

## A Platonic Influence on Early Christian Apologetics

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This essay will examine whether a seminal Christian apologist might have borrowed the concept of virtuous intuition from Plato. *Virtuous intuition* is the author's label for the presupposition that certain true propositions of fundamental importance are intuitively apparent to any sufficiently virtuous person. Such propositions may be called self-evident insofar as they are alleged to be obviously true despite being unprovable. If some people dispute them nonetheless, the claim of self-evidence becomes problematic, and it may then be claimed that skepticism arises from some defect in the skeptic's character. In such an epistemological light, people may be judged as virtuous or otherwise depending on which ideas their intuitions deem or fail to deem to be self-evidently true.

In the context of Christian apologetics, the notion seems implicit in claims such as the one made by Paul in his Epistle to the Romans, where he asserted that, because the truth about God is manifest in nature, unbelievers are "without excuse" for their skepticism. (Romans 1:19-20.) Many commentators have inferred Hellenistic influences on Paul's thinking, but, aside from references to

Jewish scripture and his self-identification as a Pharisee, he tells us nothing in his own words about his intellectual background. The first advocate for Christianity whose philosophical roots are identifiable from his own words was the second-century apologist Justin. Of several works once attributed to him, the current scholarly consensus accepts three as authentic. Two are explicitly styled apologies, one addressed to Emperor Antoninus and the other to the Roman Senate. The third is the *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew*. The *Dialogue* includes an ostensibly autobiographical introduction, which is the sole extant source of information about the author's life. Justin mentions Plato by name in all three documents and sometimes quotes from his dialogues, including the *Timaeus*.<sup>1</sup>

The true extent of Justin's philosophical education is not known with certainty,<sup>2</sup> but besides the *Timaeus* he knew the *Republic* at least indirectly.<sup>3</sup> Plato says nothing in either work to explicitly propound a notion of virtuous intuition,

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<sup>1</sup> Justin, *Dialogue of Justin, Philosopher and Martyr, with Trypho, a Jew*, chap. 5, in Philip Schaff, *ANF01, The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Cox. Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 2001. <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf01.txt>. (Accessed October 3, 2008.) Another reference is in the *First Apology*, chap. 60.

<sup>2</sup> Arthur J. Droge, "Justin Martyr and the Restoration of Philosophy," 304. *Church History* 56.3 September 1987, JSTOR <http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0009-6407%28198709%2956%3A3%3C303%3AJMATRO%3E2.o.CO%3B2-M>. (Accessed October 31, 2007.)

<sup>3</sup> Justin, *The First Apology of Justin*, chap. 3, in Schaff.

but those two as well as the *Theatetus* contain statements that Justin could have construed as supporting it. This essay will confine its attention to those three dialogues.

Justin credits Plato for his belief that knowledge of God is the true purpose of philosophy. He tells Trypho that in his philosophical studies, “I expected forthwith to look upon God, for this is the end of Plato's philosophy.”<sup>4</sup> He later elaborates: “Plato indeed says, replied I, that the mind's eye is of such a nature . . . that we may see that very Being when the mind is pure itself . . . coming suddenly into souls well-dispositioned, on account of their affinity to and desire of seeing Him.”<sup>5</sup> Justin seems to suggest here that a sincere desire to know the truth is necessary and may be sufficient for its discovery. In the *First Apology*, he says without qualification that “Reason directs those who are truly pious and philosophical to honour and love only what is true.”<sup>6</sup> In another chapter of the same work, he asserts that “the sensible man will not choose” what is forbidden by the teaching of Christ.<sup>7</sup> He also asserts that skepticism cannot be justified: “In

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<sup>4</sup> Justin, *Dialogue*, chap. 2.

<sup>5</sup> Justin, *Dialogue*, chap. 4.

<sup>6</sup> Justin, *First Apology*, chap. 2.

<sup>7</sup> Justin, *First Apology*, chap. 14.

the beginning He made the human race with the power of thought and of choosing the truth and doing right, so that all men are without excuse before God; for they have been born rational and contemplative.”<sup>8</sup> In the *Second Apology* he says those who don’t believe the Christian message are “thoroughly depraved, being conquered by illiberal and unreasonable opinion and fear.”<sup>9</sup>

These passages seem to presuppose that a person’s doxastic inclinations are character-driven. Justin thinks that good people will just know the truth about God when they hear it. God created us with minds that can perceive him, and so if our minds are working properly, they will perceive him. In his worldview, the proper exercise of reason must lead one to true beliefs, and Christian beliefs are true, and so the proper exercise of reason will lead to belief in Christianity.

The idea of the mind as a sensory apparatus, the means by which we perceive ideas, is propounded in the *Theatetus*.<sup>10</sup> This is reinforced in the *Republic*,

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<sup>8</sup> Justin, *First Apology*, chap. 28.

<sup>9</sup> Justin, *The Second Apology of Justin for the Christians Addressed to the Roman Senate*, chap. 3, in Schaff.

<sup>10</sup> Plato, *Theatetus*, 185c-d, trans. Harold N. Fowler. Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA, 1921, *Plato in Twelve Volumes, Vol. 12*, Perseus-Tufts University, <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/ptext?lookup=Plat.+Theaet.+142a>. (Accessed November 7, 2008.)

where Socrates asserts that failure to see truth is a kind of blindness:

“Do you think, then, that there is any appreciable difference between the blind and those who are veritably deprived of the knowledge of the veritable being of things, those who have no vivid pattern in their souls and so cannot, as painters look to their models, fix their eyes on the absolute truth . . . ?” “No, by heaven,” he said, “there is not much difference.”<sup>11</sup>

The *Republic* also contains assertions of a connection between one’s moral character and one’s ability to perceive truth, as when Socrates seems to claim that “the real lover of knowledge” is naturally virtuous.<sup>12</sup> He also suggests that only virtue can recognize itself, whereas evil cannot distinguish between itself and its contrary.<sup>13</sup> The title character in the *Timaeus* might have endorsed the biblical notion that all atheists are fools (Psalms 14:1, 53:1): “All men who possess even a small share of good sense call upon God always at the outset of every

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<sup>11</sup> Plato, *Republic*, 6:484c-d, trans. Paul Shorey. William Heinemann: London, 1969, *Plato in Twelve Volumes, Vols. 5 & 6*, Perseus-Tufts University, <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/ptext?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0168>. (Accessed November 7, 2008.)

<sup>12</sup> Plato, *Republic*, 6:490a-c.

<sup>13</sup> Plato, *Republic*, 3:409d.

undertaking, be it small or great; we therefore who are purposing to deliver a discourse concerning the Universe, how it was created or haply is uncreate, must needs invoke Gods and Goddesses . . . .”<sup>14</sup> Timaeus also offers the question-begging proposition that the assertions of people whom tradition declares to be “children of gods” must be believed “even though their statements lack either probable or necessary demonstration.”<sup>15</sup>

The question of how much of his own writings Plato himself believed need not detain us here. The ideas were there in the dialogues, and if Justin construed them in ways Plato never intended, that was not Plato’s fault. Justin claimed that Plato was familiar with the writings of Moses,<sup>16</sup> but does not explain how Plato recognized their truth. The reader is left to suppose that in Justin’s mind, Plato’s virtuous intuition enabled him to just know, when he read what Moses had to say about God, that Moses was stating the truth. Many pagan philosophers, according to Justin, had perceived some fragment of the truth, each one “in

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<sup>14</sup> Plato, *Timaeus*, 27c, trans. W.R.M. Lamb. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1925, *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, Vol. 9, Perseus-Tufts University, <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/ptext?lookup=Plat.+Tim.+17a>. (Accessed November 7, 2008.)

<sup>15</sup> Plato, *Timaeus*, 40e.

<sup>16</sup> Justin, *First Apology*, chaps. 44, 59, 60.

proportion to the share he had of the spermatic word, seeing what was related to it."<sup>17</sup> But only Christians, he said, have managed to see the entire truth, i.e. all things "rightly said among all men."<sup>18</sup>

Justin nowhere offers a defense of Christian dogma that does not presuppose its truth. He quotes Jesus at length without attribution to any identifiable source, while mentioning almost offhandedly the existence of "memoirs of the apostles,"<sup>19</sup> a possible but not certain reference to documents that became the canonical gospels. On at least one occasion, he is explicit in affirming that at least some Christian teachings are "received by tradition."<sup>20</sup> In the *Second Apology* he extols the righteousness of Christians, suggesting that their presence in the world is the only thing forestalling God's final judgment.<sup>21</sup> He also claims that Christians prove their virtue by their willingness to suffer martyrdom.<sup>22</sup> He also finds vindication in the mere existence of any animosity

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<sup>17</sup> Justin, *Second Apology*, chap. 19.

<sup>18</sup> Justin, *Second Apology*, chap. 13.

<sup>19</sup> Justin, *First Apology*, chap. 67.

<sup>20</sup> Justin, *First Apology*, chap. 10.

<sup>21</sup> Justin, *Second Apology*, chap. 7.

<sup>22</sup> Justin, *Second Apology*, chap. 12.

against Christians: “The devils have always effected, that all those who anyhow live a reasonable and earnest life and shun vice, be hated.”<sup>23</sup> Such notions may easily lead the reader to suspect Justin of arguing, in effect: “Christians are good people; good people believe the truth; therefore, what Christians believe is the truth.”

Justin presents no such argument in so many words. Neither does Plato, in the three works consulted for this essay, make any analogous argument for any philosophical community of his own time. That neither of them said it doesn't mean neither of them believed it, but the consequences for the West's intellectual history would have depended less on what either believed in fact than on what their readers would have been led themselves to believe. The role, if any, of virtuous intuition in that history could not be addressed in this essay. However, if it played any role at all in Christianity's formative years, then a search for its subsequent influence, perhaps continuing to the present day, would perhaps not be a waste of time.

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<sup>23</sup> Justin, *Second Apology*, chap. 8.



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