

# The Gods of the Platonic Tradition

## Session 1 – The One and the Gods

"But, according to this reasoning, every temperate man is a friend to divinity, for he is similar to him. But the intemperate man is dissimilar, different, and unjust; and other things from the same reasoning will take place in a similar manner. But we should understand that which is consequent to these things, and which in my opinion is *the most beautiful, and the most true of all assertions, that for a good man to sacrifice to and be conversant with the Gods, is of all things the most beautiful, the best, and the most useful to the possession of a happy life*; and that, besides this, it is in the highest degree becoming; but the contraries of these things naturally happen to the vicious man. " Plato, *The Laws* IV, 716c.

The history which explains why it is that when moderns think about the polytheism of the ancient world they think of a squabbling family of characters superhuman in power, but all too human in morality and with no overarching and harmonizing order is, I am sure, too long and complicated to go into in any kind of useful detail. Suffice to say that this view was the construct of people with little understanding of its underlying philosophy and theology, and who were waging a determined polemic against the "old order" on behalf of a new exclusive monotheism. The view that one must either believe in "one true God" or many Gods was not one held by the wisest of the ancient west, in just the same way that it is not the opinion of so many religious cultures of the east.

We need to step back and look at what the most articulate advocates of pagan polytheism thought was actually the situation, in order to understand Platonism's religious roots. The following passages will, I hope, enable us to discuss tonight the general overview of the Gods of the tradition.

1 Maximus of Tyre (in the second century C.E.) wrote that although humans have difficulty agreeing on anything, "You will see one agreed law and assertion in all the earth, that there is one God, the king and father of all things, and many Gods, sons of God, ruling together with him. This the Greek says, and the Barbarian says, the inhabitant of the Continent, and he who dwells near the sea, the wise and the unwise. And if you proceed as far as to the utmost shores of the ocean, there also there are Gods, rising very near to some, and setting very near to others." (Dissertation 1).

Thomas Taylor, the first person to translate the whole of Plato into English (as well as many other Platonic works), summarized much in his essay *On the Theology of the Greeks*. After a short preamble he begins:

2 "In the first place, that which is most admirable in this theology is, that it produces in the mind properly prepared for its reception the most venerable, and exalted conceptions of the great cause of all. For it celebrates this immense principle as something superior even to *being itself*; as exempt from the whole of things, of which it is nevertheless ineffably the

source, and does not therefore think fit to enumerate it with any triad, or order of beings. Indeed, it even apologises for attempting to give an appropriate name to this principle, which is in reality ineffable, and ascribes the attempt to the weakness of human nature, which striving intently to behold it, gives the appellation of the most simple of its conceptions to that which is beyond all knowledge and all conception. Hence it denominates it The One and The Good; by the former of these names indicating its transcendent simplicity, and by the latter its subsistence as the object of desire to all beings. For all things desire good. At the same time, however, it asserts that these names are in reality nothing more than the conceptions of the soul, which, standing as it were in the entrance of the inner sanctuary of deity, announce nothing pertaining to the ineffable, but only indicate her spontaneous tendencies towards it, and belong rather to the immediate offspring of the first God, than to the first itself."

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"Let us as it were celebrate the first God, not as establishing the earth and the heavens, nor as giving subsistence to souls, and the generation of all animals; for he produced these indeed, but among the last of things; but prior to these, let us celebrate him as unfolding into light the whole intelligible and intellectual genus of Gods, together with all the super-mundane and mundane divinities - as the God of all Gods, the unity of all unities, and beyond the first adyta, - as more ineffable than all silence, and more unknown than all essence - as holy among the holies, and concealed in the intelligible Gods." Proclus (5th Century C.E.), *Theology of Plato*, Book 2, Chapter 11.

We will look more closely at the differences between the orders of Gods just mentioned (intelligible, intellectual, super-mundane and the mundane Gods) in coming sessions; suffice to say that the intelligible Gods were considered to be the highest order, and that therefore they are those which are closest to the One. But given the reality of the First God, why should there be other Gods? The answer to this is that the Platonic tradition considers that the whole scheme of reality must be the most complete and beautifully ordered as possible, and that therefore every principle should extend itself in such a way as to fill all conceivable layers of reality; and this extension is through the law of similitude. Thus Thomas Taylor in his Introduction to Proclus' *Theology of Plato* says:

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"The scientific reasoning from which this dogma is deduced is the following: As the principle of all things is The One, it is necessary that the progression of beings should be continued, and that no vacuum should intervene either in incorporeal or corporeal natures. It is also necessary that everything which has a natural progression should proceed through similitude. In consequence of this, it is likewise necessary that every producing principle should generate a series of the same order with itself, viz. nature, a natural series; soul, one that is psychical (i.e. belonging to soul); and intellect, an intellectual series. For if whatever possesses a power of generating, generates similars prior to dissimilars, every cause must deliver its own form and characteristic peculiarity to its progeny; and before it generates that which gives subsistence to progressions far distant and separate from its nature, *it must constitute things close to itself according to essence, and conjoined with it through similitude*. It is therefore necessary from these premises, since there is one unity the principle of the universe, that this unity should produce from itself, prior to everything else, a series of natures characterised by unity, and a number the most of all things allied to its cause; and these natures are no other than the Gods." (p. 2)

This idea that true causes (that is to say causes which are producing effects out of their own intrinsic nature) produce effects most like themselves first and then, as their causal reach moves outward, gradually produce effects less and less like themselves is explicitly stated in the Proclus' *Elements of Theology*, proposition 28 – "Every producing cause gives subsistence to things similar to itself, prior to such as are dissimilar."

To explore that idea in more familiar terms: when we consider that a fire has a nature essentially hot, something placed next to the fire becomes almost as hot as that fire; if something else is placed next to the first heated thing, further from the fire, that thing will be less hot, as the heat passes on to it; and so on, until the thing furthest from the fire has the least of the original heat in it. Or consider that when an animal reproduces, it produces something most akin to itself, and any particular characteristic it has tends to become less prominent as each succeeding generation extends that animal's reproductive causality.

Let's go back to the concept that *all that is* has been unfolded from a First Principle so transcendent that it is beyond *being* – in other words it is beyond all the definite characteristics by which the mind knows things: sameness, difference, stability, movement, relation, number, equality, inequality, measure, and so on. It is, in itself, completely unknowable: in a way it must possess those qualities (where else could they come from if it is the origin of all things?) but not in a way that it is itself subject to any or all of them (nor is it a conglomeration of them). For the Platonic philosophers it seemed necessary that each primary quality starts to emerge after this unknowable One, and that therefore the Gods can be seen, at least from our vantage point, as each quality stepping forward as a unity – after which each quality can be distributed into a series of increasing multiplicity.

So to return to Thomas Taylor's Introduction, he continues:

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"According to this theology therefore, from the immense principle of principles, in which all things causally subsist, absorbed in super-essential light, and involved in unfathomable depths, a beauteous progeny of principles proceed, all largely partaking of the ineffable, all stamped with the occult characters of deity, all possessing an overflowing fullness of good. From these dazzling summits, these ineffable blossoms, these divine propagations, being, life, intellect, soul, nature, and body, depend; *monads* suspended from *unities*,<sup>1</sup> deified natures proceeding from deities. Each of these monads too, is the leader of a series which extends from itself to the last of things, and which while it proceeds from, at the same time abides in, and returns to its leader. And all these principles and all their progeny are finally centred and rooted by their summits in the first great all-comprehending one. Thus all beings proceed from, and are comprehended in the first being; all intellects emanate from one first intellect; all souls from one first soul; all natures blossom from one first nature; and all bodies proceed from the vital and luminous body of the world. And lastly, all these great monads are comprehended in the first one, from which both they and all their depending series are unfolded into light. Hence this first one is truly the unity of unities, the monad of monads, the principle of principles, the God of Gods, one and all things, and yet one prior to all."

<sup>1</sup> The unities (in Greek *henads*) are the Gods which transcend the particular natures; the monads are first of any particular nature. Thus concerning any particular order there is first a unity, then a monad, then a whole series which displays the range of possibilities held transcendentally in the unity and immanently in the monad.

This is about as far as I think we need to go in this the first of three sessions; in the next one we'll compare the Gods as unfolded by this metaphysical/theological scheme with the Gods of the traditional myths of Greece. We will see, I think, that so long as we treat the myths as symbols, and the actions portrayed in them as images of how the many characteristics of the theological Gods work their way out into manifestation, the two together provide a thoughtful philosopher with profound insights into the nature of reality.

We will also look at the way this theology ensures that Platonic philosophy is not dualistic: the world of eternal forms and the world of temporal "copies" of forms are embraced and brought together by the Gods who are not measured either by time or by eternity.

And in the third session we'll look at the "orders" of Gods – to try to understand how in the unfolding of the orders there is a hierarchy of power; while if we consider the Gods *in themselves* they are not hierarchical but all equally rooted in the One. Some of these orders and some of the Gods will be relatively familiar (at least as mythological characters) while others will not only be strange to modern thinkers, but also difficult to see as they gather in the intense light of the First Principle.