CHAPTER FOUR
MAKING ROOM FOR FAITH: IS PLATO?

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I therefore had to annul knowing, in order to get room for believing

(Ich musste also das Wissen aufheben, um zum Glauben Platz zu bekommen).
Immanuel KANT, Critique of Pure Reason, B xxx

pistis is of course not “faith” in Plato, but Neoplatonists, Christians, and
commentators have confused the two ideas hopelessly.
Paul SHOREY on Republic VI,511E, Loeb edition

1. Making room for faith

In the programmatic statement by which Kant clarifies the project of the
first Critique in the Preface to its second edition, Glaube(n) doubtless covers
more beliefs than just those of ‘faith’, but it has at least to include these.
Making room for these had been on the early modern agenda at least since
Descartes drove his wedge between faith and reason by claiming that ‘the
revealed truths … are beyond our understanding’;¹ but one might expect it to
have already been a problem for Platonising Christians, or Christianising
Platonists, confronted on the one hand with the primacy of faith (pistis) in
the New Testament, on the other hand with Plato’s apparent depreciation of
pistis in the Republic. If we suppose that Shorey’s sharp distinction between
the two notions of pistis involved is valid without qualification, then
precisely to the extent that it helps us with Plato it cannot help us in under-
standing a large part of the Platonic tradition; it requires at least a supple-
mentary answer to the question how a Christian reader could have known, or
why he would have assumed, that Plato meant by pistis something radically
different from faith.

One approach to this question is to trace the reception of Platonic doc-
trine through individual philosophers, theologians and commentators. An
illuminating study of this kind on Clement of Alexandria will be found in
Lilla (1971).² A related or complementary approach could be to consider the
ordinary language background of the term, looking for antecedents of
Christian notions of faith in pagan, especially pre-Platonic, Greek literature,

¹ les vérités révélées … sont au-dessus de notre intelligence. (Discours pt. 1, p. 8 A·T)
² Esp. III. pistis, gnosis, cosmology & theology. 1. The doctrine of Pistis, pp. 118–42.
as well as in Hebrew scripture and the Septuagint version. This line is exemplified by Lindsay (1993) on Josephus.\footnote{Esp. pp. 7–20.}

In what follows I will not be concerned with how later antiquity read Plato or any other pre-Christian author, nor, with one exception, with the relation of Plato’s terminology to previous usage or with the evolution of his own conceptual apparatus; I will not enter upon the history of concepts or doctrine or of their actual reception. Instead I shall review statements on and statements applying the notion of \textit{pistis} and a few related notions in Plato’s own works with a view to what might be called their possible reception, i.e. in order to find out to what extent they might be open to or even provoke a reading assimilating them to a religious notion of faith. I hope to show that Plato does indeed expose himself to such interpretations owing to a certain ambivalence and tension within his own conception of \textit{pistis}.

2. \textit{Trust and her sisters: belief states ranked}

The most familiar contexts of the term \textit{pistis} in Plato are the ones in the \textit{Republic}, where the belief state of \textit{pistis} is associated with \textit{doxa} or ‘what is held to be so’, as distinct from what is known to be so. This distinction of meaning is more often than not exploited so as to have \textit{doxa} refer to what is \textit{merely} held to be so, what is only apparently so, as opposed to what is really and truly so; and this connotation determines how low \textit{pistis} is rated compared to several other cognitive dispositions. The first instance of \textit{pistis} in the \textit{Republic} establishes this link with \textit{doxa}, but leaves the status of \textit{pistis} undefined:

\begin{itemize}
  \item[(1) Rep. VI,505E2\footnote{Translations are my own. They are unidiomatic, making no concessions to either usage or tradition as far as the terminology under discussion is concerned; deliberately so, since the object is precisely to retrieve what these terms could have expressed to a first audience unaccustomed to look at them through overlays accruing to them by transmission from teacher to student over dozens of generations. For \textit{pistis} I vary between translations as they suit the context, in order to bring out different potential connotations. If one equivalent is required, then of English vocabulary as basic as \textit{pistis} is in Greek, ‘trust’ catches more of these connotations than ‘faith’ does, and ‘faith’ more than ‘belief’ does.}]
    \item[(505D5)] S.: But what of this? Isn’t this clear, that many would choose (to do and posses and be held to <do and possess>) things that are estimated (\textit{dokounta}) to be just or fine, but no one is content to acquire things that are <merely> estimated to be good; on the contrary, they seek those which really are \textit{(onta)} good: here if anywhere everyone depreciates estimate (\textit{atonizei doxan}).\footnote{Usually translated ‘opinion’ when attributed to the knowing subject, and ‘appearance’ when attributed to the object known. I use ‘estimate’ both because it is conveniently ambivalent or neutral between these two applications and because it comes with a verb that, unlike ‘opine’, is not overly stilted and, unlike ‘appear’, has an active and a passive voice neatly corresponding to \textit{dokein} in its ‘subjective’ and its ‘objective’ use. Cf. on (4) below.}
      \\
      \textit{Adeim.:} Quite so.
\end{itemize}