

Lecture: Living the Platonic Tradition

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Unlike most fortnightly Monday evening sessions at Cecil Sharp House where we have perhaps a five minute introduction to two or three pages from one of the Platonic texts (leaving ourselves a good hour for a joint exploration and discussion of the ideas which have come up) this evening is a more formal lecture. I will aim to finish the lecture so that we still have half an hour for a discussion. I don't have an exact text for the lecture but here are a few quotes from various sources around which I'll construct my lecture.

Philosophy and Life

Philosophy "is a life, not a discourse." Pierre Hadot – *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 279

"For a thing of this kind cannot be expressed by words like other disciplines, but by long familiarity, *and living in conjunction with the thing itself*, a light as it were leaping from a fire will on a sudden be enkindled in the soul, and there itself nourish itself." Plato – *Seventh Letter*

"Beatific contemplation does not consist of the accumulation of arguments or a storehouse of learned knowledge, but in us theory (*theoria*) must become nature and life itself." Porphyry, *Abstinence from Animal Food*

What kind of life?

Socrates, to the jury of Athenians at his trial: "O best of men, since you are an Athenian, of a city the greatest and the most celebrated for wisdom and strength, are you not ashamed of being attentive to the means of acquiring riches, glory and honour, in great abundance, but to bestow no care nor any consideration upon prudence and truth, nor how your soul may subsist in the most excellent condition?" *The Apology*

Know Thyself

The beginning of this "care of the soul" is founded upon an oft-repeated phrase in Platonic dialogues taken from the Oracle centre at Delphi – "know thyself" for as Proclus says, "The most peculiar and firm principle of all the dialogues of Plato, and of the whole theory of that philosopher, is the knowledge of our own nature; for, this being properly understood, we shall be able accurately to learn the good which is adapted to us, and the evil which opposes this good." *Comm. First Alcibiades*

What kind of self?

The thinking self:

"But it is necessary that he who is sedulously employed in the acquisition of knowledge, who is anxious to acquire the wisdom of truth, and who employs his most vigorous exertions in this one pursuit; it is perfectly necessary that such a one, if he touches on the truth, should be endued with wisdom about immortal and divine concerns; and that he should participate of immortality, as far as human nature permits, without leaving any part of it behind." *The Timaeus*

The loving self:

"Perceive you not, that in beholding the beautiful with that eye, with which alone it is possible to behold it, thus, and thus only, could a man ever attain to generate, not the images or semblances of virtue, as not having his intimate commerce with an image or a semblance; but virtue true, real, and substantial, from the converse and embraces of that which is real and true. Thus begetting true virtue, and

bringing her up till she is grown mature, he would become a favourite of the Gods; and at length would be, if any man ever be, himself one of the immortals." *The Symposium*

The human being as a microcosm of the whole of reality:

"For the soul when looking at things posterior to herself [i.e. the things of the material world], beholds the shadows and images of beings, but when she converts herself to herself she unfolds her own essence, and the reasons which she contains. And at first indeed, she only as it were beholds herself; but, when she penetrates more profoundly into the knowledge of herself, she finds in herself both intellect, and the orders of beings [i.e. eternal ideas]. When however, she proceeds into her interior recesses, and into the deepest sanctuary as it were of the soul, she perceives with her eye closed, the genus of the Gods, and the unities of beings. For all things are in us psychically, and through this we are naturally capable of knowing all things, by exciting the powers and the images of wholes which we contain." Proclus, *Theology of Plato*, I, 3

The soul as a player in the divine drama

"Yet it was not with an eye to this that we established the city; to have any one tribe in it remarkably happy beyond the rest; but that the whole city might be in the happiest condition; for we judged, that in such an one we should most especially find justice, and injustice in the city the worst established: and that, upon thoroughly examining these, we should determine what we have for some time been in search of. Now then, as I imagine, we are forming a happy state, not selecting some few persons to make them alone happy; but are establishing the universal happiness of the whole. . ." *Republic*

"And hence this of all things is most to be studied, in what manner every one of us, omitting other disciplines, shall become an inquirer and learner in this study, if, by any means, he be able to learn and find out who will make him expert and intelligent to discern a good life, and a bad; and to choose everywhere, and at all times, the best of what is possible, considering all the things now mentioned, both compounded and separated from one another, what they are with respect to the virtue of life. And to understand what good or evil beauty operates when mixed with poverty, or riches, and with this or the other habit of soul; and what is effected by noble and ignoble descent, by privacy, and by public station, by strength and weakness, docility and indocility, and everything else of the kind which naturally pertains to the soul, and likewise of what is acquired, when blended one with another; so as to be able from all these things to compute, and, having an eye to the nature of the soul, to comprehend both the worse and the better life, pronouncing that to be the worse which shall lead the soul to become more unjust, and that to be the better life which shall lead it to become more just, and to dismiss every other consideration. For we have seen, that in life, and in death, this is the best choice. But it is necessary that a man should have this opinion firm as an adamant in him, when he departs to Hades, that there also he may be unmoved by riches, or any such evils, and may not, falling into tyrannies, and other such practices, do many and incurable mischiefs, and himself suffer still greater: but may know how to choose always the middle life, as to these things, and to shun the extremes on either hand, both in this life as far as is possible, and in the whole of hereafter. For thus man becomes most happy." *Republic*