

## Meditation and Platonic Contemplation

In Plato's *Symposium*, Socrates is late to the party at Agathon's house because he stopped and "stood" (ἔστηκεν) in front of a neighboring house (174d4-175d2). Later in the dialogue, Alcibiades says that Socrates once "stood" (εἰστήκει) for an entire twenty-four hours while they were on campaign at Potidaea (220c2-d5). Earlier in his speech, Alcibiades compares Socrates to a Silenus figurine that is ugly on the outside, but opens to reveal divine beauty within (*Symp.* 215a4-b4). In this paper, I argue that when Socrates "stands," he is visualizing a cult statue in his mind's eye. His intense concentration on that mental image allows the separation of his soul from his body. As his soul ascends, his body remains completely still, like a statue, and becomes an object of wondrous contemplation for Alcibiades and other onlookers.

Scholars have variously interpreted what is happening in Socrates' mind when he "stands." Dover's commentary assures us this is "not a mystical experience, but concentrated intellectual scrutiny of a problem" (Dover 1980: 173). Some scholars have questioned this type of rationalizing interpretation. John Bussanich (1999) has long argued that Socrates was in fact something of a "mystic" after all, and most recently (Bussanich 2016) has suggested that Socrates practiced mental concentration techniques like the meditation practices represented in Indian texts such as Patañjali's *Yoga Sūtra*. Yulia Ustinova (2018: 313-369) has similarly suggested that early philosophers like Parmenides, Empedocles, and Socrates practiced meditative techniques like visualization and breath control in their pursuit of supersensory truth. Richard Seaford (2020) has argued that early philosophy in Greece was predicated on the interiorization of mystery cult initiation parallel to the interiorization of sacrificial ritual in India

that results in the identification of the inner self and the cosmos, which in turn, makes it possible to perform rituals in the interior space of the mind.

What remains to be done is to investigate what Greek philosophy as an interiorized ritual means in practice. Scholarship on Indian meditative practices has identified visualization of images of gods as a widespread technique with ancient origins (Sarbacker 2005: 111-126). I argue that Plato hints that this is what Socrates is doing when he “stands.”

I support this line of interpretation by exploring how Plato’s myth of the soul’s prenatal ascent toward the Forms (Pl. *Phdr.* 246a3-249d3) functions in part as a phenomenological description of contemplative experience. At the climax of the ascent, the souls of the gods “stand on the back of the sky and gaze with wonder at the things outside” (ἔστησαν ἐπὶ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ νότω, ... αἱ δὲ θεωροῦσι τὰ ἔξω τοῦ οὐρανοῦ, Pl. *Phdr.* 247b7-c2). The verbal connection suggests an analogy between the gods’ “standing” (ἔστησαν) to contemplate the Forms and Socrates’ own habitual “standing” (εἰστήκει). Andrea Nightingale (2004) has already shown that this passage, like others in the Platonic corpus, likens the philosopher’s vision of the Forms to gazing with “wonder” (θαῦμα) at cult statues and other sacred objects in the context of traditional *theōria*. This, I suggest, makes it likely that Socrates is mentally visualizing a cult statue. Alcibiades says that he and others gathered around to watch Socrates “standing” at Potidea and “gazed at him with wonder” (θαυμάζοντες, *Symp.* 220c6). This suggests that Socrates’ own unmoving body becomes a statue and an object of contemplation. This claim finds support in Andrea Capra’s (2021) argument that Plato may have read the *Symposium* in front of an audience at the Academy, where a statue of Socrates stood in the background.

In this light, it becomes clear that the gods contemplate the Forms, Socrates contemplates the gods by visualizing a statue, and Socrates himself becomes a statue for others to contemplate.

After Socrates dies, Plato sets up a statue of his teacher and composes dialogues, both of which serve as essential steps on the path of the soul's ascent to the intelligible world.

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