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A dialogue of life and death:

Transformative dialogue in the *Katha Upanishad* and Plato's *Phaedo*

The *Phaedo*, Plato's dramatization of the last hours of Socrates, his admired philosophy master, was probably written during the years 380–370 B.C., 20 or 30 years after Socrates had been tried for impiety and condemned to death (Dillon 2000: 526). However, the *Phaedo*, which was also known to the ancients as *On the Soul* (Cooper 1997: 49), cannot be relied on as an accurate historical account. Like other Platonic works from what are known as the Middle Dialogues—the *Gorgias*, *Symposium*, *Republic*, and *Phaedrus*—and perhaps even more intensely, the *Phaedo* is characterized by numerous elements of literary and pedagogical drama, such as theatrical tension, timing, tempo, pauses, and gestures, as well as being imbued with symbolism and myth (Cohen 1976: 317).

Another significant aspect of the Middle Dialogues that distinguishes them from the rest of Plato's corpus is their extreme metaphysical and ethical dualism, which involves an intense dismissal of the reality of the body, the senses, and the transient world (Cohen 1976: 317). This is perhaps most evident in the *Phaedo*, which presents, among other explicitly mystical meditations, the audacious claim that death is preferable to life since the philosopher, being formless, is finally free to merge into the desirable state of pure knowledge (Plato 1997: 58).

The *Phaedo*'s intense preoccupation with the notions of self-liberation and self-transcendence in the face of death is strikingly reminiscent of Hindu and Buddhist philosophies. It is therefore not surprising that comparative philosophers have shown great interest in comparing this particular Platonic work to various South Asian texts: The *Phaedo* has been compared to the philosophy underlying yoga and Patanjali, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, and *Mahāparinibbāṇa*

Sutta, the canonical account of the Buddha's final days (see, respectively, Gold 1996, Cohen 1976, Dillon 2000).

As Dillon (2000: 525, 539) remarks, *Phaedo*'s thematic closeness to doctrines developed in India during more or less the same historical period is so remarkable that it seems likely that there was a certain amount of cultural contact and influence. There is no substantial evidence of this, other than Pythagoras' alleged journey to India, where he absorbed Indian philosophy and sciences and probably embraced the theory of metempsychosis—a significant possibility that could illuminate the deeper roots of *Phaedo*'s Pythagorean orientation—and a brief, late anecdote depicting Socrates' philosophical conversation with an Indian who visited Athens (ibid., 526).¹ It is likely, however, that Plato drew on more immediate sources, since it was not only the Pythagoreans who cultivated the idea of ceaseless transmigration from which the soul struggles to be released, but also the Orphics and Empedocles (ibid., 539–540). Thus, although expounders of reincarnation were relatively rare and peripheral in ancient Greece, in contrast to ancient India, where there was mainstream and multi-religious agreement regarding reincarnation (ibid., 539), the *Phaedo* could have emerged from the fertile ground of Greek thought.

Among the various articles that have compared the *Phaedo* and particular Hindu and Buddhist texts, R. Raj Singh's (1994) analysis of the theme of death-contemplation as a catalyst for self-transformation in the dialogues of the *Phaedo* and the *Katha Upanishad* (c. 800–500 B.C.) is most relevant to our discussion.² In light of the existence of such comparative studies, one might question the necessity of yet another comparison between the *Phaedo* and South Asian texts—the *Katha Upanishad*, in particular. What gap am I aiming to fill in this article?

There are two major ways of considering the similarities and dissimilarities between the *Phaedo* and Hindu and Buddhist writings. The first and most obvious of these is thematic and

indeed all past comparisons, including Singh's,³ have been concerned with (and have succeeded in) establishing a common thematic ground. The other, less-traveled path is a methodological exploration—focusing less on what is said and more on the method of presentation in order to demonstrate the intense interrelation between content and form, that is, the way the form sheds light on the philosophical content. Several scholars have analyzed the *Phaedo* as a drama, exploring how this literary dimension discloses the philosophical content (see, for instance, Arieti 1991; Sedley 1995; Jansen 2013), and a few have also briefly treated its dialogical nature and structure (Sedley 1995: 3; Dillon 2000: 528; Kuperus 2007: 199–206). However, to the best of my knowledge, there is no comparative literature that seriously juxtaposes the dialogical character of Plato's works with that of the Upanishads, let alone that of the *Phaedo* with that of the *Katha Upanishad*.

In general, it is my contention that a form-based comparison between Plato's works and the Upanishads is worthwhile. The fact that these two literary projects frame most of their texts as dialogues seems to be relevant to the historical and philosophical shift represented and enabled by these works. Both Plato's writings and the Upanishads marked a transition from mythopoetic, ritual-based, and deity-oriented religions to perspectives that focused on the human mind's ability to liberate itself using the power of its own reason.⁴ Hence, we can identify in the two bodies of work the central themes of ignorance of one's true nature as the only source of bondage and suffering and, in contrast, self-knowledge as the only source of liberation (Gold 1996: 19–20). The dialogue form employed in these texts served to illustrate a new relationship between a teacher devoted to the release of the pre-existing but dormant powers of the student's mind and a fully engaged disciple who seeks and demands an experiential realization of the truth. The dialogue form was not merely an attempt to preserve the oral nature of the Socratic and the Upanishadic

traditions, nor was it employed only for the sake of a “more dramatic presentation of character and theme”—rather, it expressed the “necessity for dynamic interaction with other minds as an approach to the Truth” (Dillon 2000: 526), since it centered not on a systematic and absolute expression of the philosopher’s thought, but on the interlocutor’s existential realization. This type of transformative dialogue, introduced for the first time by Plato and the unknown authors of the Upanishads, was shaped and structured with the intention of effecting a lasting change in the minds and ways of life of both the fictional discussant and the potential reader or hearer.

Of course, this close, general affinity between the two works does not explain why I have decided to analyze the dialogical dynamics of Plato’s *Phaedo* and the *Katha Upanishad*. These two texts, I shall demonstrate in the following section, have enough common features for a comparative analysis to be fruitful; thus, by means of such an analysis, I will be able to discern notable divergences amid the texts’ common features. I will start by demonstrating how the two dialogues fulfill all of the conditions necessary for the realization of the transformative dialogue. I will then discuss significant differences in the dialogical dynamics, distinguishing between transformations that take place within the dialogue itself and secondary transformations that are expected to occur after and outside the discourse. I will also highlight other elements, such as aim, method, structure and tempo, the teacher–interlocutor relationship, the role of doubt, expectation, and the end result. Such differences, I believe, should lead us to conclude that although both dialogues “aim not to inform but to form” (Hadot 2009: 91),⁵ each belongs to a different stream or sub-category of the transformative dialogue: The *Phaedo* falls into the sub-category of the transformative *philosophical* dialogue, whereas the *Katha Upanishad* can be classified as a transformative *mystical* dialogue.

Death as an opportunity

The *Katha Upanishad* and the *Phaedo* have three important commonalities; two are textual and structural and one is thematic, though all three are intrinsically linked. The first important commonality is that both texts strive to leave their pedagogical mark on the reader through memorable and highly developed narratives, which abound with dramatic elements and allegorical layers. As Ahrens Dorf (1995: 1) notes, though many of Plato's books—particularly his Middle Dialogues—employ dramatic means to celebrate the triumph of the philosophical life, none of his other dialogues comes as close as the *Phaedo* to being a true tragic drama that overshadows the process of argumentation. Similarly, Easwaran (2007: 63–64) suggests that the *Katha Upanishad* has earned its popularity due to its exceptionally successful and dynamic allegory, which preserves the balance between the story and its archetypal significance. He further maintains that the *Katha Upanishad* is, in its structure and context, more of an organic whole than any of the other Upanishads (ibid., 66). Thus, whereas the dialogical structure is used in most of Plato's works and the Upanishads, the extended dramatization in both the *Phaedo* and the *Katha Upanishad* enables the presentation of humans who are confronted with an intense and overpowering reality—death itself—and have only philosophy as a weapon. Should the heroes emerge victorious, they will prove to the reader as well as themselves that their philosophy is indestructible, even in the face of death.

The second important commonality is thematic, which has already been recognized by Singh (1994: 9, 10, 12): the bond between death-contemplation and genuine philosophy. However, since this common theme could also be explored in treatise form or in a more focused dialogue, an even stronger case for the similitude of the two books can be made—the essentially similar

structures of the two narratives. The settings chosen by the Greek and Indian authors enable a seeker of truth (a young philosopher, if you will) to ask a spiritual authority about the nature of death and the possibility of the survival of the soul (Plato 1997: 55, 60–61; The Upanishads 2007: 72–73). But since these questions are posed in highly dramatic circumstances—Simmias and Cebes are sitting next to Socrates’ prison bed, a few hours before his unjustly imposed death, and Nachiketa is sitting in the house of death and his teacher is death himself—the interrogations in the texts are not abstract musings, but rather urgent inquiries. In both cases, the students do not ask for the truth, but demand it with such intensity that their teachers feel compelled to share their hidden knowledge and, at the same time, the students are more receptive to their teachers’ guidance (Easwaran 1997: 63–64).

The unusual settings of the two dramas also require the teachers to rise to the highest level of spiritual authority. This may not be so extraordinary in the case of the Upanishads, which contain many gurus who confidently reveal universal mysteries, although the god of death, who is the *Katha Upanishad*’s guru, is reluctant to assume this position at first (The Upanishads 2007: 73–74).⁶ However, it is quite a leap for Plato’s Socrates to shed all traces of irony and to be portrayed not as an orator, expositor, or intellectual midwife, but as someone who “teaches with his whole personality” (Cohen 1976: 318). Scholars have perceived this radical shift as evidence that, in the *Phaedo*, Plato, the theorist, is merely exploiting the historical figure of Socrates (see, for instance, Sedley 1995: 13). However, the *Phaedo* itself seems to offer a more convincing explanation. Socrates treats this last dialogue with his close students as his “swan song,” an opportunity to sing his most beautiful song in the knowledge that the end is near, in praise of his master, the god Apollo, and the underworld (Plato 1997: 74). We may assume that, in his last hours, even the historical Socrates would have preferred to establish his legacy in the hearts and

minds of his intimate disciples, rather than lead them to *aporia*—a state of philosophical puzzlement—to demonstrate once again the limits of human knowledge. It seems likely that a teacher such as Socrates would forgo his dialogical tactics in order to impart his most honest and direct realization and that he would emerge as a philosophical Heracles⁷ to combat, fiercely but constructively, his students' subtlest doubts until they are fully convinced that they should take good care of their own selves (Plato 1997: 97). Hence, the purportedly unreasonable shift from the *Apology*'s agnostic Socrates to the mystical figure in the *Phaedo* is not necessarily a departure from the historical figure of Socrates: In the *Apology*, Socrates defends his position in front of an angry crowd, whereas in the *Phaedo*, he devotes all of his energy to his discussion with a select group of philosophers who, as Ahrens Dorf (1995:9) shows, endeavor to embrace the philosophical life, despite the deadly hazards this entails.

However, the spiritual authority of Yama, the god of death, and that of Socrates, have a deeper commonality. In addition to being perfect gurus with mystical knowledge of the nature of death, Yama and Socrates are the face of death, dramatic representations of the underworld. In the Vedas, Yama was the first human to die and thereby initiated the path of mortality, which all humans have since followed, and became the ruler of the departed (Macdonell 1995: 172). But in the *Katha Upanishad*, Yama is requested by the boy Nachiketa to reveal an altogether different path: the path of immortality. This is extremely ironic since it implies that death should “put death itself to death” (The Upanishads 2007: 80) by leading a mortal to a realm in which the god of death himself is powerless and death is, truly, non-existent.⁸ In the *Phaedo*, Socrates is about to drink the hemlock potion and the preparations for his death, as well as his process of dying, are dramatically woven into the dialogue and often disrupt it. But he is not merely a dying person: In Cicero's words, Socrates' language makes him seem “not as one thrust out to die but as one

ascending to the heavens” (quoted in Ahrens Dorf 1995: 1). He speaks as if from the afterlife, as if he has already walked through death’s transparent gate. Like Yama, he is a human who will soon attain a deity-like status, abandoning his human incarnation and living for eternity in the presence of the gods (Plato 1997: 60).

In summary, in both texts we find evocative situations that allegorically represent the confrontation between individuals and the reality of death. However, these confrontations are philosophically constructive as they are based on the assumption that dying is ultimately a positive experience, a chance to reveal the truth about one’s original nature, which may be less accessible in life itself (Cohen 1976: 325). Accordingly, these circumstances allow keen students to pose burning questions about the nature of death and that which lies beyond it, thus giving their spiritual masters, who already embody the state beyond death, the opportunity to provide elaborate answers. These complex answers facilitate transformative death-contemplations that eventually give rise to a new state of mind and a different way of life, thus leading to the final resolution of the dramatic tension. Hence, theme and structure, or content and form, are deeply intertwined in both the *Phaedo* and the *Katha Upanishad*—an indication of a transformative dialogue that is centered not on a theoretical discussion, but on a genuine existential crisis. Drama and dialogue are, in both cases, powerful devices that aspire to involve fictional discussants and readers alike in a direct meditation on death and transcending death.

These striking resemblances enable me to bring important similarities and dissimilarities in the dialogical processes into focus—similarities and dissimilarities which, I argue, have much to convey to us philosophically.

Soul-liberation in the *Phaedo*

The *Phaedo* is one of several Western philosophical texts the interpretation of which greatly benefits from a thorough comparison with South Asian texts. All of the scholarly works mentioned above enable us to better grasp the profound themes with which Plato is preoccupied in this book and to classify it as a dialogue focused on self-transformation. Upon setting the Platonic dialogue and similar Indian and Tibetan texts side by side, it becomes even clearer that Plato's book is designed to radically affect the actual state of mind and way of life of the reader (Cohen 1976: 322). For instance, Gold (1996: 17–18) argues that commentators tend to overlook the centrality of the theme of *lisis* [freedom or deliverance], as well as the role of philosophy, to the achievement of this liberation in the *Phaedo*. He asserts that by drawing a comparison with Patanjali's *Yoga-Sutra*, the importance that Plato himself ascribes to soul-liberation finally becomes clear again (ibid., 17–18, 27). This is also the case when the *Phaedo* is brought into dialogue with the *Katha Upanishad*: Since the two works share an unequivocal passion for the potential liberation of the soul from illusory attachment to earthly identification, arising from a conscious confrontation with death, they complement each other as works primarily designed for soul-guidance.

However, even before elucidating the core intentions of the *Phaedo* through a comparison with the *Katha Upanishad*, there are at least four reasons to support the argument that the *Phaedo* chiefly functions as a liberating dialogue. Firstly, if any Platonic text provides a clear definition of what philosophy is, it is no doubt the *Phaedo*. Interestingly, Pierre Hadot (2002: 39–40, 44–47) asserts that it is in the *Symposium* that Plato gives new meaning to the term “philosophy” as an unfulfillable striving toward transcendent wisdom. While his observation does contain some truth, which I will discuss near the end of this article, Socrates' speech in the *Symposium* only elucidates the nature of the philosophical drive, while the *Phaedo* tells us, in numerous ways, that a

philosopher is one who is preoccupied with the “release and separation of the soul from the body” (Plato 1997: 58) and that philosophy’s aim is to persuade “the soul to withdraw from the senses” (ibid., 72). This makes it clear that for Plato philosophy is not the art of argumentation; philosophical argument is simply a purifying tool that helps the soul to withdraw from the sensory world and enter the realm of the Forms, thus extricating it from its false corporeal identity (ibid., 73; Singh 1994: 10–11). This act of purification is not driven by a moral or religious ideal, but by the mystical aim of self-knowledge, the final goal of which is a state comparable to that described in the Upanishads: a soul that is immersed in blissful formlessness and never again reincarnates (Plato 1997: 97). Given this explicitly trans-logical, mystical orientation, we may well wonder if and how Plato’s philosophy ultimately differs from mysticism, a question to which I shall return in the last section of this article.

The second reason for regarding the *Phaedo* as a liberating dialogue strongly supports the understanding that philosophy is not the process of argument construction: Although there is no doubt that the *Phaedo*’s Socrates deems his arguments extremely meaningful—for a man who is about to die, he invests a tremendous amount of energy in devising a complex set of four undefeatable “proofs” of the immortality of the soul—they are not the only method used to establish the importance of leading a life of philosophical dedication. Though analytical philosophical interpretations have focused on these four arguments, Socrates’ vital transmission of his fundamental approach to philosophy and death is conveyed more effectively through other dramatic means (Singh 1994: 10). The text weaves the practice and demonstration of the philosophical method into a broader drama that is replete with emotional tensions and either fearsome or alluring mythical elements (Jansen 2013: 338, 341). Even the crisis of faith that takes place between the third and fourth arguments, during which Socrates warns against misology (the

hatred of arguments) that inhibits the search for wisdom, is embellished with emotional and mythical details (Plato 1997: 77). After all, as Cebes, one of the two main discussants, states, believing the soul to be immortal requires both “a good deal of faith and persuasive argument” (ibid., 60).

The fact that the “proofs” are not all that persuasive in the eyes of most scholars may not be, in itself, a reason to suspect that Plato thought they were unimportant. But this at least somewhat reaffirms Hadot’s theory that the frustrating experience of the modern reader engaging with the ancient texts is based on a fundamental misunderstanding, since, broadly speaking, Greek philosophers did not aim to provide systematic theories in the first place (Davidson 1995: 19; Hadot 2009: 90). What drove Plato to write the *Phaedo* was not necessarily his conviction that he had come up with the ultimate proof of the soul’s immortality; rather, he sought to outline a more general view underlying these theories (Cohen 1976: 319). This may explain why the arguments are founded on unchecked axioms, which everyone accepts unreservedly, such as Socrates’ statement that “the gods are our guardians” and “men are one of their possessions” (Plato 1997: 54). We ought to recall that according to the theory of Forms, which is unconditionally accepted by all the discussants, “learning is no other than recollection” (ibid., 63), hence the arguments do not constitute a constructive theory, but instead serve as reminders of an untaught, innate truth. It is only when one fails to find this truth for oneself that one should adhere to the “most irrefutable of men’s theories” and use this as a raft to “sail through the dangers of life” (ibid., 74). So, if the arguments are not the centerpiece of the *Phaedo*, what is Plato striving to achieve? This leads us to the third reason that the *Phaedo* should be read as a book of transformation.

Nowhere in the text do we find an indication that Socrates succeeds in guiding his discussants toward an experiential fulfillment of the philosophical goal of stripping their souls of

their earthly costumes (nor does any expectation of such fulfillment appear in the book). However, there is a great deal of evidence that the transformation that the *Phaedo* seeks to effect is the dispelling of any doubts in the hearts of Socrates' students concerning the superiority of the philosophical life. Ahrens Dorf (1995: 9–12, 15) convincingly argues that the aim of relieving the discussants' fears in the face of death was not purely existential, but also arose within a more pressing political context: The young philosophers encircling Socrates' deathbed were witnessing how the philosophical life can lead to execution, at a time characterized by the persistent persecution of philosophers. Sophists and philosophers, from Pythagoras and the Pythagorean community to Xenophanes and Zeno, were either exiled or condemned to death and several philosophers—among them Anaxagoras, Protagoras, and Diagoras—were accused and convicted of impiety both for political reasons and for dishonoring the gods of the ancient cities (ibid.). Even Simmias, Socrates' other main discussant in the *Phaedo*, bitterly remarks that the majority of men agree that “philosophers are nearly dead” and that “they deserve to be” (Plato 1997: 55). In such a climate, it is reasonable to suppose that Plato's aim was not so much to establish the doctrine of the soul's immortality as it was to demonstrate in an unforgettable fashion the immortality of philosophy itself—philosophy's capacity to overcome the oppressive Athenian regime, doubt and the frailty of the human heart, and, ultimately, life and death.

This brings us to the fourth and last reason: The way in which Socrates approaches his imminent death is the truly unfailing “argument” that establishes the triumph of the philosopher's spirit and the philosophical method alike (Sedley 1995: 20–21; Singh 1994: 10). Only by showing how the Socratic philosophy is expressed in a moment of truth can both participants and readers be persuaded that philosophy can be a way of life. The drama that Plato masterfully weaves makes it impossible for the reader to remain entirely focused on the process of argumentation. Even when

the discussion becomes intensely engaging, it is hard to forget the tragic context in which it is taking place. And lest we do forget, Plato frequently disrupts the dialogue with real-life proofs of how unyielding Socrates' position is, as, for example, when Socrates ignores his executioner's recommendation to speak less in order to avoid the torment of drinking more poison (Plato 1997: 55) or when he laughs at Simmias' and Cebes' hesitation to present further qualms that may bother him in his "present misfortune" (ibid., 74). It is the dramatic contrast between the severity of the situation and Socrates' astonishing equanimity that reinforces his philosophical worldview and reaffirms his ability to teach us (ibid., 51); it is clear that the lifelong practice of philosophy has made him extraordinarily available and fully capable of responding with compassion and patience to disciples who are troubled by their own fears, even in the face of his own death (ibid., 77).⁹ In the end, witnessing how Socrates dies proves to be the most truly successful therapy. Herein lies the value of the dramatic transformative dialogue, which, in its insistence on presenting a concrete situation, aims to vividly demonstrate the change it endorses.

“Know thyself to be pure and immortal!”¹⁰

The *Katha Upanishad* is also a dramatic transformative dialogue, in that it not only speaks of self-transformation, but also depicts a human in the process of transforming. However, unlike Plato, who attempts to establish his text as a historical document, the *Katha Upanishad*'s author presents a purely allegorical drama. A psychologically and spiritually mature boy named Nachiketa criticizes his father for making a shallow and hypocritical religious offering. When his angered father exclaims that he would give his own son as an offering to death, the sincere Nachiketa recognizes the truth in it: Sooner or later, we are all offered to the lord of death (The Upanishads

2007: 69). Thus, Nachiketa visits the house of death to request *vidya* [ontological knowledge], first-hand mystical truth about that which lies beyond death. There, his sincerity is tested twice: First, when he is expected to wait for Yama for three full days and second, when Yama offers to grant him a great abundance of earthly pleasures in place of the transcendent knowledge he seeks (ibid., 73–74). Eventually, the reserved deity acknowledges the exceptional ardor of the young seeker and reveals himself to be a “delighted teacher” (Easwaran 1997: 66). From then on, the dialogue mostly consists of Yama’s monologues, which culminate in Nachiketa’s *jivanmukti*, that is, soul-liberation while still in a human body.

As soon as we bring the *Katha Upanishad* and the *Phaedo* into dialogue, it becomes clear that the request Nachiketa makes of the deity is not essentially different from the request Simmias and Cebes make of their philosophy master. These three students, who represent the truth-seeking aspect of the ideal reader, ask for existential certainty rather than theoretical or objective knowledge. Although Socrates’ disciples are more doubtful than Nachiketa about their chances of attaining profound self-knowledge (Plato 1997: 74), they still hope for a “divine doctrine,” the certitude of which could alleviate the fears of their inner child (ibid., 68, 74). It is also evident that Yama and Socrates are not particularly keen to impart arcane knowledge of the subtle realities of the hereafter—even though both eventually provide metaphysical descriptions and hints (The Upanishads 2007: 87; Plato 1997: 92–97)—since, as masters of inner transformation, they deploy death to foster liberation here and now. For both, beholding the face of death, as Nachiketa puts it (The Upanishads 2007: 74), leads to a radical change in one’s relationship with life: the realization that it is vitally important to engage in focusing on and cultivating knowledge of the soul’s reality (Plato 1997: 92). Since the soul is immortal, death is not an escape, but rather the continuation of one’s ignorance or one’s awakening (ibid.). This shared recognition gives shape to psychagogic

dialogues, the immediate purpose of which is to encourage discussant and reader alike to purify themselves of earthly identities and attachments, both during and after the discourse, through inquiry, self-control, and meditation.

The historical shift from deity-oriented and ritual-based religious practice to the immanent power of self-liberation—as represented by the Upanishads and Plato’s dialogues—is particularly evident in these texts, which are concerned with the ultimate fate of the soul. Neither prescribes specific righteous acts that grant deliverance and although the texts do not deny the value of religious ceremonies and offerings (Plato 1997: 100; The Upanishads 2007: 71–72), they consider them secondary and limited (Plato 1997: 60; The Upanishads 2007: 69). They also leave no hope for divine salvation before or after death. Certainly, deities are mentioned in both works (after all, Yama himself is a deity), but not as forces that can save humans from themselves. In the *Katha Upanishad* (Upanishads 2007: 79), for instance, God may bestow the grace of self-revelation, but only upon those aspirants who have made immense efforts. The primary effort that is required of aspirants is insight, which can be achieved through single-minded, contemplative dialogue between sincere souls. Such dialogue helps to turn the discussant’s gaze toward the divine element that resides not in the heavens, but within his or her mind, and that is not formed, but is, rather, exposed (ibid., 90; Ganeri 2013: 117–118).

What Nachiketa is expected to find when he looks into his mind—the “indivisible Atman” (Upanishads 2007: 91)—is not substantially different from Socrates’ concept of the soul, which is “most like the divine, deathless, intelligible, uniform, indissoluble, always the same as itself” (Plato 1997: 70). Nevertheless, since the object of discussion is the subject doing the discussing and since the self is a presence that is separated from both the mind and the senses (Domanski 2006: 50; Schiltz 2006: 461), this divine element exists outside the boundaries of the verbally

objectifying discourse; it is a non-object that, as Wittgenstein famously put it, “can be shown” but “cannot be said” (Wittgenstein 2020: 4.1212). Hence, the two masters not only draw on their own experiential knowledge, but also attempt to bring this knowledge to life as a direct realization in their students. It makes sense that both sanctify stillness as a method of contacting this truth: Yama proclaims that through “complete stillness ... one enters the unitive state” (The Upanishads 2007: 91) and Socrates remarks that “one should die in good omened silence” and therefore requests that his students keep quiet and control themselves (Plato 1997: 99).

The awakening of the discriminating intellect (*buddhi* or *vijnana* in the *Katha Upanishad* and *nous* in the *Phaedo*) is still of great importance, since it has the dual role of harnessing and directing the body and the lower mind and turning the mind’s attention away from external objects and toward the innermost reality of the self (Domanski 2006: 50, 52–53; Schiltz 2006: 460). This dual role is deeply related to the practice of purification, which is strongly endorsed by Plato and the anonymous Upanishadic author: Purification is exercised in the dialogue itself—when the intellect guides the mind, through the cleansing power of wisdom, toward an unwavering rejection of the senses—and outside the dialogue, when the intellect commits the body and the mind to a self-controlled, spiritually elevating way of life. In both texts, the practice of purification is not ethically oriented; rather, it stems from an ontological recognition—the lucid awareness of death that leads us to acknowledge the meaninglessness of transient possessions and events and to wisely determine to invest in the imperishable self—and it is cultivated for the sake of the attainment and embodiment of this knowledge (The Upanishads 2007: 80; Schiltz 2006: 461–462). In the words of *Phaedo*’s Socrates, purification is the act of separating the soul “as far as possible from the body” (Plato 1997: 58). Thus, the problem is existential—ignorance of oneself—and if it is resolved, an ethical engagement in life naturally follows.

In his parting words, Yama twice exclaims, “Know thyself to be pure and immortal!” (The Upanishads 2007: 92). It is this recognition of a pre-birth purity—accessible through inquiry and meditation, when “the soul passes into the realm of what is pure” and experiences itself as untainted by even the slightest corporeality (Plato 1997: 70)—that drives us to lead a life of virtue. One’s choice of the perennial joy of wisdom is reflected in a way of life that rejects the senses and transient pleasure. The other way of life, that of satisfaction of the senses, necessarily implies a rejection of this wisdom (Schiltz 2006: 459).¹¹ The disciple should be concerned with purification with the mystical aim of striving to merge into pure knowledge or the Godhead. Since the impure cannot attain purity (Plato 1997: 58), whereas “pure water poured into pure water becomes the very same” (The Upanishads 2007: 86), one can only effect this much-anticipated reunion in one’s untainted Self-form.

Thus, the transformative orientation of these two dialogues derives from their shared commitment to this kind of purification process. Both express, implicitly and explicitly, unshakable confidence in the power of their dialogical dynamics to lead the reader toward a complete realization of this purification, which ultimately uncovers that which is already pure. This commitment is demonstrated by the fact that those on both sides of the discussion—the students and the teachers—fulfill all the conditions necessary for the realization of the transformative dialogue.

The students—Nachiketa, Simmias, and Cebes—open the dialogue by raising a question that is literally a matter of life and death, to which they seek an existential resolution. None of them pretends to possess transcendent knowledge and they are willing to jettison the disturbing weight of their accumulated ordinary knowledge. All three profoundly trust that their teachers are embodiments of a complete knowing. Driven by their sincere wish to be transformed *while* the

discussion is taking place, they remain in a state of active listening throughout the entire interaction and collaborate with the teachers by making a personal effort to engage in the process. Thus, they elicit not only their own latent existential truth, but also the secret truth that lies dormant within their teachers' minds.

Socrates and Yama insist not on imparting their perfect knowledge or enforcing their authority, but, rather, on enabling their interlocutors to attain insight by themselves, since they hold that the knowledge sought already lies dormant in the student and must therefore be generated by the individual in the form of an awakened memory. This recognition of the mutual dependency necessary for a successful outcome to the interaction contributes to their unique role as an authority that is respectful, friendly, and open at all times. Although the dialogue is not an open-ended discussion and there is a natural hierarchy that arises from the students' acknowledgment of their teachers' mastery of self-transformation, it is, ultimately, a non-hierarchical conversation between souls, in which one participant happens to be maturer and more practiced at self-remembrance. Finally, both Socrates and Yama exhibit existential certainty, a charismatic presence, and a radiating confidence on which their students rely, as well as an ability to lend their powers of self-inquiry to their interlocutor until they can see through their own eyes.

Nevertheless, the fact that the *Katha Upanishad* and the *Phaedo* are both characterized by a passion for transformative purification does not mean that there are no profound dissimilarities that specifically delimit the transformation offered by each. I will devote the rest of this article to these important distinctions, which prove that each work belongs to a different sub-category of the transformative dialogue.

Where mystical thought diverges from philosophy

Transformative dialogue is intended to provide us, the readers, with an opportunity to observe humans like us aspiring to turn an ontological truth into a living revelation in their minds and hearts through various forms of intense reflection. In rare instances, the author may choose to depict a failed attempt at this in order to further illuminate the untapped potential of the transformative dialogue. However, whether a dialogue is considered a success or a failure depends on the particular aims of the specific tradition to which it belongs.

As I have demonstrated in this article, the objectives of the Socratic tradition and the Upanishadic sages, as explicitly stated in the *Phaedo* and the *Katha Upanishad*, are essentially similar: Both developed a dualistic approach that perceives one's original self as utterly independent of one's physical existence. Accordingly, they are concerned with the purification of the soul, or Atman, from contaminating attachments to the sensory world and its accompanying earthly identity. Consequently, in Plato and the Upanishads alike, ethical behavior results from this ontological commitment, since the motivation to lead a pure life is mystical rather than moral. This reaffirms my thesis that Platonian philosophy and Upanishadic thought share a common conception of the final goal of both the philosopher and the mystic, as well as the path leading to the fulfillment of this goal.

However, this shared destination does not necessarily imply that the two traditions deploy their method of transformative dialogue in order to achieve the same results. I propose that the various transformations that are made possible by this form of dialogue can be divided into two types: major transformations that take place within the dialogue itself and secondary transformations that are expected to occur after and outside the discourse. On the basis of this distinction, we can deduce that it is not possible to evaluate the success of a transformative

dialogue without considering what it set out to achieve in the first place.

If the success of a transformative dialogue is evaluated solely on its ability to bring about an immediate existential change in the discussant, then we must conclude that the *Phaedo* and the rest of Plato's dialogues are failed dialogues. Surely, not a single one of the philosophers surrounding Socrates' deathbed actually experiences the immortality of the soul. Simmias, one of the two major discussants, remains hesitant to embrace the Socrates' conviction, even after accepting the validity of the arguments made, because of the enormity of the subject and the frailty of the human heart (Plato 1997: 92). In response, Socrates himself agrees that the initial hypotheses require further examination and analysis and expresses the hope that the argument will be perfected by others after his death (ibid.). Crito disappoints Socrates by asking him, "How shall we bury you?" after an entire discourse dedicated to proving that he, Socrates, cannot die (ibid., 98). And when Socrates drinks the hemlock, all of his students burst into tears; Phaedo states that they were grieving for their own loss and not for their master's fate, but Socrates still needs to hush them and to lead them back to the detached and transcendent view of the soul (Sedley 1995: 17–18). As Dillon (2000: 530–531) points out, much of the drama in the *Phaedo* derives from the contrast between the master's serenity and the students' doubts and emotional distress. In the end, it becomes clear that only Socrates' behavior and action are truly consistent with the knowledge of the Forms; thus, we are shown the limits of the logos—its inability to bridge the gap between intellectual agreement and authentic experience and to penetrate the heart of the disciple through successful dialectic (ibid., 531–532).

Other works written by Plato end in a similarly disappointing tone. The *Euthyphro* concludes with Socrates ironically begging Euthyphro not to walk away from him, leaving him, Socrates, in the darkness of ignorance (Plato 1997: 16); the *Symposium's* anti-climactic ending

describes how Socrates attempts to bring his argument to a conclusion while everyone around him is too fatigued to follow his line of reasoning (ibid., 505); the *Alcibiades* seems to end with Alcibiades' encouraging promise that he will dedicate himself to self-cultivation, but Socrates responds with disbelief, poignantly remarking that sooner or later Alcibiades will be defeated by Athens' overwhelming powers (ibid., 595); and the *Republic* concludes with Socrates' conditional and future-dependent statement that "if we are persuaded by me, we'll believe that the soul is immortal and able to endure every evil and every good" (ibid., 1223).

In stark contrast, the *Katha Upanishad* culminates in Nachiketa's total and irreversible transformation. Not only has he learned the entire discipline of meditation, but he has also freed himself from existential separation and achieved "immortality in Brahman" (The Upanishads 2007: 97). It is unclear whether the boy has attained this remarkable state at the end of this one dialogue, as a later result of this one dialogue, or after a long period of discussions and meditative practices of which the written dialogue is only a representation. The *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* concludes with the great creator deity Prajapati recognizing the complete understanding his children have achieved as a result of his one-syllable teaching (ibid., 118). And the *Chandogya Upanishad*'s last sentences are an exclamation most likely by Indra that, after 101 years of studies with his master, he has attained the "pure realm of Brahman" and will never again be lost (ibid., 152).

Moreover, if content and form are indeed inseparable in texts written by authors from transformative schools of thought, we should expect that the way the dialogue evolves will reflect and demonstrate the subject under discussion—death, in the case of the *Katha Upanishad* and the *Phaedo*. Hence, death should not merely be the topic discussed, but also the method with which the dialogue enables transformation. In this regard, the *Katha Upanishad* presents a successful

process: Nachiketa not only converses with Yama, but also manages to merge his mind with the mind of Death himself. One could say that he goes through death and experiences what can be thought of as a rebirth in the formless form of an immortal being. In the *Phaedo*, on the other hand, the initiatory process is completely absent and death remains an object of contemplation. The concept of death, however, does undergo a radical abstraction: It develops from a physical event into a metaphor for a conscious philosophical life; death becomes a practice, a spiritual exercise, in the sense of dying to the world.

One can only assert that the *Phaedo* is a failed dialogue if one insists that a transformative dialogue should culminate in a major metamorphosis that takes place in the hearts and minds of the discussants within the dialogue itself. It is my contention that Plato does not aim to show that his form of philosophical dialogue can lead to such drastic mystical enlightenment. Rather, he is occupied with the transformative dialogue's other purpose: the secondary transformations that are expected to occur after and outside the discourse. The fact that the Indian and Greek dialogues eventually diverge in their striving toward different purposes demands our attention. When Schiltz (2006: 451, 455), for instance, attempts to show, in her comparison of the *Katha Upanishad* and Plato's *Phaedrus*, that the two creations intend to direct the student toward the best way of life, she seems to overlook the ending of the Indian text, which tells us that the *Katha Upanishad* not only justifies the choice of a "life spent in pursuit of wisdom," but endorses direct and immediate self-realization, after which the individual is no longer his or her ordinary self. No doubt, the *Phaedrus* is zealously devoted to the aim of directing the reader toward the ideal life: Its extensive mystical, mythical, and poetic descriptions (Plato 1997: 524–529) are designed to recover the soul's memory and, thus, to inspire the philosopher's soul to apply the practical aspects of the doctrine of the Forms as intensely as possible. The *Phaedo* is even keener to

accomplish the task of persuading hearers and readers to practice philosophy, both in its ultimate form of withdrawing the soul from any physical interferences and in its intellectual and practical form of the philosophical method.

If we measure the success of the *Phaedo* in terms of its ability to persuade us of the indomitable power and nobility of the philosophical way of life, we are likely to conclude that it has indeed left a deeply humbling impression on us. The *Phaedo*, in this sense, is Socrates' final defense of philosophical commitment (Plato 1997: 55; Ahrens Dorf 1995: 2), as well as a defense of the figure of the true philosopher. As such, it works extremely well: Owing to the *Phaedo*, "The dying Socrates became the new ideal, never before encountered" (Nietzsche, quoted in Hadot 2002: 41). The conviction that Plato strives to instill in us is not achieved through perfect, undoubtable arguments—after all, as the author of a non-historical literary work, he could have easily re-shaped Simmias' and Crito's responses to avoid leaving unresolvable suspicion and confusion in the text. Rather, he seeks to demonstrate how an unwavering commitment to philosophy as a way of life gives rise to a great being such as Socrates, how philosophical contemplation prepares a human for the fearsome encounter with death, and how the philosophical method can be employed as the soul's weapon against confusion and adversity, even if that weapon requires constant honing.

Since the *Phaedo* and other works by Plato are designed to prepare the reader for a commitment to the philosophical life that can only take place after the dialogue has occurred, they do not depict sudden alterations in the existential state of the discussants or mystical victories, as the Upanishads do, nor do they encourage the interlocutor to attempt to effect such transformations during the dialogue. Rather, their role is to deeply convince hearers and readers; that is why they make use of arguments (Hadot 1995: 92), which are intended to prove a point,

even when they ultimately seek to effect a mystical end and a radical transformation in this lifetime. While no logical argument can lead us to a direct experience, such arguments are often persuasive enough to propel us to adhere to the practice to which they related. Thus, a growing conviction as a result of a sound argument is an indication that Socrates and his partners have made progress in the dialogue. Nevertheless, Plato's dialogues establish the doctrines of Plato's academy, settle students' doubts, and constantly re-align the mind with the practice of self-purification, using not only logic, but also myth, poetry, and the living example of the teacher. After Socrates finishes telling his lengthy myth of the afterlife in the *Phaedo*, he adds that such extensive and repetitive descriptions act like incantations for one's mind and eventually establish therein a firm trust in the reality of the soul's immortality (Plato 1997: 97). Interestingly, in the same breath, he emphasizes that no reasonable person would insist that the reality of the afterlife is precisely as he described it (ibid.).

Indeed, it is evident that the *Phaedo* encourages and embraces intellectual skepticism and critical thinking. Plato's elaborate description of the philosophical crisis that disheartens not only the main discussants, Simmias and Cebes, but also the silent participants (ibid., 73–79), and Plato's choice to leave Simmias in doubt and Crito in misunderstanding (ibid., 92, 98) are not merely designed to serve as a contrast to the outstanding figure of Socrates. Constructive doubts are inherent in the philosophical method itself. The philosopher never claims to possess absolute authority (Dillon 2000: 546); in fact, he is susceptible to the scrutiny of the interlocutor, as well as his own ongoing re-evaluation. A truth can be established, rather than being eternally re-considered, only after one has ensured that it is founded on a chain of thoroughly tested arguments. If there is even the slightest shadow of a doubt, the dialogue does not have to conclude with a triumphant and definitive statement. Since philosophy's project is, at least to an extent, a

continuous one and its dialectic is “an ‘open’ method” (Kuperus 2007: 193), the dialogue’s open end is not an indication of failure; on the contrary, it leads to further discussion, an invitation to a deeper commitment, or a more engaged practice (Nicholson 2015: 159–160).

We find no such ongoing re-examination or open-endedness in the *Katha Upanishad*. Whereas the *Phaedo* is structured as a continuous conversation, an intense back-and-forth of highly absorbing dialogue that is intended to disperse doubt and establish conviction, the *Katha Upanishad*’s interest in an on-the-spot, complete realization dictates an altogether different dialogical rhythm. Nachiketa starts as a demanding questioner, but soon disappears into the background, giving way to Yama’s lengthy answers—which are, in fact, monologues within the dialogue. This uninterrupted discourse allows for a meditative assimilation of both verbal and non-verbal messages, increasing the discussant’s alignment with the teacher’s guidance, the ultimate aim of which is for the student to become one with that which the teacher is consistently pointing at. To achieve this instant enlightenment, one does not need to be persuaded, so no arguments are employed. What is required is “not so much instruction as inspiration” (Easwaran 2007: 20), a constant repetition and elaboration of a number of encoded messages that magically illuminate the student’s interior (see, for instance, the seven verses that end with the same exclamation, “For this Self is supreme!,” in *The Upanishads* 2007: 83–86). Though an ascetic way of life is laid out, the disciple’s insight occurs within the boundaries of the discourse, hence the discourse does not merely prepare the disciple, but makes transformation possible.

This sense of precious opportunity makes it clear that Nachiketa’s silence does not imply that his presence is a mere literary device that aids in the unfolding of Yama’s teaching. On the contrary, the fulfillment of the dialogue rests entirely on his shoulders. If the implementation of the guidance is instantaneous, Nachiketa must be extraordinarily alert to seize the opportunity

and to become the knowledge himself by strongly identifying with it until he reaches a state in which any distinction between the listening subject and the object of discussion falls away (Nagler 2007: 315–316). This diverges profoundly from the inner work expected of the *Phaedo*'s young philosophers. Simmias and Cebes must carefully and diligently follow Socrates' process of argumentation and test its validity and therefore cannot afford to allow him to proceed without them. The fact that most of Socrates' statements are met with plain agreement—which may arouse suspicion that the dialogue is, in actuality, a monologue—only exemplifies the importance of the interlocutors following the argumentation for the success of the Platonic dialogue: The intensely interdependent nature of the dialogue means that it is extremely important that Plato keep adding these affirmatory responses—without the interlocutor's pronounced agreement, Socrates could not continue. Plato juxtaposes Simmias and Cebes to demonstrate how a student, like Simmias, can fail to retain a balance between critical thinking and profound conviction and how another student, like Cebes, can constructively apply the philosophical method by raising wise opposing arguments and, at the same time, embracing an argument once convinced (Plato 1997: 83, 92).

But if it is true that Plato's dialogues do not aspire to effect the mystical state so clearly longed for by the participants, if they are indeed but a method of persuasion and preparation for the philosophical activity that can only take place afterwards, it is worth asking: Did Socrates or Plato advocate practices other than arguments that could authentically lead to the experiential condition of the immersion of the soul in “the realm of what is pure, ever existing, immortal and unchanging” (ibid., 70) and, finally, to a bodiless existence in indescribably beautiful realms (ibid., 97)? I demonstrated above that in the *Phaedo* the definition and purpose of philosophy according to Socrates are mystically oriented and should be distinguished from the philosophical

method. This implies that philosophy is far more revolutionary in what it demands of us than the process of argumentation could ever be. Plato's faithful reader may intuit that the author directs him or her toward certain practices outside the discourse—for instance, when one reads of Diotima's stairs of beauty in the *Symposium* (ibid., 492–494) or when one reads in the *Phaedrus* of the refinement of sexual and romantic infatuation that culminates in the soul's ability to grow its wings (ibid., 528–533). Indeed, such poetic speeches can, in themselves, awaken in the reader a limited degree of meditative immersion in the Forms, or, at the very least, the longing for such immersion. And there are certainly moments when Socrates seems to practice not dialectic, but intense forms of quiet reflection (*Symposium*, in Plato 1997: 460, 502). However, there is no evidence in Plato's oeuvre as a whole that he or Socrates endorsed other spiritual exercises.¹² It may be speculated that certain spiritual exercises were practiced at Plato's academy, but since the dialogues were intended to be read publicly (Hadot 2009: 52–53), Plato chose to depict these practices in a concealed, metaphorical manner.¹³ After all, philosophy in ancient Greece was a life-threatening activity, whereas the forest sages of the Upanishads, though explicitly challenging the status of the mythopoetic worldview, could thrive in a non-hostile environment (Sarma, quoted in Nagler 2007: 297–298).

Complete and incomplete endings

These important dissimilarities—in the dialogue's purpose (definition of success and failure and fundamental expectation), the teacher–interlocutor relationship, the main method (argument/repetition), the rhythm and nature of exchange, the role of doubt (encouraged/irrelevant), the final outcome (open/closed ending), and the truth that is revealed

(truth in progress/final truth)—signify an even more radical difference. They demonstrate that although Plato’s dialogue is full of mystical thought and is designed to evoke in the reader the longing for mystical self-liberation, it is not, on the whole, a mystical text. In the final analysis, I contend that the *Phaedo* and the *Katha Upanishad* belong to different subtypes of the transformative dialogue: The *Phaedo* is a transformative philosophical dialogue, whereas the ancient Indian work is a transformative mystical dialogue. These sub-categorizations are broadly applicable to all of Plato’s dialogues and the Upanishadic compendium of dialogues. Moreover, these divergent paths demonstrate that although these two traditions engaged in transformative ideas and practices that centered on the liberation of the soul and the importance of self-purifying activities as the path leading to such liberation, there is still a substantial difference between the nature of the philosophy celebrated by the Greeks and the mystical thought developed by the Upanishadic sages.

Philosophy, as Socrates and Plato understood it, seems to maintain the tension between one’s striving toward a final attainment of the truth and one’s inability to achieve complete knowledge. Although the *Phaedo* leaves little doubt that Socrates attained a profound experiential revelation of the unadulterated soul, Socrates makes it clear at the beginning of the dialogue that it is impossible for the philosopher to achieve “any pure knowledge” while in the body (Plato 1997: 58). Since one can only hope to be “closest to knowledge” during one’s physical existence (*ibid.*), it should follow that the true philosopher would gladly die, knowing that what awaits him or her in the underworld is a final merging with much sought-after wisdom in its purest form (*ibid.*, 59). This is further illuminated by Hadot’s analysis of the *Symposium* (2002: 44–45), in which he concludes that Plato’s philosopher is a lover of wisdom in the sense that he or she longs for a state of absolute merging with wisdom that forever eludes him or her. Hence, philosophy is

not wisdom, but a “way of life and discourse determined by the idea of wisdom,” a dynamic tension that is ironically “defined by what it lacks” (ibid., 46–47). This conception of philosophy may explain why none of Plato’s dialogues insists on a final accomplishment or resolution and why Plato seems content to leave us with incomplete endings. It may also shed light on why Socrates refuses to assume the absolute authority of the mystic—even when he eventually rises to the heights of the mystical planes in his extensive geographical, topographical, and moral description of the upper worlds, he opens with a hesitant “We are told that ...” (Plato 1997: 92). Room for doubt must be retained at all times, since the human mind cannot transcend the limits of knowledge imposed on it by physical interferences and the inherent mystery of life and death.¹⁴

The mystical thought of the Upanishads, on the other hand, is determined to resolve, and even destroy, the tension between the mind aspiring to pure knowledge and absolute reality. It does not seek to engage the inquiring mind in an analytical process, nor does it foster doubt that keeps one at a distance from the mystical realization. Mystical thought is guided by the wish to settle, once and for all, any duality of inquirer and truth. Of the two, it is the thinking, objectifying mind that needs to be dissolved, thus we can conclude that the Upanishadic dialogues aim to bring an end not only to the spiritual quest of the fictional seeker, but also to the very possibility of a dialogue (Ganeri 2013: 124). It is for this reason that Yama declares that the Self “cannot be known ... through hearing discourses about it” (The Upanishads 2007: 79). Of course, the advantage of mystical thought is that the living revelation experienced by the disciple manages to penetrate the existential fear that seems to hover, unresolved, over the heads of the *Phaedo*’s participants.

Perhaps the strongest thematic expression of the disparity between the mystical thought of the *Katha Upanishad* and the *Phaedo*’s philosophy is their different conceptions of self. While

Socrates' depiction of the pure soul is not fundamentally different from Yama's Atman, the Upanishadic Atman, the individual soul, rapidly collapses into a non-dual universal reality, since it becomes clear as soon as the soul is unveiled that it is essentially indistinguishable from the totality of existence, or Brahman (The Upanishads 2007: 76). Consequently, everything, including the differentiating consciousness that identifies and categorizes reality's distinct components, becomes sucked into the whirlpool of this realization and turns into yet another representation or embodiment of the Self (Ganeri 2013: 31). In contrast, in the *Phaedo*, the soul, even in its most untainted condition, remains separate from the Forms and beholds them from the outside, as a pure subject contemplating a pure object. This subtle gap, or tension, is also retained in Plato's other peaks of inner revelation, as captured in Diotima's ultimate state of Beauty itself (Plato 1997: 493) or in the *Phaedrus*' ability of the immortal souls to glimpse into the realm of the Forms, "the place beyond heaven" (ibid., 525). Nowhere in Plato's writings do we find a final absorption in the totality of existence. The soul "resembles the divine" (ibid., 70), but never loses its distinctive outlines, even when they seem to become nearly transparent. Thus, it remains knowable—indeed, it is the "most valuable object of investigation" (Schiltz 2006: 463).

As Cohen (1976: 320, 326) points out, the *Phaedo* chooses to remain one step behind the non-dualistic mystical vision, in that it refrains from asserting that the final form of perfect knowledge is the mind's "identity with what it knows"; thus, the mind retains its individual boundaries even in the face of the full recognition of the Forms. Indeed, we know that Plato was aware of the possibility of such a leap because, in the *Theaetetus*, Socrates declares his profound reverence for Parmenides, whose conception of absolute truth seems to be far closer to that of the *Katha Upanishad* (Domanski 2006: 47-49). Nonetheless, any expectation that Plato would take such a leap would be based on a great misunderstanding, since philosophy derives its

contemplative powers from the subject–object, or lover–wisdom, relationship. We should recall that although both the Indian and Greek texts reject objective learning as a means of achieving genuine knowledge (The Upanishads 2007: 79; Plato 1997: 83-86), they retreat to different subjective domains: The former withdraws to the pre-cognitive realm of the unknowable Self, whereas the latter retreats to the domain of pure, pre-sensory thought, where it seeks the “truth of existence” (Singh 1994: 11-12). This conscious choice on Socrates’ part to remain, in Heidegger’s words, the “purest thinker of the west” (ibid., 12) has given rise to philosophy as we know it.

Endnotes

1. From Alexander's invasion of northwestern India in 327 B.C.E. onwards, there are clearer links. For example, Pyrrho, who joined Alexander's expedition to India, was deeply influenced by the Indian sages (Hadot 2002: 111).
2. The *Katha Upanishad*, on the other hand, has been compared to the *Phaedrus*, another of Plato's work from his Middle Dialogues period (Schiltz, 2006). The *Phaedrus* is also dedicated in large part to proving and establishing the concept of the soul's immortality (ibid., 456).
3. It must be pointed out that even Singh's paper has not covered all the comparative possibilities, since he is chiefly occupied with the *Phaedo*'s opening discussion, in which Socrates provocatively claims that philosophy is, by nature, a preparation for death (1994: 10).
4. For views that support this argument, see, for instance, Dillon 2000: 526, 545,548, and Nagler 2007: 302.
5. Here I borrow Victor Goldschmidt's formula, which was originally applied to Plato's dialogues.
6. Yama's initial reluctance is extensively discussed by Ganeri (2013: 15–17).
7. Plato 1997: 77.
8. We could speculate that this is at least one dramatic reason for Yama's reluctance to disclose his secret self-knowledge (The Upanishads 2007: 73–74).
9. Dillon (2000: 548) finds this attitude comparable to that of the Buddha in his last days.
10. *Katha Upanishad*, in The Upanishads 2007: 92.
11. However, it may be suggested that Plato's conception of the interrelations between the sensory world and the "place beyond heaven" (Plato 1997: 525)—the sublime realm of the Forms—is more complex, since he considers the world perceived by the senses to be a reflection of the Forms that is ultimately and positively designed to remind us of the primordial reality (ibid., 66).
12. Socrates does occasionally refer in the *Phaedo* to the secret initiation rites of the Orphic mystery religion (Plato 1997: 54, 60).
13. Gold (1996: 24–25), for instance, attempts to interpret the myth that appears near the end of the *Phaedo* as a cryptic description of a mystical practice similar to yoga's pranayama and meditation.
14. See also Schiltz (2006: 463–464), who demonstrates how the *Katha Upanishad*'s final resolution and the *Phaedrus*' incomplete and future-dependent ending reflect "the differing views about the nature and accessibility of knowledge of the self."