Chapter Five

WALKING TO HEAVEN

Plato Discovers Distance

"It's more refreshing to walk along country roads than city streets."

One of Plato's greatest dialogues begins in Athens on a beautiful summer day. It's the late fifth century B.C., a period sometimes referred to as Greece's golden age because there were so many gifted artists, poets, playwrights, philosophers, and statesmen living and working there at the same time. One of the most famous of them, Plato's teacher Socrates, spots a young man he knows walking down the street and calls out to him.

"Phaedrus, my friend! Where have you been? And where are you going?"

This hearty greeting captures the essence of Socrates, a man who cherished his friends and was intensely curious about their lives. He was an avid connector in the face-to-face sense, a trait that comes out over and over in the philosophical conversations he had with fellow Athenians, which form the backbone of Plato's writings.

This dialogue, known simply as *Phaedrus*, explores human connectedness in a time of dramatic technological change. A revolutionary new form of communication, written language,

had arrived in Greece, which had long been an oral society. It was beginning to catch on, and thoughtful people were worried about its effect on various aspects of life, particularly the life of the mind. In other words, though this story takes place roughly 2,400 years ago, it's about an era somewhat analogous to our own. Writing on the cusp between two technological eras, Plato examined questions that are in the air once again today.

Phaedrus tells Socrates that he's just spent the entire morning with the well-known orator Lysias, listening to his latest speech. To the modern reader, this might seem a curious way for a young man to be spending his time, but in a society largely organized around the spoken word, it was perfectly natural. Just as social networks and viral video clips are all the rage today, in rhetoric-obsessed Greece there was nothing cooler than sitting at the feet of a brilliant speaker, soaking up every word.

The speech was about a topic that's always of urgent interest: sex. Specifically, it was about the question of whether it's better to sleep with someone who's in love with you or someone who isn't. Lysias argued for the latter position, pointing out that when you have sex out of pure lust there are far fewer emotional complications.

Phaedrus thought the speech ingenious, and he's been walking around turning it over in his mind, trying to commit it to memory. In pursuit of this goal, he's headed outside the city walls, following the advice of a prominent doctor named Acumenus that "it's more refreshing to walk along country roads than city streets." He invites Socrates to join him and hear more about the speech, and the older man readily agrees. They set off, eventually leaving the footpath to walk barefoot through a stream. They follow it until they reach a beautiful spot beside

the stream where they can sit under a plane tree and talk.

Socrates marvels at what a lovely, tranquil place it is, prompting Phaedrus to observe that the philosopher seems like a total stranger to these natural surroundings: "As far as I can tell, you never even set foot beyond the city walls."

Socrates concedes that it's true. "Forgive me, my friend. I am devoted to learning; landscapes and trees have nothing to teach me—only people in the city can do that." He's journeyed here, he says, strictly because Phaedrus enticed him with an invitation to do what he loves to do best back in Athens, talk over a philosophical question like the one addressed by the speech. With that, he lies down on the grass and asks Phaedrus to recite Lysias's arguments for no-strings-attached sex.

When was the last time you went off with a friend and truly left the rest of the world behind? Socrates and Phaedrus are enjoying a type of human connection—in person, dedicated, utterly private—that's quite rare today. Even when you're physically with another person, it's hard to give them your undivided attention for a sustained period, or to receive the same from them. If there's a digital device nearby, chances are that one or both of you will be distracted or interrupted.

What's interesting is that this secluded chat was a rare experience for Socrates. He admits he hates to leave the crowded city, where his work as a philosopher revolves around his conversations with students and other intellectuals, usually in larger groups. In fact, this is the only one of Plato's many dialogues in which Socrates leaves Athens for a private tête-à-tête.

The philosopher had a deep craving for the oral connectedness that was dominant in his time. You might say he was an ancient maximalist and Athens was the "screen" that enabled

his habit. Now, like a modern road warrior with a mobile broadband device, he's ventured into the hinterland in the hope that he'll be able to find a good connection there, too. And he's waiting for Phaedrus to provide it, with a rendition of that libidinous lecture. Though life in ancient Greece was obviously different in many ways from life in the twenty-first century, the basic human desire to connect was the same. Socrates was seeking what everyone with a digital screen is after: contact, friendship, stimulation, ideas, professional and personal growth.

This outward urge goes back much further than the fifth century B.C. Countless thousands of years ago, our prehistoric ancestors knew nothing about the world beyond their immediate surroundings and had no connective tools with which to transcend their isolation. In fact, there was a time in the very distant past when they couldn't even converse with their closest companions, because they didn't know how.

Somewhere along the way, nobody knows exactly when, an amazing thing happened—or rather, two amazing things. Prehistoric humans came up with two of the most powerful connective tools ever devised, as E. H. Gombrich recounts in his book *A Little History of the World*:

> They invented *talking*. I mean having real conversations with each other, using words. Of course animals also make noises—they can cry out when they feel pain and make warning calls when danger threatens, but they don't have names for things as human beings do. And prehistoric people were the first creatures to do so.
>
> They invented something else that was wonderful too: pictures. Many of these can still be seen today, scratched

and painted on the walls of caves. No painter alive now could do better.

I came across this passage while reading the book to my son at bedtime one recent winter. Gombrich wrote the *Little History* for children, but I learned more from it than I have from most adult history books, because he treats technology and other facets of the past as the human stories they really are, free of specialist jargon and needless complexity. He calls those prehistoric people “the greatest inventors of all time,” and he’s right. They wanted and needed to reach out beyond themselves, and they found a couple of brilliant ways to do it: words and images.

History retraces this story over and over. People are constantly trying to close the distances between them by inventing new connective tools and working over time to improve them. Humans are the only animals that devise multiple uses for a single tool, and we’re especially good at finding new applications for our connective tools. If the “technology” of conversation was originally created to serve the practical needs of people struggling to survive in a harsh environment, by the fifth century B.C. it had evolved into something richer and more interesting: a path to truth and enlightenment.

Socrates used conversation to practice philosophy as nobody had ever practiced it before. Whereas previous philosophers had set themselves up literally as wise men with special access to the truth, he made no such claim. He was “a totally new kind of Greek philosopher,” writes modern-day scholar John M. Cooper. “He denied that he had discovered some new wisdom, indeed that he possessed any wisdom at all.” Rather, he be-

lieved the way to attain wisdom was through searching discussions with others like the ones he presided over in Athens, using the question-and-answer technique known today as the Socratic method. For Socrates, oral communication was the key to a good life.

But there was a downside to the connectedness of oral society. Talking enabled the emergence of early civilizations like Greece and the cities that were their nerve centers, none of which would have been built if people couldn't communicate their thoughts. These ancient metropolises offered many benefits to those who lived in them, including the intellectual stimulation that Socrates treasured. At the same time, they imposed new burdens. They were busy places, not anything near as busy as today's cities but, by the standards of their time, busy indeed. To live in Athens was to be surrounded day and night by a few hundred thousand other people, with all their attendant activity, noises, smells, and other claims on one's attention. It was a permanent crowd, and life in a crowd is an inherently demanding experience.

Plato makes it clear that life in Athens could be taxing to the mind when he quotes Phaedrus explaining why he's decided to take a stroll outside the city walls. Like the modern person who takes up yoga or meditation on a doctor's advice, he's following the physician Acumenus's prescription for clearing the head. He's getting a little exercise, and in a very particular way. In order to think deeply about the speech, he's putting some distance between himself and the crowd.

Distance. The very thing human beings had been running away from since prehistoric times, the space separating the self from others. The point of oral communication and all the good

things that flowed from it had been to shrink the distances between people. Now, in the place where this kind of connectedness had reached its highest and most intense expression, thoughtful people were realizing that, for personal well-being and happiness, it was necessary to restore some of that distance to everyday life.

This dialogue isn't about distance per se. But Plato was a careful, economical writer, and it's unlikely he would have made so much of the walk in the country unless he was trying to make a point. Phaedrus was a member of Socrates' intellectual circle and, like Plato, deeply interested in rhetoric and philosophy. Thus, when he was walking along in the city trying to memorize the speech, he wasn't just idly musing, he was doing work that mattered to him. And to do it well, he realized he needed some space.

For a twenty-first-century equivalent, think of the cubicle dweller who's spent the entire morning immersed in the digital crowd, shuttling among e-mails, Web pages, text messages, and other electronic activity. She wants to step away and focus on just one thing, perhaps an important project requiring sustained thought and creativity. Though not an aspiring philosopher, this worker is in much the same position as Phaedrus. She's striving to absorb new information, to learn from and make sense of it. But with all that stuff knocking around inside her head, it's awfully hard. How to refresh the overloaded mind?

In Athens, Plato suggested, one answer was creating a physical distance; getting away from the crowd by spending a few hours outside the walls. Curiously, though, Socrates doesn't see the point. He was about sixty at this time, and years of experience had convinced him that conversation was the only reliable

path to wisdom and happiness—and the more people who were available to converse with, the better. By this logic, a philosopher (a word that means "lover of wisdom") should never want to put any distance between himself and the crowd. It's the same basic principle that drives digital life today: the more you connect to others through screens, the better off you are.

Who was right, one of the most celebrated thinkers of all time or a young man remembered chiefly as a bit player in that thinker's work? Do we need distance, or don't we? The answer emerges in the balance of the dialogue.

Back at the stream, Phaedrus launches into the speech with the help of a surprising tool. Earlier, just before they stepped into the stream, Socrates said he wouldn't be satisfied with a mere summary of Lysias's argument. He wanted to hear it word for word as originally delivered. Phaedrus protested that he couldn't possibly do that since he didn't have it memorized. Socrates then observed that Phaedrus seemed to be hiding something under his cloak, and he strongly suspected it was a written copy of the speech. At which point Phaedrus sheepishly pulled out exactly that, a hard copy of the oral presentation.

Some translations call it a "book," others a "scroll." Whatever you call it (I'm going with scroll), the point is that, as he headed out for his meditative walk, the younger man had taken with him a tool employing the very latest communications technology, written language based on an alphabet. In fact, writing wasn't completely new. The Egyptians and other early civilizations had pre-alphabetic writing systems. And the Greek alphabet had been around for several hundred years by that time, but it had been very slow to catch on. It was only in the lifetimes of

Socrates and Plato that it really took hold. In contemporary terms, Phaedrus's scroll was roughly what a cell phone was around the year 1985, a technology still in the early stages of adoption and not yet fully understood.

The reason he had brought the scroll along is obvious: it was useful. It would allow him to continue thinking about Lysias's speech and work on memorizing it even as he wandered into the country. With the hard copy in hand, he could engage with the speaker's ideas far from the place where the speech had been first delivered, long after it was over. He could leave the crowded city and still perform the task he wanted to perform. If he's a little embarrassed by the scroll, as he seems to be, perhaps it's because he's in the company of the most revered oral communicator of all time, a man who never read from a written text and, it will soon emerge, didn't think much of the medium.

When Phaedrus is done delivering the speech, Socrates lavishly applauds the performance, playfully pronouncing himself "in ecstasy." They then have a discussion of its arguments, and along the way Socrates spins one of the most famous metaphors in all of philosophy. Since Lysias's essential point was that love drives people mad, Socrates examines exactly what madness is and why the mind sometimes goes over the edge.

He likens the soul to a flying chariot pulled by a pair of winged horses. One of the horses stands for the good, virtuous side of us and the other for the bad, corrupt side. The goal of the charioteer is to drive the horses skillfully so the chariot soars up toward "the place beyond heaven" where "pure knowledge"—enlightenment and happiness—resides. But the horses are hard to manage, especially the evil one, and sometimes they pull in different directions. When this happens, the

chariot loses its way and crashes to Earth.

The image still resonates because it captures something essential about the challenge of being human. Socrates aimed to be a practical philosopher, and what he's describing is really the journey of the inner self every day. We're all driving our own chariots through the chaos, struggling to reconcile the forces pulling at us from every direction. You know the feeling. You rush around chasing the things the world holds up as the keys to happiness: money, success, status, what passes for entertainment. Yet they don't do the trick, not in a lasting way. On some level, you know you could be using your time and talents to pursue a steadier, more authentic kind of existence, but you're not sure how. As Socrates puts it, chariot driving "is inevitably a painfully difficult business."

Foolish people get caught up in the chariot race itself, he says, "trampling and striking one another as each tries to get ahead of the others." Others manage to stay calm and keep their chariots on course, adroitly avoiding the pileups. And while these lucky souls don't quite attain "pure knowledge"—which is reserved for the gods—they do soar to impressive heights and find genuine contentment.

Skillful life management yields wisdom and happiness. It's a terrific ideal, but the busier our days become and the more others control the reins, the harder it is to imagine achieving it. Lately, with the relentless demands of digital devices, the challenge often seems insurmountable. If you're a faithful connector who spends all day interacting with screens, you probably know, as I do, what it's like to have your chariot stuck in the bad place. "The result is terribly noisy, very sweaty, and disorderly," Socrates says, and those who live this way wind up "un-

satisfied."

What can we do about it? This isn't ancient Greece, and Socrates and Phaedrus never had to manage jammed inboxes. But the beauty of Plato, and the reason he's still widely read today, is that he addresses life's fundamental questions in ways that transcend time and place. The chariot metaphor is a helpful reminder of the link between the outward self—how we spend our time interacting with the world, managing our work lives and relationships—and the inward one. In ancient Athens, there was a highly effective way to quiet one's busy outward life and get the chariot back under control: a simple walk in the country.

True, the star of this story, Socrates, initially pooh-poohs the idea of putting any distance between himself and his beloved city. However, Socrates isn't the only philosopher involved here. Plato wrote this and the other dialogues of Socrates after the latter's death. They're based on real historical conversations, but since time had passed and Plato was becoming a philosopher himself, it's widely assumed he took liberties and often arranged the material to make his own points. Though he never states his personal views directly, now and then he seems to implicitly criticize what Socrates is saying.

Phaedrus is sprinkled with clues that Plato disagreed with his teacher about distance. First there's the question of the walk in the country. Though Socrates leaves Athens reluctantly, once he and Phaedrus have settled in by the stream, they have a conversation that, even by Socratic standards, is extraordinary. After the "ecstasy" of Phaedrus's performance, Socrates delivers a few stunning speeches of his own, becoming so absorbed in the task that he's in a kind of rapture. He's in the zone, you might say, and he attributes this pleasant state to their rural hideout.

"There's something really divine about this place," he says. He's using the word "divine" literally, to suggest that the gods are inspiring him. But notice he links the divinity to this *place*, the isolated location to which Plato has devoted particular attention. The message is unmistakable: the distance Socrates had dismissed as a pointless bother has played an important role in helping his mind take flight.

Second, the tool Phaedrus brought along under his cloak allows them to make the most of that distance. With the hard copy in hand, they can be away from town with all its distractions and burdens, yet retain full access to one of its chief draws: great, stimulating rhetoric. The gadget is the linchpin of their conversation, but once again Socrates doesn't see the point.

Toward the end of the dialogue he brings up the new technology and the question of whether written language serves any useful purpose. He tells a story about an Egyptian god named Theuth who had invented many "arts," including arithmetic, geometry, and astronomy. But his greatest discovery was written language. Theuth showed this creation to the king of Egypt, promising it would "make the Egyptians wiser" and "improve their memory."

The king was not impressed. To the contrary, he told Theuth, writing would make his people forget more easily. Once something was recorded in this external way, using letters, they wouldn't feel the need to "remember it from the inside, completely on their own," i.e., in their minds. Worse, they would use writing to appear knowledgeable when they were merely parroting what they'd read. "[T]hey will be tiresome," the king says, "having the reputation of knowledge without the

reality."

Socrates shares the king's dim view of this tool, and he expands on it. Writing is a dangerous invention, he tells Phaedrus, because it doesn't allow ideas to flow freely and change in real time, the way they do in the mind during oral exchange. Whereas conversation is all about back-and-forth, written language is a one-way street: Once a thought is written down, it's frozen and you can't challenge it or change its position. It's a record of ideas that already exist, rather than a way of creating new ones. He likens written texts to paintings, which "stand there as if they are alive, but if anyone asks them anything, they remain most solemnly silent." A piece of writing "continues to signify just that very same thing forever." In a word, it's dead.

Thinkers have been analyzing and debating this passage for ages, because Socrates got it so wrong. His reaction to writing is typical of the confusion and anxiety new technologies often cause. Like the Luddites of today who believe that digital technologies are irredeemably inferior to older devices and even dangerous, he judged the new tool exclusively through the lens of the old one. Because writing didn't work just like conversation, he felt, it couldn't possibly be worth much and would only make people dumber. To Socrates, writing was useful only as an aid to oral dialogue, a kind of script, which is exactly how he and Phaedrus employ it.

What led Socrates to this narrow, pessimistic view of writing? He failed to understand that new connective technologies come along to solve genuine problems, and those problems usually have something to do with distance. In primitive times, the problem had been *psychic* distance; people were trapped in their own thoughts without an effective way to express them-

selves. Conversation solved this problem by allowing them to put their thoughts into words that could be shared and understood.

Oral communication was a great success, but it gave rise to a new problem of *physical* distance, rooted in the fact that conversation could happen only in close proximity to others. As civilization expanded, it became increasingly useful and important for people to communicate across great distances. By the fifth century B.C., merchants and traders were running businesses that spanned mountains, deserts, and seas. There were city-states and emerging empires whose political and military leaders needed to send messages to far-flung locations. Human messengers long met this need, delivering information by voice. But this system had drawbacks, including the limitations of memory. Written language solved the problem of physical distance by allowing words and ideas to travel anywhere and arrive intact, exactly as originally recorded. Writing also solved the *temporal* problem of storage, making it possible for information to be stored over the long term more reliably than it could ever be stored in the human mind.

As Plato shows in *Phaedrus*, this immensely practical innovation also had a less tangible, but ultimately far more significant, benefit. It allowed individuals to experience other people and their ideas *at a distance*, in a private, reflective way. A text written in a busy city could be "replayed" anywhere, including on the bank of a gurgling stream. Immediately after Phaedrus removes the scroll from his cloak, the two men step into the stream, which Phaedrus observes is "lovely, pure and clear"—a metaphor, perhaps, for what's about to happen to the flow of their thoughts. While closing one kind of distance, written lan-

guage opened another, giving the mind a new kind of freedom. As a result of that freedom, writing turned out to be much more than a static record of old thoughts. Over time, it would become the fantastic medium for exchanging ideas and growing new ones that it is today.

Given who Socrates was, a philosopher whose life's work was embedded in the old medium, it's understandable that he didn't grasp the value of the new one. Steeped in the culture of the voice, he never imagined that one could go off alone with a written text and read it silently and thereby gain new insights. His doubts may also have been related to the physicality of writing. A firm believer that the mind was the source of all meaning, he was suspicious of the body and, indeed, the entire physical world. At one point in this dialogue, he refers to the body disparagingly as a mere shell for the intellect, "this thing we are carrying around." To him, a written text was just another "thing," a dumb object that pretended to do what the mind does but never could.

Plato had more vision than his teacher about the value of distance. As the action of the dialogue shows, he understood that there was much to be gained by retreating physically from the crowd. Years after Socrates' death, when Plato decided to open his own school, he founded it outside Athens in the same kind of countryside where this dialogue takes place. The Platonic Academy would become synonymous with the best of Greek thought, further evidence that there really is something divine about distance.

Second, though there's no record of what Plato personally thought about written language, he left plenty of evidence that he thought better of it than Socrates did. Plato also took a dim

view of physical objects as sources of wisdom, but that didn't stop him from putting pen to scroll and becoming a writer himself. The reason we're able to read this dialogue today is that Plato wrote it down, using the very tool Socrates denounced. He was roughly forty years younger than Socrates and evidently more open to the possibilities of the new device. By recording in hard copy Socrates' dark fears about writing, he was effectively saying, "Sorry, old man, there's more to it than that."

For our purposes, in *Phaedrus* Plato establishes a basic principle on which to build a new way of thinking about digital connectedness: In a busy world, the path to depth and fulfillment begins with distance. The technological landscape is a great deal more complicated today, and over the centuries distance has taken on different meanings. But the basic dynamic hasn't changed: to steer your chariot toward a good life, it's essential to open some gaps between yourself and all the other chariots crashing around this busy world.

Technology is unpredictable, and the gaps often appear in surprising places. So far, digital gadgets have increased the general level of our busyness, creating a new need for distance. It's a problem yet to be solved, and it's worth noting that some 2,400 years ago, it was just beginning to dawn on people that they could use *their* newest technology for the opposite purpose: to reduce or temper their busyness. Might we be able to pull off the same trick in the digital age?

For that to happen, it's essential to be more mindful of how today's devices change our relationship to the crowd, which in turn affects our busyness and state of mind. Human connectedness is fluid and ever changing. When they first meet in the city, Socrates and Phaedrus are in a busy, highly connected sit-

uation. By talking a walk, they become less connected to the crowd and more connected to each other—and the scroll helps make it all happen.

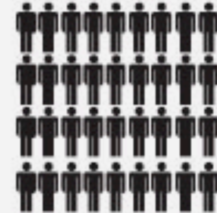
As new technologies are added to the mix, the permutations and subtleties multiply. In Athens, the city was synonymous with the crowd. But today, walking down a bustling city street can be a form of *dis*connectedness from the crowd, especially if you've just come from an office crowded with screens. While you're walking down that city street, if your mobile buzzes with a call or message, your relationship to the crowd changes yet again.

To make sense of all this, it's helpful to imagine connectedness as a continuum along which we're moving all the time. It's pictured below as a straight line between two poles, which I've labeled with the Greek letters alpha and omega. Alpha represents minimum connectedness, or the self alone, while omega is the maximum connectedness of the crowd.

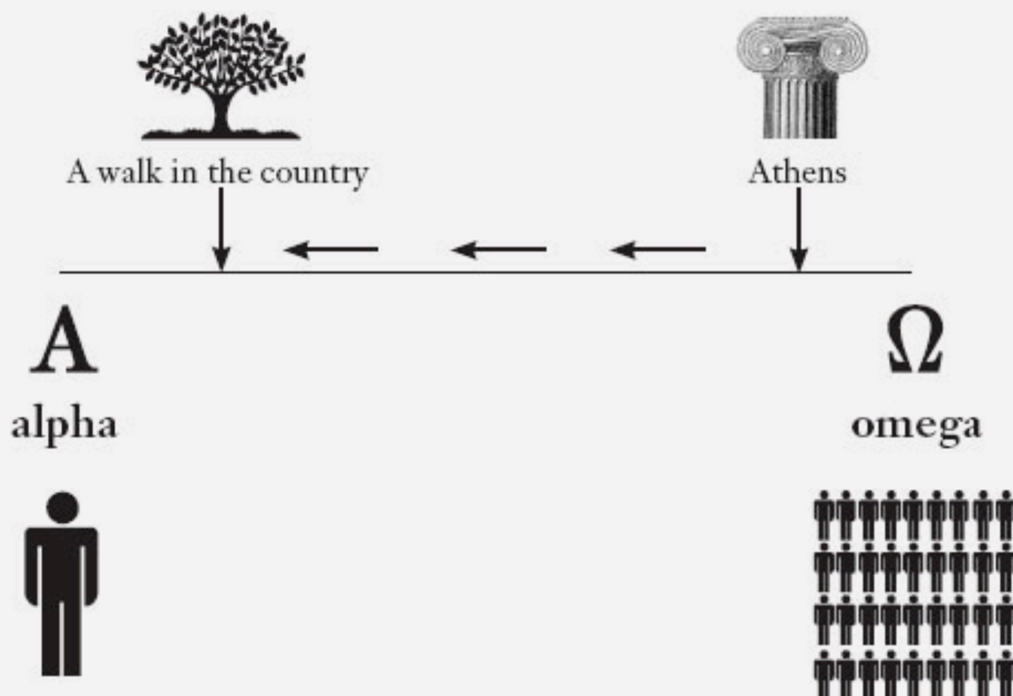
The poles represent not just the fact of being in a crowd or being alone but the types of experience associated with those situations. When we're alone, our thoughts and feelings are oriented inward, and experience tends to be relatively quiet and slow. In contrast, in a crowd—whether physical or virtual—our orientation is more external, simply because there's more happening, more demands on our attention. Life in a crowd is typically busier and faster.

A
alpha

Ω
omega



The rest of the continuum represents the range of situations between these extremes. Moving from left to right, solitude gives way to interaction with others, and one's experience becomes relatively more outward and busy. Moving from right to left, the crowd grows smaller, and experience is relatively less busy and more inward. When Socrates and Phaedrus leave the city, they dramatically reduce the intensity of their connectedness, shifting from the omega end of the continuum toward alpha. Distance makes all the difference.



This is just a simple graphic device, and it can't begin to represent the full range of human experience. Everyone's temperament is unique, and we all have our own personal reactions to crowds as well as to solitude. There are born introverts as well as extroverts, and countless shades in between. A situation that feels oppressively crowded and busy to you might not strike me in the same way. Still, there is a rough correlation between how immersed anyone is in a crowd and how busy (or not) their thoughts are. And this idea is central to understanding the workings of human connectedness.

In the chapters to come, as the story progresses from Plato's era to the present, I'll occasionally use this continuum as a point of reference. Though the other six philosophers lived in different times and technological climates, the fundamental issue remained the same: the individual trying to make the most of life in an increasingly crowded, busy society. The philosophical goal—a practically useful way of thinking about technology, so it serves the full range of human needs, inside and out—doesn't change, either. The point is not to run away from the crowd and become a hermit. For most of us, the pure alpha life would be as unpleasant as the pure omega. The point is to find a happy balance.

Plato captures this idea at the end of the dialogue, when, having refreshed themselves and had a conversation for the ages, the two men decide to start back for the city. Socrates offers a prayer: "Beloved Pan, and all ye other gods who haunt this place, give me beauty in the inward soul; and may the outward and inward man be at one."