

The Gods of the Platonic Tradition

Session 3 – The Gods and their Orders

"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 are suspended . . ."

In our two previous sessions we have looked at the metaphysical necessity for including a pantheon of Gods as part of an orderly unfolding of the One or the Good (the titles for the First Principle in the Platonic tradition) into the "all" – the panorama of the universe with its immaterial and material levels, its many classes and subdivisions, its uncountable individuals that perform the beautiful dance around what Plato calls the King of all things.

We have also looked at the depiction of the Gods in Greek myths and explored their extraordinary power to give insights into the nature and activities of the Gods, so long as the hearer is prepared to look behind the literal to the symbolic truths which the Platonic tradition affirms is to be found in such stories.

We need to return to the beginning of our explorations and look again at the First Principle which Thomas Taylor attempts to describe in these words:

". . . that there is one first cause of all things, whose nature is so immensely transcendent, that it is even superessential; and that in consequence of this it cannot properly either be named or spoken of, or conceived by opinion, or be known, or perceived by any being. However, that if it be lawful to give a name to that which is truly ineffable, the appellations of *The One* and *The Good* are of all others the most adapted to it; the former of these names indicating that it is the principle of all things, and the latter that it is the ultimate object of desire to all things."

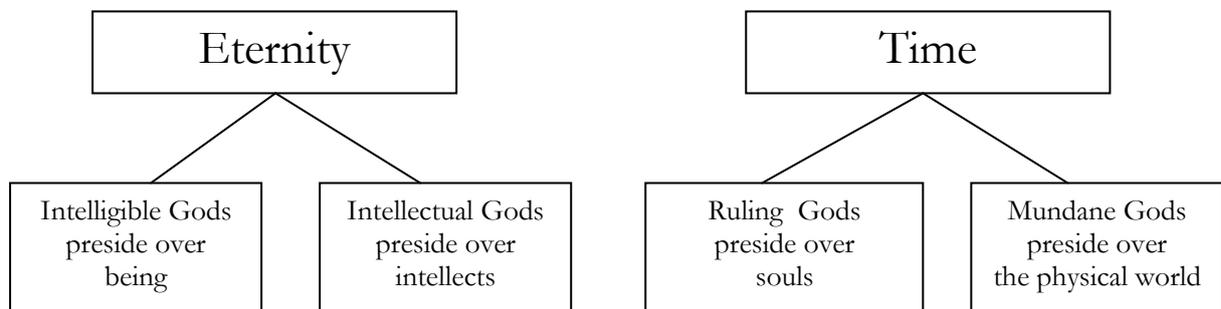
Transcending every attribute which allows the mind to identify the objects of thought perhaps our best response to this originating One is silence: standing, as it were, in the midst of what it has brought about we can, I think, permit ourselves to say "it must *be* in some way" and then pass on.

The movement from the truly unthinkable to a world full of thinkable things begins, so the Platonists of the ancient world asserted, with the Gods. They emerge, as it were, from that which has no characteristics in order to give to reality each necessary characteristic in its simplest and most powerful form. Insofar as every God is rooted in the One, and, as Taylor puts it, "largely partaking of the ineffable, all stamped with the occult characters of deity" even these are beyond the reach of the mind, because in themselves they transcend being and the qualities which are attached to being; nevertheless given that each provides

an individual character from which the unfolding universe derives is kaleidoscopic beauty, we can say something about every God and Goddess. In other words, while we cannot truly see the causes, we can know something of them through their effects. The Platonists, especially those who wrote in the so-called neoplatonic era (about 200 – 600 C.E.) divided reality into several layers, so to speak, and therefore tended to see the Gods as orders variously producing and ruling over these great kingdoms. They also saw some layers as having a causal priority over others: for example, the primary layer is that of *being*, since every other condition of reality cannot exist without participating in *being*. From this point of view the Gods who bring the order of being into existence are themselves considered to be the first choir or order of Gods. Here is Sallust introducing the simplest analysis of reality and the orders of Gods which preside over it:

1 "But of the gods some are mundane and others super-mundane. I call those mundane who fabricate the world: but of the super-mundane, some produce essences, others intellect, and others soul; and on this account they [that is the super-mundane] are distinguished into three orders, in discourses concerning which orders, it is easy to discover all the gods."

This fourfold order – essence (or being); intellect, soul, body – follows a view of reality, which divides it into a level which is eternal and unmoving, and another which is temporal and moving. Each level is then divided again: in eternity there are intelligible essences and intellects which rest in contemplation of those essences. In the temporal world there are self-motive souls and bodies moved by those souls.



We need to be careful here: the Gods do not emerge in this way because of these divisions: the divisions exist because of the differing characteristics of the Gods – in other words the Gods are the causes, the levels of reality are the effects.

But this scheme is refined by looking more carefully at how the intelligible links up with the intellectual and how soul links up with body, and as a result of this closer inspection, it is more common in late Platonic theology to refer to six orders of Gods.

2 To outline these orders we can quote Thomas Taylor's notes to the *Parmenides* who sees them in terms of processions of Gods who, he says: "may be comprehended in six orders: The Intelligible, The Intelligible-Intellectual, The Intellectual,

The Supermundane,¹
 The Liberated and
 The Mundane.

For the *intelligible*, as we have already observed, must hold the first rank, and must consist of *being*, *life*, and *intellect*, *i.e.* must *abide*, *proceed* and *return*, and this super-essentially; at the same time that it is characterized, or subsists principally according to *being*. But, in the next place, that which is both *intelligible* and *intellectual* succeeds, which must likewise be triple, but must principally subsist according to *life*, or *intelligence*. And, in the third place, the *intellectual* order must succeed, which is *triplely convertive*."

(What has happened here is that some of the Gods which the fourfold analysis considered to be intelligible and some which it considered to be intellectual are now understood to be "intelligible-and-at-the-same-time-intellectual." This does mean that the whole eternal order of things can now be understood in a familiar – at least to Platonist – pattern of an abiding-proceeding-returning powers. Taylor continues:)

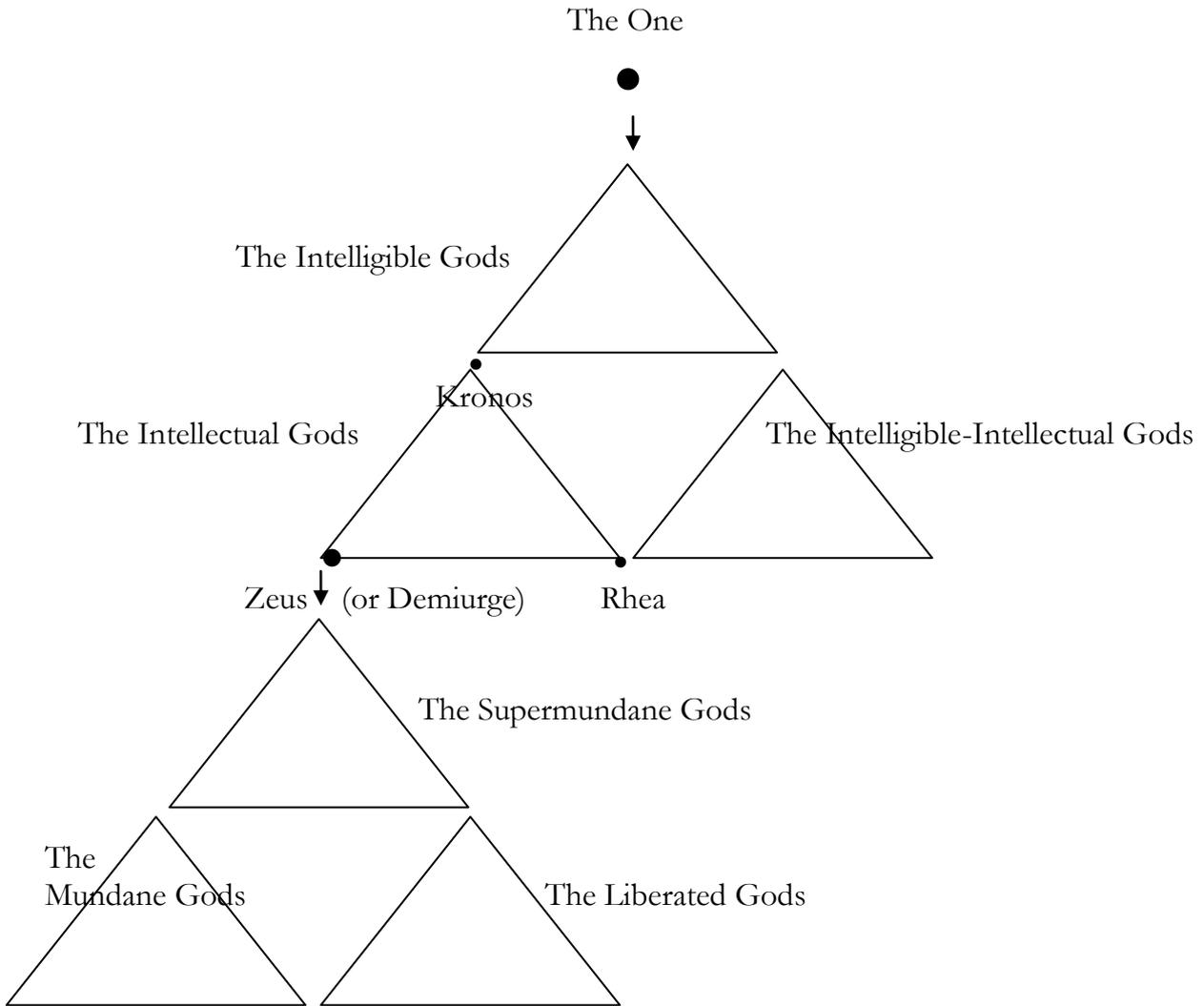
3 "But as, in consequence of the existence of the sensible world, it is necessary that there should be some demiurgic cause of its existence, this cause can only be found in *intellect*, and in the last hypostasis of the *intellectual triad*. For all forms in this hypostasis [nature] subsist according to all-various and perfect divisions; and forms can only fabricate when they have a perfect intellectual separation from each other."

(The creative cause of the temporal universe is thus the fabricative power of the final God of the intellectual order: in the *Timaeus* this is called the Demiurge – Proclus in his commentary identifies him as Zeus. Platonic metaphysics understands that a whole series of states or conditions of being must arise before what is inherent in the ineffable One can manifest in physical form – note the word *before* is used to mean *causally* before, rather than *temporally* before. Taylor continues:)

4 But since *creation* is nothing more than *procession*, the Demiurgus will be to the posterior order of the Gods what *The One* is to the orders prior to the *Demiurgus*; and consequently he will be that secondarily which the first cause is primarily. Hence, his first production will be an order of Gods analogous to the *intelligible* order, and which is denominated *supermundane*. After this he must produce an order of Gods similar to the *intelligible-intellectual* order, and which are denominated *liberated* Gods. And in the last place, a procession correspondent to the *intellectual* order, and which can be no other than the *mundane* Gods. For the Demiurgus is chiefly characterized according to diversity, and is allotted the boundary of all universal natures."

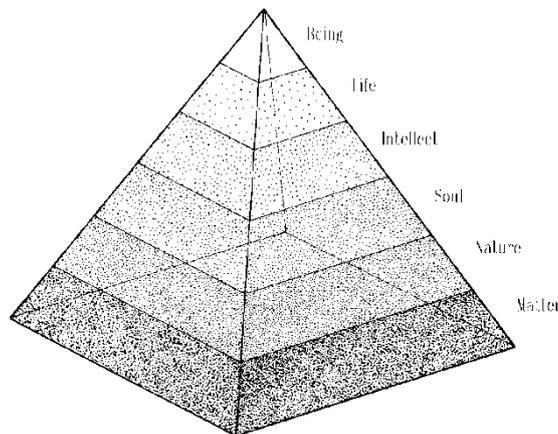
That is to say the Demiurgus is the final boundary of Gods which rule over eternal and universal natures: below him the other orders of Gods rule over things which are temporal and in varying degrees particular. The structure as outlined by Taylor can be show diagrammatically thus:

¹ We should note here that Proclus' use of the term *supermundane* is restricted to that order of Gods which presides over that which is above the natural and physical world – whereas Sallust, in our first quote, uses it to mean all the orders above the mundane.



The Intelligible Gods preside over being } These three orders are called the
 The Intelligible-Intellectual Gods preside over life } "total" or "universal" orders: all that
 The Intellectual Gods preside over intellect } resides in them is eternal.

The Supermundane Gods preside over souls } These three are called the "partial"
 The Liberated Gods preside over Nature (*Phusis*) } orders: all that reside in them are in
 The Mundane God preside over the world of bodies } varying degrees subject to time.



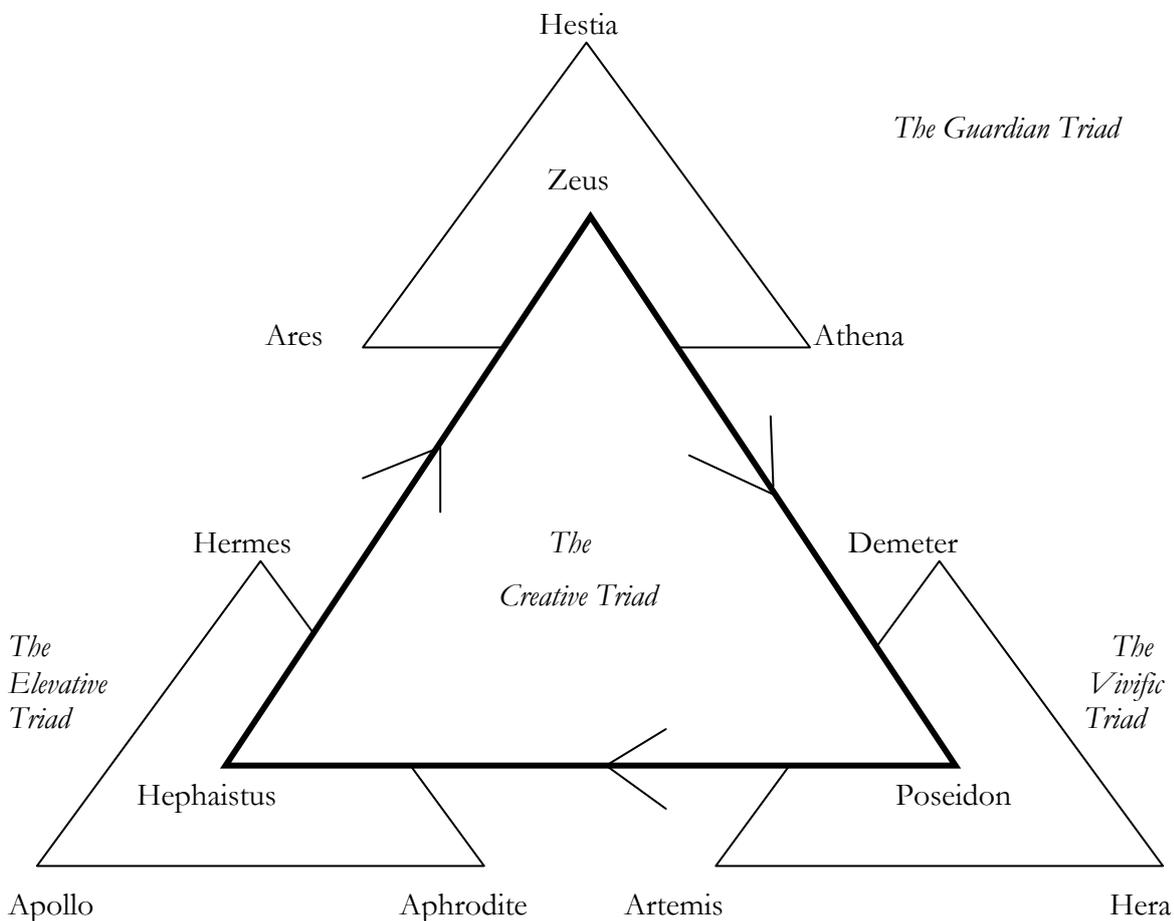
In this way the metaphysics of the Platonic tradition which regards existence to be unfolded through six major orders matches its theology, which, after the transcendence

of the One unfolds its divinities in terms of their sphere of rulership. We should note that the Gods themselves transcend their spheres of activity – even the lowest order of Gods are above being. As Proclus says in his *Elements of Theology* (proposition 115), "Every God is above being, above life, above intellect."

For souls such as ours – that is to say souls which get involved in bodies, and the world of physical manifestation – the dominion of the Mundane Gods is the most significant: they order the world in which we act, ensuring that whatever we do as free-willed and self-motive creatures is held within their providential compass.

The mundane Gods are often seen as being an order of 12 Gods, and Sallust gives a description of them in his treatise *On the Gods and the World* (chapter 6):

"But of the mundane gods, some are the causes of the world's existence, others animate the world; others again harmonize it, thus composed from different natures; and others, lastly, guard and preserve it when harmonically arranged. And since these orders are four, and each consists from things first, middle, and last, it is necessary that the disposers of these should be twelve: hence Zeus, Poseidon, and Hephaistus, fabricate the world; Demeter, Hera, and Artemis, animate it; Hermes, Aphrodite, and Apollo, harmonize it; and, lastly, Hestia, Athena, and Ares, preside over it with a guardian power. But the truth of this may be seen in statues as in enigmas: for Apollo harmonizes the lyre, Pallas (Athena) is invested with arms, and Aphrodite is naked; since harmony generates beauty, and beauty is not concealed in objects of sensible inspection. But since these gods primarily possess the world, it is necessary to consider the other gods as subsisting in these; as Bacchus in Zeus, Aesculapius in Apollo, and the Graces in Aphrodite."



Plato, in the *Phaedrus*, offers us a myth about the relation of human souls to the Gods: Socrates says that the soul is like a winged chariot driven by a charioteer and drawn by two horses. He says that before its descent into body, it joined a procession of the Gods across the heavens (246d):

"There is a natural power in the wings of the soul, to raise that which is weighty on high, where the genus of the Gods resides. But of everything subsisting about body, the soul most participates of that which is divine. But that which is divine is beautiful, wise, and good, and whatever can be asserted of a similar kind. And with these indeed the winged nature of the soul is especially nourished and increased: but it departs from its integrity, and perishes, through that which is evil and base, and from contraries of a similar kind. Likewise Zeus, the mighty leader in the heavens, driving his winged chariot, begins the divine procession, adorning and disposing all things with providential care. The army of Gods and daemons, distributed into eleven parts, follows his course; but Hestia alone remains in the habitation of the Gods. But each of the other Gods belonging to the twelve, presides over the office committed to his charge. There are many, therefore, and blessed spectacles and processions within the heavens, to which the genus of the blessed Gods is converted as each accomplishes the proper employment of his nature. But *will* and *power* are the perpetual attendants of their processions: for envy is far distant from the divine choir of Gods."

What each soul sees when riding in the procession of one of the Gods constitutes the well-spring of its deepest intuitions. And when we become inspired – especially when that inspiration is engaged by falling in love – the characteristic of the God we followed in that procession colours our response (252d):

"*And thus every one honours the God, round whom he harmoniously revolves, and imitates his life as much as possible, and as long as he remains free from corruption: and after this manner he lives here his first generation, and associates with, and conducts himself towards, his beloved and others. Everyone, therefore, chooses the love of beauty after his own fashion, and, as if he considered it with respect to himself a God, he fabricates and adorns it like a statue, and as that which is the object of his adoration and sacrifice.*"