and to create ourselves as a work of the *Konkyo*. In other words, we must expose ourselves to *Konkyo* and carve ourselves to become his son '*ko-to-nari* (子となり)'.¹⁶ Although he emphasized the special experience of encounter, his stance was different from Izutsu, in so far as he avoided the label 'mysticism (神秘主義)'.¹⁷ In this way, Ino-ue understood philosophy not as mere theoretical enquiry or systematic research, but as a challenging way of living our own life in this world.

Although Ino-ue reached this position in the 1960s, he later became a harsh critic of Plato's philosophy. He considered Plato to

¹⁵ The term '*konkyo*' (German 'Grund') seems to show the deep influence of German mysticism on modern Japanese thoughts. Meister Eckhardt and other thinkers discussed God as the 'Grund' of all beings and emphasized '*unio mystica*'.

¹⁶ Ino-ue appealed to the etymological connection of *Yamato-kotoba*: '*koto/goto* (事, 言, 如, 同, 殊, 別, 異), in Ino-ue (1974, p. 161, 'Practice for *Ideai*'). This use of etymological association is shared with his former colleague, Sakabe Megumi.

¹⁷ Ino-ue criticised 'mysticism' as empty secrecy (Ino-ue, 1974, p. 216, '*Ideai*').

resort to an intuitive search for truth in the soul.¹⁸ He argued that, even if Plato encountered the Ideas and saw the truth (as Plato believed), this turned out to be another belief. Insofar as Plato heavily relied on his own conviction of the encounter experience, he can never come out of the closed, 'private' world of the soul. This, Ino-ue believed, was blind faith as opposed to philosophy.

I think that we should face his criticism of Plato, since it shows us how mystic understandings of Plato's philosophy reach an impasse. Ino-ue showed both a provocative but straightforward way for approaching the Platonic Ideas and its fundamental drawbacks.

5. The Theory of Ideas Reconsidered

Studying Plato first at the University of Tokyo in Japan and next in Cambridge (UK), I gradually realised that the essence of Plato's theory of Ideas may be missing in current philosophical studies. In my recent papers, both in English and Japanese, I emphasize the aspects of separation (離在), purification (浄化), and transcendence (超越) as the core concepts of Plato's philosophy.

We know that Aristotle identified 'separation' of intelligible things from sensible things as the essential aspect of Plato's theory of Ideas. This aspect was fully examined by Matsunaga Yuji (松永雄二, 1929–2021), a Plato scholar at Kyushu University and close friend of Ino-ue Tadashi. Matsunaga analysed the dynamism of 'separation' in the following way (Matsunaga, 1993, 'On the Separation and Participation of the Forms'). The Ideas are *separated* from many changing and conflicting *states of affairs*. We should stand away from the so-called conflicting appearances (for example, that something is both just and unjust, or beautiful and ugly) to realise the absolute being of the just or the beautiful. The Idea of the beautiful is beautiful *itself by itself*. Here 'separation' is twofold: it is separated from many beautiful things, on the one hand, and from the other Ideas, such as Ugliness and Justice, on the other. Matsunaga stressed the significance of correctly understanding 'separation' rather than 'participation' in Plato's theory of Ideas.

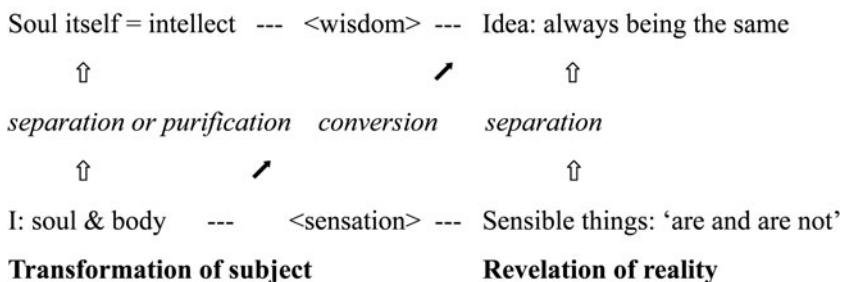
Following Matsunaga's interpretation, I suggest that Plato also used the concept of 'separation' in another way in the *Phaedo*: it

¹⁸ Ino-ue stayed abroad in the USA from 1967 to 1968. During this time he met G.E.L. Owen at Harvard University and was greatly influenced by Owen's analytic reading of Aristotle. This caused his radical shift from Plato to Aristotle.

also signifies the separation of the soul from the body, in the definition of death. Socrates says that the philosopher ‘does not concern himself with the body, but in so far as he can, *separates* himself from it, and concentrates upon the soul’.¹⁹ This separation enables the soul to reach the higher cognitive state called ‘wisdom’ (*phronesis*), concerning the Ideas. When Socrates characterises the soul in terms of ‘separation’, he connects it with the ontological ‘separation’ of the Ideas from sensible things. Thus, the double use of the word ‘separation’ for the soul and the Idea clarifies the close relationship between the soul and Ideas. The soul’s being alone by itself and the Ideas’ being themselves by themselves stand or fall together. They are correlative and make a pair.

We come to know the Ideas when the soul gets separated from the body to be alone by itself. This separating process is called ‘purification’. Here, the two ‘separations’ coincide to make an experience of transcendence:

Experience of transcendence



In this diagram, our initial state is at the bottom: the embodied soul perceives sensible objects which both *are* and *are not* so and so.²⁰ Then, as the soul becomes aware of something beyond these, it is separated and eventually becomes the true soul, that is, the intellect. Then it observes and knows purely the Ideas, which always *are*. This shift from the bottom to the upper stage is the double change of the subject and the reality. This experience can be traditionally called ‘transcendence (超越)’.²¹

¹⁹ Plato, *Phaedo*, 64E. For ‘separation’ in the *Phaedo*, see Notomi (2018).

²⁰ This confusing state is called ‘conflicting appearances’ in modern commentaries.

²¹ For the diagram, see Notomi (2018, p. 292).

Japanese Philosophers on Plato's Ideas

The theory of Ideas indicates not only the transcendence of the objects but also a transcending experience of the subject, namely our-selves. Therefore, although the Ideas may appear to be unnecessary and a mistake to the embodied soul in the corporeal world, once it gets separated, the intelligible world of Ideas is revealed as its proper object. In other words, at the lower stage, we live everyday life with bodily sensations and opinions, but we can proceed to the higher stage where we contemplate the Ideas with knowledge and wisdom.

I take transcendence and transformation of the subject as a response to 'care for the soul' in Plato's *Apology of Socrates* since it means to convert from the bodily concerns to our true self. The 'practice of death' in the *Phaedo* signifies the same conversion of the soul from various earthly things, such as property, honour, appearance, desire, and body, to the true self.²² In the transcendence experience, the transformation of our soul into its original form, namely intellect, undergoes a complete change of view of reality, from grasping confusing and conflicting sensibles to absolute and eternal Ideas. When the soul is awakened, the world appears totally different, and only then does the sensible experience seem like a dream. The philosophy of Plato awakens our soul from the dreaming state and helps us go up to contemplation of the Ideas and transform ourselves. If this interpretation is correct, the theory of Ideas is not just a theory about metaphysical entities, but an ethical practice of the soul.

This is my present reading of Plato's theory of Ideas, which in certain ways has been strongly influenced by my Japanese predecessors. Plato is a major philosopher who has had a great influence on Japanese thinking and society since the mid-nineteenth century. Since then, we have developed a new approach and proper reading for doing and living philosophy through philosophical dialogue with Plato.

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²² In Notomi (2013) I examine the continuity from the *Apology of Socrates* to the *Phaedo*.

Noburu Notomi

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