PLATO’S HOUSEHOLD \textit{TOPOS}: A FORMATIVE INFLUENCE ON ANCIENT EDUCATIONAL AND SOCIAL THEORY

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Plato’s ideas about children and education sometimes had indirect but significant influence on later antiquity. This paper will examine one example of this phenomenon, namely the formative influence of what I am calling the household \textit{topos} as Plato articulates it in relation to physical and spiritual children. Classical poets and philosophers, as well as early Church Fathers, employ a nexus of \textit{topoi} that centre on reasons for and against having children of one’s own. One of these \textit{topoi} is that the child enables a man to perpetuate his household, in the dual sense of family and possessions, and thereby to achieve stability, immortality and happiness. This is perhaps the most important of the pro-\textit{topoi}, because happiness and immortality have commonly been construed as the \textit{summum bonum} by philosophers and non-philosophers alike. In classical literature the household \textit{topos} is first clearly analyzed in Plato’s dual concepts of physical and spiritual children and continued in the Platonic tradition. It is also adopted and adapted by early Christian Fathers in two often-interwoven steps: first, the household argument is transferred from physical (real) children to spiritual (symbolic) children (as Plato had done), and secondly the application of the argument to physical children is downplayed. The purpose of this paper is to trace the household \textit{topos} in both the Platonic and Christian traditions in order to stress the importance of the idea for ancient educational and social theorizing. What follows, therefore, is a study in the history of ideas, and will limit itself to the household as family, not possessions, and almost exclusively to the Greek world.

The Topos in the Platonic Tradition of Two Concepts of Children

All men are pregnant, Socrates, both in body and in soul: on reaching a certain age our nature yearns to beget. . . . It is a divine affair, this

1. For a brief study of these, see Garth R. Lambert, ‘Childless by Choice: Graeco-Roman Arguments and Their Uses’, \textit{Prudentia} 14.2 (Nov.1982), 123–138.
engendering and bringing to birth, an immortal element in the creature that is mortal.3

From childhood to declining years, no one is the same, though we speak of the ‘same person’: physically, morally, intellectually, a person loses and ‘begets’ anew, but enough remains for us to speak of the ‘same person’. Begetting a child is an extension of this same process: the ‘same person’ lives on somewhat modified. Through this continuity, made possible by love or the urge to beget offspring, every mortal being partakes of immortality. Plato has the priestess Diotima emphasize to Socrates further that there is but one way for mortal nature, men and animals, to fulfil its desire for immortality: through generation to leave behind itself a second being in place of the first. This mortal sameness, achieved by generation, and differing from divine sameness where no change or begetting is involved, contributes to the stability and, therefore, the divine nature of what is coterminous with time, namely the human race as a whole: through reproduction of his kind, man shares in immortality and divinity.4 It is clear from these ideas (drawn from Symposium 207A–208B and Laws 721B–C) that Plato’s consideration of this natural urge for children falls within his usual antithesis of change and stability.

Reproduction of his kind not only enables man to share in immortality and divinity, but is a duty ordained by god: abstinence from begetting children is an unholy act (Laws 721C), for ‘he who is concerned with the whole has arranged all things for the preservation and perfection of the whole’ (Laws 903B).5 The nature of this duty to god is clearly stated at Laws 773E: Plato uses the mystic expression ‘children’s children’6 to declare that each generation in turn are servants of god in that it is their duty to procreate more children as a contribution to the ‘whole’.

In Plato, then, two sorts of immortality derive from having children: an immediate immortality resulting from identifiable offspring; a larger, impersonal immortality based on contribution to the continuity and stability of the human race. Only the latter kind would be possible in Plato’s system of

4. Aristotle follows Plato in seeing the production of children as a natural act of self-reproduction that enables all mature beings to participate in the eternal and the divine (De Anima 415 b 1–7).
5. In Xenophon as well the gods are made responsible for the coupling of male and female with a view to preserving the species (Oeconomicus 7.18–19; 30); in the Memorabilia (1.4.7), the natural desire for begetting children is adduced as evidence for the existence of a divine and kindly creator.
6. B. B. Rogers said of the line ‘on yourselves, and your children, and your children’s children’ (Aristophanes, Aves 730), ‘This is obviously a formula from some litany or religious benediction.’ In his commentary on Aeneid 3.98 (‘and children’s children and those to be born from them’), Servius pointed out that Vergil adapted the line from Homer (Iliad 20.308), Homer from Orpheus, and Orpheus likewise from an oracle of Hyperborean Apollo.
community of children proposed in the Republic. In practice, according to Diotima in the Symposium, men expected from their having children eternal ‘immortality, memorial and happiness’.7

It is evident from non-philosophical literature that Plato in the Symposium and Laws was rationalizing and mythologizing ideas already long found in Greek society. The household topos appears as early as Homer, whose attitudes toward the child and inheritance were to continue largely unchallenged until the Christian period. So, for example, in his opening remarks to Queen Arete, Odysseus wished for the banqueters what he knew must be dear to their hearts: ‘May the gods grant them happiness for life and give each the joy of bequeathing to his sons the treasures of his house.’ (Odyssey 7.148–150; trans. E. V. Rieu). And with an epithet that was to continue down the centuries, the house of Protesilaus in the Iliad is called ‘incomplete’ because it lacked an heir (Iliad 2.701). Not surprisingly, therefore, Plutarch points out, citing Homer, that ‘an only son, late-born, amid many possessions’ was especially precious to parents because of his role as heir (Moralia 117C–D; Iliad 9.482). Down the centuries from Homer, the topos turns up in other non-philosophical genres, not least in fifth-century tragedy in those many scenes describing vengeance upon a household, a punishment sometimes caused by gods, sometimes by mortals, as when Medea destroys her children so that with ‘all Jason’s house entirely ruined’ he may be ‘eaten by desire’ (Euripides, Medea 794, 817). But the idea of children as means to stability and immortality through household is perhaps nowhere better expressed than in an image of Aeschylus that Plato could have heard in the theatre:

... let not his seed of Pelops’ line be blotted out; for then, in spite of death, thou art not dead. For children are voices of salvation to a man, though he be dead; like corks, they buoy up the net, saving the flaxen cord from out of the deep.8

Platonic influences can be seen in later centuries in those philosophically inclined writers, such as Plutarch, who considered the consequences of the continuity of generations. Plutarch urges that the man whom chance has made a father while he still has a father is more complete or more perfect than other men: the man who can ‘look before and after’ (as Homer put it)

7. These words of Diotima were to remain alive in both pagan and Christian minds at least until the fourth century A.D.: See Basil, De Virginitate 55, and Themistius, Oratio 32, 355D.
8. Aeschylus, Choephoroi 503–507; translation H. Weir Smyth. Aeschylus seems fond of the word soterioi in regard to ‘saving’ the household: cf. Choephoroi 236; Eumenides 909. Resembling Aeschylus’ simile of corks, comparisons in Euripides serve to stress the fundamental necessity of children to the preservation of the household. In the Hecuba, Polydorus is an anchor (79–80); in the Iphigeneia in Tauris, Orestes, and sons generally, are likened to the pillars of a house (56–57).
has a stronger sense of his place in the continuum of generations.\textsuperscript{9} Again, since the Platonic notion that to beget a child is to continue the same person implies the closest possible relationship between generations in a family chain, Plutarch argues that god visits the sins of the father upon the children and that god is just in so doing: because of the intimate link of father and son, the child can inherit the good and bad tendencies in his father's disposition — or the traits may skip a generation or more — and god therefore may give punishment, like medicine, to repair the inherited characteristics; and again, because of the intimate link, the rewards and punishments experienced by descendants in this life will react in some way upon the originally guilty forefathers.\textsuperscript{10}

The role of morality in these ideas in effect underscores the implicit importance of education. This search for continuity and immortality through children, embedded as it was in the ancient mind (as Diotima said) and rationalized into mythical form by Plato, must have contributed to the great importance attributed to education as the formation of personality, at least among the upper classes: as a continuation of oneself, as the means to immortality, the child should be perfected morally and intellectually as far as possible, in order to ensure the worthiness of one's successor. Such an inclination helps explain the classical emphasis on education: what Jaeger said of the community could be said of the household:

Education is the process by which a community preserves and transmits its physical and intellectual character. For the individual passes away, but the type remains.\textsuperscript{11}

The children we have been discussing have all been the product of corporeal generation in our physical world. In Plato's view, the procreation of such children is a part of that constant process of generation and decay that constitutes the 'sensible' world. But we learn from Diotima in the \textit{Symposium} (209A) that men beget spiritual children as well, in order to achieve immortality:

Some men are pregnant in soul, for there are those who in their souls rather than in their bodies conceive what the soul ought to conceive and produce: practical wisdom and all other virtue.

Such are the poets, inventors, statesmen, lawgivers; Homer and Hesiod, Lycurgus and Solon have achieved immortality of name through their souls' begetting. In addition, there are those whose love of the beautiful, starting

\textsuperscript{9} Moralia,\textsuperscript{279B}, citing Odyssey 24.452; Iliad 1.343.
with the beauty of a single youth, enables them to ascend through a love of wisdom or philosophy to a vision of the Form of Beauty itself. In the course of this ascent, a man begets ‘beautiful discourse that will improve the young’ (210C) and ‘fine and splendid converse and contemplation in an unstinting wealth of philosophy’ (210D), until finally, as he contemplates the Form of Beauty, he is able ‘to beget not illusions of virtue, but true virtue, because now he partakes of truth rather than illusion; and after begetting and rearing true virtue, it falls to him to be beloved of god and to become immortal if any man does’. Thus, through begetting spiritual children, the soul of man — or at least the highest, intellectual part of it — can reach beyond the ‘sensible’ world of generation and decay to an immortality in the ‘intelligible’ world of unchanging Forms. The youth too may produce spiritual children with the help of the philosopher, or ‘midwife’, as Plato has Socrates describe himself in the *Theaetetus*: 

> ... my patients are men, not women, and my concern is not with the body, but with the soul that is in travail of birth. And the highest point of my art is the power to prove by every test whether the offspring of a young man’s thought is a false phantom or instinct with life and truth. . . . Perhaps when I examine your statements I may judge one or another of them to be an unreal phantom. If I then take the abortion away from you and cast it away, do not be savage with me like a woman robbed of her first child. 

With his usual irony, Socrates disclaims begetting wisdom himself, as a midwife cannot herself bear children any longer: ‘. . . heaven constrains me to serve as a midwife, but has debarred me from giving birth. So of myself I have no sort of wisdom, nor has any discovery ever been born to me as the child of my soul.’ (150C–D) Plutarch, asking why god so constrained Socrates, gives a reply which suggests the plausible connection of producing spiritual children with recollecting the Forms:

> . . . of the sole wisdom about what is divine and intelligible . . . there is neither generation nor invention by man, but reminiscence. Wherefore Socrates taught nothing, but suggesting principles of doubt, as birth-pains, to young men, he excited and at the same time confirmed the innate notions.

Socrates, in assisting young men to bring to birth their own spiritual


children, helps them recollect the Forms.\(^{15}\)

Plato leaves no doubt that spiritual children are superior to the physical, in that they are themselves finer and more immortal (Symposium 209D), and win in turn greater honour (209E) and higher immortality (212A) for their parents. 'Every man would welcome having such children in preference to human ones. . . .' (209C) Obviously, the two types of children need not be mutually exclusive: there would be nothing to prevent the poets and philosophers from producing both inferior and superior offspring. But this kind of dualistic thinking can invite the conclusion that physical children should be excluded because of the innate superiority of spiritual ones and because of the hampering effect of physical children upon the achievement of immortality through spiritual offspring. We have no reason to believe that this conclusion was reached on a large scale in the Graeco-Roman world before the rise of the Christian monastic movement in the late third century.

Early in the Christian era, the Platonizing Plutarch in the Amatorius borrows extensively from Plato's Phaedrus to describe the ascent from earthly love through heavenly love to the Forms. In this process both lover and beloved benefit:

And it is not a long time until lovers bypass the body of the beloved, and moving inward fasten upon his character. Uncovering their eyes they see clearly and have intercourse with one another, mostly through philosophic discussions, but also through their moral deeds: their purpose is to see whether the beloved has in his thoughts the shape and image of Beauty (Amatorius 765C).

The language of mystery religions is suggested in Plutarch's description of Love's escorting of the lover to his union with Beauty in the Plain of Truth: divine, chaste Love is the physician, saviour, guide of the soul, and 'kindly Love carries up and escorts those who yearn to embrace and have intercourse with Beauty after their interval of absence, and in doing this Love acts like a mystic guide at an initiation'. (Amatorius 764E–765A). In regard to Plato’s belief that the love of physical beauty is the first step in the ascent to the Forms, Plutarch feels that this love can be for women as well as boys (Amatorius esp. 751, 765–766). The placing of heterosexual love as the first step would enhance the desirability and value of earthly marriage and offspring relative to the spiritual, though it still leaves them preliminary and, therefore, secondary to the final spiritual love of Forms at the climax of the ascent.

\(^{15}\) F. M. Cornford, Plato's Theory of Knowledge 27–28, quotes the words of the Anonymous Commentator to show the connection of the art of midwifery in the Theaetetus and the theory of recollection (anamnesis) in the Meno. Plato's theory of education is not always expressed in terms of recollection: it is, e.g., in the Phaedrus, but not in the Symposium.
In following Plato closely in his dual system of love, offspring and immortality, Plotinus in the third century stresses that earthly procreation is the result of love for an earthly beauty which is merely a reflection of the beauty in the other realm; Plotinus clearly states the object of earthly love to be immortality through procreation and thereby a satisfying of a feeling of insufficiency. But the preference for the ascetic life is clear:

Those that love beauty of person without carnal, desire for beauty’s sake; those that have — for women, of course — the copulative love, have the further purpose of self-perpetuation: as long as they are led by these motives, both are on the right path, though the first have taken the nobler way.  

Plotinus echoes the concept Plato put in the mouth of Pausanias in the Symposium (180D–E): there are two Aphrodites corresponding to the two realms and two types of union (3.5.2). The souls of the ‘philosopher, man of culture and lover’ ascend to an ineffable union with the One: ‘it is that union which is imitated by lover and beloved in this world in their yearning to unite.’ (Enneads 6.7.34) The imagery of spiritual offspring is again brought out:

Life in the Supreme is the native activity of intellect; in virtue of that silent converse it brings forth gods, brings forth beauty, brings forth righteousness, brings forth all moral good; for of all these the soul is pregnant when it has been filled with God (Enneads 6.9.9.).

Clearly, the heavenly Aphrodite is much superior to the earthly, but there is no overt suggestion that the two are incompatible and that the one should be avoided for the sake of the other: both are good, but in differing degree. It is a moot point whether Plotinus shared with Plutarch a desire to advance beyond Plato in his attitude to heterosexual love, i.e. to the belief that love for a woman, as well as love for a boy, can lead to spiritual offspring.

In these Platonic notions, the basic point is educational. If a man has spiritual children, he achieves greater enlightenment or understanding of

16. Plotinus, Enneads, 3.5.1; translation MacKenna-Page.
17. Enneads 1.3.1. In the Phaedrus of Plato (248D), those souls which have had the best view of the Forms, at the time of assuming new lives, enter into bodies destined to be such philosophers, men of culture and lovers. The three types correspond as well to those who have spiritual children in the Symposium (209ff.). At 4.3.8 Plotinus seems to summarize the activity of such men as energeia, gnosis, orexis.
18. J. M. Rist, Eros and Psyche (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1964), 100–101. The new idea that love for a woman could culminate in the sight of beauty itself was to have great influence in later literature, for example in the love lyric of the French Renaissance; sonnet number 113 in Joachim du Bellay’s collection L’Olive ends:

La, ô mon âme, au plus hault ciel guidée,
Tu y pourras reconnoistre l’idée
De la beauté, qu’en ce monde j’adore.
the principles that inform the world as he approaches knowledge of the Forms, even the Form of Beauty or Good, or the One: the principle of Beauty is the principle of ultimate Truth. Such a man succeeds in advancing beyond the ‘moving eide’ or manifestations of the Forms in this world, beyond this sensible world of mere belief and empirical conclusion, to a growing knowledge of the Forms themselves — the intellectual anabasis described in Plato’s philosophic education in the Republic (books 6 and 7). 19 However far they have progressed in their personal ascent to knowledge, such men can teach others. Poets and statesmen, such as Homer and Solon (as Diotima says in the Symposium), by showing the moving eide operating in literature and laws, reveal their own greater wisdom (their spiritual offspring) and enable others to catch glimpses of the Forms, not least Beauty, in a type of propaideia, i.e., the pre-philosophic, elementary education of the Republic (books 2 and 3). For the Platonizing Plutarch too this propaideia is the point of studying poetry: it anticipates the insights of philosophy. 20 But in a higher teaching function, those striving to ascend to the Forms and to produce their own spiritual children can, as Socrates did, play midwife-teacher for the birth of others’ ideas, 21 not through the relatively fixed forms of literature and laws, but through the give-and-take of philosophic discussion. This higher form of education, described in the education of the philosopher-kings of the Republic, was already a mystical as well as a rational anabasis in Plato, and became more so in the Platonic tradition represented by Plutarch and Plotinus, as mystery religions increasingly dominated spiritual life. Clearly in this Platonic tradition great intellectual ability was a necessary condition for the higher paideia and the higher level of life to which that paideia led. But while Platonists could sound ascetic at times (certainly Plato and Plotinus did), they did not make celibacy a requirement for the higher education and higher life: a man could have both physical and spiritual children. Monasticism was to change this.

The Topos in Early Christian Thought

Plato’s attitude is continued in the second century in the Alexandrian Christianity of Clement of Alexandria. Clement sees two kinds of children, both of which are good and not incompatible. At the beginning of the Stromateis, he follows the Platonic tradition 22 of questioning the value of

19. For an interesting and lucid analysis of the relationship of the Symposium to Plato’s ‘line’ (i.e., an analysis of the stages traversed in the philosophical pupil’s ascent to Beauty itself), see J. S. Morrison, ‘Two Unresolved Difficulties in the Line and the Cave’, Phronesis 22.3 (1977), 212-231.
20. Plutarch, Quomodo Adolescens Poetas Audire Debeat 15F.
22. Plato, Phaedrus 274C ff.; Seventh Letter 341C-D, 343A, 344C-D.
written works for higher understanding, and concludes that if such shameful men as Epicurus, 'the leader of atheism', are to be permitted to write, then it is not right that:

the man who heralds the truth should be prevented from leaving behind help to succeeding generations. And I think it is a fine thing to leave good children to posterity: children are the offspring of our bodies, and words are the offspring of our soul. It follows that we call those who have instructed us, fathers . . . and every learner is the son of his teacher in keeping with his subservient position (1.1.1.2-1.1.2.1).

In this concept, Clement probably had in mind specifically a passage in Plato's *Phaedrus*, in which the philosopher, speaking of 'words made lessons and spoken for instruction and truly written in a soul', urges that 'such words should be spoken of as the man's own — as it were, his legitimate children, first the word in himself, if it is to be found there, and secondly whatever offspring and brothers of this word have developed worthily in the souls of others.' This suggestion of a succession of spiritual children, begotten in the souls of following generations, is brought into harmony with the words of Solomon: 'Solomon points out', says Clement, 'that the word being sown is hidden in the soul of the learner as in soil, and this is a spiritual planting'. (1.1.1.2) So Clement says of his own greatest teacher that he 'engendered in the souls of his students a pure legacy of knowledge'. (1.1.11.2) The Platonic imagery (Republic 527D-E; Phaedrus 248B) of the winged soul ascending to the intelligible world is suggested:

In these studies, the soul is purified of the sensible world and set ablaze again, so that it may some time perceive truth. (1.6.33.3)

Those who have been reared legitimately on the words of truth gain the means of voyaging to everlasting life and grow wings for the flight to heaven. (1.1.4.3)

For Clement of Alexandria, then, spiritual children, i.e. spoken and written words of wisdom, are a means to immortality; these words form a continuing succession of generations beginning with the apostles, and those men in each generation who transmit the words are the spiritual fathers of the

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24. The concept of the Judaeo-Christian teacher-father of spiritual children was destined to continue down to our own time through the office of abbot within monasticism. The Aramaic word *abba*, 'father', Hebrew *ab*, used by children in the time of Jesus as a form of address for their own fathers, is found in the New Testament as a form of address for God (Mark 14.36; Romans 8.15; Galatians 4.6; in each case the Aramaic word *abba* is followed by the Greek word *pater*); and it became the initial word and concept in the fundamental prayer Jesus taught his disciples, the Pater Noster (Matthew 6.9-13; Luke 11.2-4). It came to be a term of respect for monks generally, but with the rise of religious communities within monasticism the term developed into a title for the 'spiritual father' in charge of the community.
spiritual children who receive them: ‘Those who preserve the true transmis-
sion of blessed teaching derived directly from Peter, James, John and Paul,
the son receiving it from the father . . . came with God’s help to us as well
to deposit those ancestral and apostolic seeds.’ (1.1.11.3) There is in
Clement’s view no suggestion that marriage and physical children should be
abandoned by all men for the sake of the spiritual: ‘I bless chastity and
those to whom this gift has been given by God, and I esteem monogamy and
the sanctity of a single marriage.’ (3.1.4.3)

It can be concluded from what has been said above that in his imagery of
spiritual children, Clement follows and blends both Platonic and Judaeo-
Christian influences: to picture discourse, whether oral or written wisdom,
as spiritual offspring is Platonic; to portray those who receive this wisdom
as spiritual children, and the wisdom correspondingly as ‘seed’, is Judaeo-
Christian. In his work The Instructor (Paedagogus), Clement makes it
abundantly clear that Christ is the greatest teacher of such spiritual
children.25 These two related concepts of spiritual offspring were often
blended and blurred,26 as we shall see in our consideration of other Chris-
tian writers. This distinction, therefore, should not be pushed too far, but it
does seem to reflect the basic difference between the intellectual contri-
bution of the Greeks to Christianity, and the personal contribution of the
Jews.

Origen, like his predecessor Clement, reveals his debt to Plato27 in his
description of earthly and heavenly love (Commentary on Song of Songs,
PG 13.67AB):

Just as there is one love called carnal, wherein the lover sows in the flesh,
so there is a spiritual love, according to which that inner man, when in
love, sows in the spirit. To speak more clearly, whoever still carries the
image of the earthly according to the outer man, is moved by earthly love
and desire; whoever carries the image of the heavenly according to the
inner man, is moved by heavenly love and desire when it has clearly seen
the beauty and glory of the Word of God and has felt a love for His
beauty and has received from Him a kind of amorous dart and wound.

25. For Clement’s borrowing of the imagery of spiritual children from the New Testament, see
Justin’s expression logos spermatikos illustrates the Judaeo-Christian concept of wisdom as
seed.

26. Plato himself, at Phaedrus 276E–277A, by shifting his metaphor, changes his word or
discourse from spiritual offspring to spiritual seed to be implanted in the soul of the learner;
but this is counter to his basic conception of education as turning the eye of the soul to the
light, rather than the inserting of knowledge (Republic 518B ff.). Philo of Alexandria follows
his Jewish tradition in seeing the recipients of wisdom and virtue as spiritual children (Quis
Rerum Divinarum Heres 38).

27. On Origen’s indebtedness to Plato re Eros, see J. M. Rist, Eros and Psyche (Toronto:
In synthesizing Platonic and Christian thought, Origen does not hesitate to reveal his familiarity with Greek philosophers' dialogues, including Plato's Symposium, concerned with the importance of love for those souls striving to reach the heights of heaven. But for the ascetic Origen there is a clear line between carnal and spiritual love: love for carnal beauty does not serve as a first step in the ascent to God, as Plato, Plutarch and perhaps Plotinus would have it. And the Christian does not look to the body for immortality. In Origen's assessment of the best end for love, marriage, children and household assume an even lower place than the Platonic tradition would give them: 'The only laudable love is that which is directed to God and to the virtues of the soul.'

The Alexandrian thought of Clement and Origen became practice in monasticism, as seen in Methodius' dialogue Symposium or On Chastity, written near the beginning of the fourth century and modelled on Plato's Symposium. In this exhortation to virginity, spiritual marriage and children are incomparably superior to physical: of the ten speakers, only one, Theophila, makes any effort to defend marriage, and even she would place it second to virginity. In praise of virginity, Methodius introduces a historical and teleological argument: the world has progressed from its infancy, when even incest was allowed because of lack of population, through polygamy, monogamy with and without incontinence, to 'the most sublime goal of all, the science of virginity' (1.2); this final goal has become possible only with Christ's coming, and His virginity should serve as a model for all (1.5). One of the panegyrist of chastity urges that 'our Lord . . . promises that all who make themselves virgins will enter the Kingdom of Heaven'. (1.1) The ascent to God is described in terms of Plato's Phaedrus (246D ff.): virgins 'guide aloft the chariot of their souls . . . until they stand upon the very vault of heaven and gaze directly upon Immortality itself'. (1.1) An etymological argument worthy of Plato's Cratylus is used to suggest the godlike nature of chastity: 'Now the word parthenia (virginity), merely by changing one letter, becomes partheia (next

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Among the Greeks, many of the sages, desiring to pursue the search for truth in regard to the nature of love, produced a great variety of writings in this dialogue form, the object of which was to show that the power of love is none other than that which leads the soul from earth to the lofty heights of heaven, and that the highest beatitude can only be attained under the stimulus of love's desire. Moreover, the disputations on this subject are represented as taking place at meals between persons whose banquet, I think, consists of words and not of meats.

29. Origen, op.cit. 71C; translation Rist.

30. All translations of Methodius are those of H. Musurillo (St. Mathodius, The Symposium, A Treatise on Chastity in Ancient Christian Writers, vol.27).
to God), and this is significant of the fact that virginity alone makes divine those who possess her. . . .' (8.1) Parthenia too helps the soul's wings make the ascent to the vault of heaven:

. . . the wings of the soul, impregnated with it, truly become firmer and lighter, accustomed daily to fly from the interests of men (8.1).

Those who have loyally and faithfully lived as virgins for Christ, after their call and departure from this life, carry off, before all others, the prizes of their contest, crowned by Him with the blossoms of Immortality (8.2).

The book of Wisdom (4.1) is quoted approvingly: 'Better it is to have no children and to have virtue, for the memory thereof is immortal, because it is known both with God and with men.' (1.3)

Theophila, the one proponent of physical marriage, objects that the 'suggestion that henceforth men are not to procreate children is not well stated'. (2.1) God's injunction, 'Increase and multiply' (Genesis 1.28) is still in force until the day that the predetermined number of men is completed (2.1). Theophila's conclusion represents the warmest encouragement given to marriage in the dialogue: '. . . when a person makes a thorough examination and study of all the things that happen to a man in the course of nature, he will not learn to despise procreation, but he will also learn to praise and prefer chastity.' (2.7)

But even this moderate position is a lost cause in the dialogue. Thalia extols the spiritual substitutes, explaining that:

the first man may properly be referred to Christ Himself. . . . it was for her [the Church's] sake that the Word left His heavenly Father and came down to earth in order to cling to His Spouse, and slept in the ecstasy of His passion. Voluntarily did He die for her sake 'that He might present her to Himself a glorious Church and without blemish, cleansing her by the laver' (Ephesians 5.26, 27) for the reception of that blessed spiritual seed which He sows and plants by secret inspiration in the depths of the soul; and like a woman the Church conceives of this seed and forms it until the day she bears and nurtures it as virtue (3.8).

It is the Church that must 'increase and multiply' and this is achieved through Christ's repeated begetting in the Church, that is, His sowing in those virgins who successively compose the Church: there is a spiritual rebirth and regeneration:

Those who are more perfect and have embraced the truth with more perception, and thus, by their perfect faith and purification, have detached themselves from the absurdities of the flesh — these become the

31. The MSS are not unanimous (e.g. pantheia is found too) but the speaker's association of virginity with godliness is clear in any case.
Church and the helpmate of Christ: they are the virgin, as the apostle tells us, espoused and wedded to Him that by receiving from Him the pure and fertile seed of doctrine they might collaborate with him in the preaching of the Gospel for the salvation of all the rest. But those who are still imperfect and have only begun their lessons in the way of salvation, are formed and brought forth as by mothers in labour by those who are more perfect, until they are born and reborn unto the greatness and beauty of virtue. And when by their progress these too have become the Church, they co-operate in their turn in the birth and rearing of other children, bringing to term in the receptive soul as in a mother’s womb, the spotless desire of the Word (3.8).

The imagery of begetting spiritual children has been extended to a more complex imagery of spiritual family. The Church is the on-going collective family, an immortal household over which Christ the Bridegroom presides. In this lies the assurance of a stability and immortality infinitely superior to that gained through physical offspring and family. Thalia’s exegesis marks the complete triumph of the spiritual over the physical. Plato’s philosopher, if he wished, could have both physical and spiritual children; Methodius’ perfect virgins cannot. It is not surprising that as the number of Christians grew, asceticism and monasticism made great strides in the fourth century, sometimes weakening the ties of the natural family.32

For our present purpose there is no need to illustrate further how the early Greek Fathers adopted Plato’s concept of spiritual children, adapted it to their own needs (Plato’s Idea of the Good becoming, in effect, the Christian God), and applied the household topos to spiritual children, as Plato had done. Methodius’ position early in monasticism makes him important not only for the Greek Fathers’ later development of these same ideas (not least in the Cappadocian theology of Gregory of Nyssa),33 but also for the importation of the ideas into the Western church: Jerome, so rhetorically hostile to children and marriage, evidently read Methodius’ dialogue with approval for he calls it ‘refined and ordered conversation’.34

Over against this extended symbolism of eternal immortality through spiritual children, the early Christian Fathers concede a limited this-world

33. Werner Jaeger has shown Gregory’s great debt through Origen back to Plato, but has perhaps not given enough recognition to Methodius’ contribution, very early in the monastic period, to the monastic requirement of virginity for the production of the Christian adaptation of Plato’s spiritual children. Gregory can sound very like Methodius, e.g.: ‘Truly a joyful mother is the virgin mother who by the working of the Spirit conceives deathless children. . . .’ (Gregory, De Virginitate 13). For Jaeger on Gregory see his Two Rediscovered Works of Ancient Christian Literature: Gregory of Nyssa and Macarius (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1954), and Early Christianity and Greek Paideia (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1965).
34. Nitidus et compositus sermo (De Viris Illustribus 83).
immortality through continuity of family and through participation in the human race. Not surprisingly, in pre-monastic Alexandria, Clement shows Platonic debts. He sees the object of marriage as the begetting of children 'to secure the preservation of the whole human race'; he then combines the commonly cited biblical command with a Platonic suggestion of the divine nature of procreation: 'We have received the admonition “Be fruitful”, (Genesis 1.28) and we have to obey. In this role man becomes like God, because in his human manner he co-operates in the birth of another man.' (Paedagogus 2.10.83). In the Stromateis, those who do not marry and beget children are said to be impiously destroying divine creation (2.23.141.5); and Clement seems to agree with those who support marriage by the kind of argument from perpetuity and perfection found in Plato, Aristotle and Plutarch:

"The childless man," they say, "yet falls short of natural perfection since he has not set up in his place a successor for his household. For the perfect man is he who has made from himself his like, and he is more perfect when he sees that his son too has done the same, that is, when the son produces offspring of the same nature as their begetter." (2.23.139.5)

In paraphrasing Plato’s statements about the continuity of the human race through generation, Clement seems to sympathize, but as a Christian he should have difficulty accepting 'immortality' in anything but a limited sense: ‘Plato then places marriage among exterior goods, and provides for the immortality of our race and a kind of perpetuity achieved by the passing on of the torch of life to children’s children.’ (2.23.138.2) But Christian Fathers in the monastic period too can sound similar. Basil for example sees marriage as a ‘consolation for death. For, since it was impossible to remain alive forever, the Creator devised a permanence of life by the succession of the race.’ (Letter 301). For the Christian there must be a time limit on this mortal immortality; according to John Chrysostom, marriage was instituted that human nature ‘would be able, though mortal, to immortalize itself for a long time through a succession of descendants.’ (Homilia in Ioannem 19; cf. 85). But the Christian’s ‘long time’ implies a limit that the Platonic tradition did not share. Theophila in Methodius had said with reference to virginity that ‘when . . . the predetermined number of men is completed, then must there also be no further procreation of children’. (Symposium 2.1). Augustine in the West expresses similar views and admits the consequences. It is central to Augustine’s belief about children that the determined number of saints is at hand (De Bono Viduitatis 23.28), and that since Christ’s coming the earlier admonition to ‘increase and multiply’ is no longer valid (ibid 7.10). Augustine faces the logical conclusion:

But I know what they murmur. ‘What if,’ they say ‘all men should be
willing to keep themselves from all intercourse, how could the human race endure?’ I wish that all men had this willingness. . . . Much more quickly would the City of God be completed and the end of time be hastened (De Bono Coniugali 10).

Such termination of time must cut short the Platonic hope for immortality and happiness and thus becomes an argument to downplay physical children and marriage.

Christian spiritual children continued the educational point of the Platonic. The mystic anabasis is no longer to Plato’s Forms or Plotinus’ One, but to the Christian God: this is the way to the true knowledge or gnosis (the divine Logos or Word) that transcends mere belief (pistis). According to Clement of Alexandria in his appropriately entitled work Paedagogus, Christ is the great teacher of mankind, as Plato had declared god to be in the Laws (897B). But while for Plato literary education provided a propaideia for the true paideia of philosophy, now Clement and Origen, recognizing the great value in Platonic philosophy, made it propaedeutic to the true gnosis of Christian theology, based on the Bible. In the fourth century, Gregory of Nyssa commonly speaks of the ‘philosophic life’ of Christianity as a higher life within the Church, parallel and yet superior to the higher life of the classical philosophers: monastic life was guided by total dedication to the objective of culminating the divine anabasis in a total ‘assimilation to God’ (as Plato had expressed it: Theaetetus 176B), i.e., acquiring the excellences and purity of Christ. Men of wisdom, such as abbots of monasteries, can act as teacher-surrogates for Christ in the begetting of spiritual offspring. In the monastic period, the highest education and highest life required not only intellectual ability (as also in the Platonic tradition and Alexandrian Christianity), but additionally a willingness to remain celibate and thereby substitute spiritual children and household for physical. But those Fathers like Chrysostom and Augustine, whose first wish was that all men should remain celibate, could not, given variation in human intelligence, expect that all such celibates would achieve the higher substitute of spiritual children, in the rigorous Plato-derived sense we have examined here. Either many men, whether celibate or not, would prove incapable of such a divine anabasis, or else that anabasis must depend more on simple faith than Platonically rigorous education of the intellect.

35. The educational preparation for this higher life is explained in the celebrated work of Gregory’s brother Basil, To Young Men, in which he recommends classical Greek literature, including Plato, as propaedeutic to the Sacred Scriptures. This work should be put beside the most influential fourth-century Christian statement of how parents should educate their children for the lower level of life, i.e., education for those who will marry and live in the world, John Chrysostom’s On Vainglory and the Right Way for Parents to bring up their Children.
No man forms his vision of the universe unaided. He is indebted in a thousand ways to the culture to which he belongs. And in all modern cultures literature plays an important formative role. If Art must copy Life, Life in its turn certainly copies Art; and literary models help to determine how we feel, think and act (Bolgar36).

The above study has, in effect, illustrated that what Bolgar here says of modern cultures applies also to ancient Greek culture. Plato as literary artist and philosopher developed a metaphor of two types of children and households that was pregnant with meaning for the future. It would help determine the form in which some people in both classical and Christian societies felt and thought about the meaning of human life. And since in a fundamental sense such a vision of the universe must underlie any educational theory, Plato’s pregnant metaphor was to play an important formative role in ancient educational theory as well.