

## The *Philebus* and Prometheus

How is it that we can think about things in such a way as to have our thoughts related to those things? We don't, of course, expect the thought to *be* the thing (unless we're venturing into a mystical level of thought) but we do expect it to encompass the thing in some way – and we even expect a name or a word to perform the same function in outward terms. But is this possible? Is not each conceptual form something complex? And if our concepts are an attempt to align with the form of a thing (be it “human being” or “beauty” or “tree” or “circle”) isn't each of those forms equally complex? Whether in our own private train of thought or in conversation with others, we rely upon thoughts to tell us something meaningful and truthful about reality.

In the *Philebus* the characters of the dialogue attempt to work out what the good is from a human point of view: is it pleasure? Is it wisdom? Or something else? The investigation immediately runs into the problem of “one and many” – what is pleasure, which seems to be covered by the single word and a single thought, but on examination then seems to be a whole host of different things? Socrates identifies this issue and says:

15d SOCRATES: We say, in speaking of these monads, (each of which is one, but, on a logical examination of it, appears to be divisible into many,) that they run throughout every sentence in our discourse,<sup>1</sup> everywhere and always; and that, as their being shall never have an end, so neither does it first begin in the present age. Now this perpetual attendant upon all speech proceeds, as it seems to me, from something immortal and undecaying within ourselves. And hence it is, that the youth everywhere, when they have thus had a taste of it, are overjoyed at their having thus found a treasure of wisdom. Transported, therefore, with the delight it gives them, they apply it to every subject of discourse: sometimes they collect particulars from all quarters, and roll them into one; then they unroll them again, and part them asunder. After having in this way puzzled themselves in the first place, they question and puzzle the next person at hand, whether he be their equal  
e in age, or younger than themselves, or older, sparing neither father nor mother, nor  
16a anyone else who will attend to them, scarcely other animals more than man: it is certain they would not exempt any who speak a foreign language only, could they but find somewhere an interpreter.

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<sup>1</sup> In this translation the translator has put the question in terms of speech, but it could equally well be put in terms of thought – the Greek for this passage is *logos* and its cognates which has a whole range of meanings: word, speech, argument, discourse, reason, thought, etc. Fowler, for example, has the beginning of the speech as “We say that one and many are identified by reason, and always, both now and in the past, circulate everywhere and in every thought that it uttered.”

PROTARCHUS: Do you not see, O Socrates, how numerous we are, and that all of us are young? and are you not afraid that, if you rail at us, we shall all join Philebus, and attack you jointly? However (for we apprehend your meaning), if you can by any means or contrivance easily rid us of these perplexities, which hinder the progress of our inquiry, and can devise some better way of managing the argument, do you but give your mind to the prosecution of it, and we shall do our utmost to follow and attend you. For the present debate is of no trifling concern, Socrates.

SOCRATES: Indeed it [dialectic] is not, O boys! as Philebus called you. No better way then is there, nor can there be, than that, which I am always a great lover of; but often before now it has slipped away from my sight, and has left me, as it were, in a desert, at a loss whither to turn me.

PROTARCHUS: Let us but know what way you mean.

SOCRATES: To point out the way is not very difficult; but to travel in it, is the most difficult of all things. For all such human inventions as depend on art are, in this way, discovered and laid open. Consider then the way which I am speaking of.

PROTARCHUS: Do but tell it us then.

SOCRATES: A gift of the Gods to humans, as it appears to me, by a certain Prometheus hurled from the Gods along with a fire the most luminous. From the people of ancient times, people better than we are, and dwelling nearer to the Gods, this tradition of it has descended to us, - that those beings said to be eternal derive their essence from one and many; and therefore have in themselves *bound* and *infinity* inherent in them: that, being in the midst of things so constituted as they are, we ought to suppose and to search for some one idea in everything around us; for that, since it is there, we shall, on searching, *be sure to find it*: that, after we have found it, we are next to look for two, if two only are next; otherwise three, or some other number: again, that every one of this number we are to examine in like manner: until at length a person not only perceives, that the one, with which he began, is one, and many, and infinite, but discovers also how many it contains: for, that a person never should proceed to the idea of infinite, and apply it immediate! to any number, before he has fully discovered all the definite number which lies between the infinite and the one: but that, having completed this discovery, we should then finish our search; and dismissing into infinity every one of all those numbers, we should bid farewell to them. The Gods, as I before said, have given us to consider things in this way, and in this way to learn them, and teach them one to another. But the wise people of these days take any monad whatever, and divide it into many with more conciseness than they ought, and with more prolixity too, since they never come to an end: for immediately after the monad they introduce infinity, overlooking all the intermediate numbers; the express mention of which, or the omission of them, distinguishes such dialectical and fair debates as ours, from such as are contentious and sophistical.

## The Myth

In Hesiod's *Works and Days* there is an account of the five ages of humankind: each age gives way to its successor, in a descending scale. Of the first two ages, those of Gold and of Silver, the intervention of Prometheus is not required, but at some point in this descent Prometheus becomes their champion. There is even a myth which says that it was Prometheus who fashioned humans from clay, and that Zeus then breathed spirit into the inert body to give him life. But the central myth is that Prometheus realised that humans were in a vulnerable and wretched condition and resolved to bring to his aid the heavenly fire of Zeus kept in the forge of Hephaestus. Plato says that his brother Epimetheus had given all the gifts of nature - strength, speed, claws, wings, and so on - to the various creatures of the earth, but had forgotten humankind, and had, therefore, left them without any natural protection. Prometheus' plan to bring fire to humankind was, however, contrary to the will of Zeus; the Titan was obliged, therefore, to steal the fire concealed in a fennel stalk.

With fire, humanity was able to rise above the other creatures of nature, and the whole earth was enkindled with the light of the divine fire: when this came to the notice of Zeus he was enraged, contending that with fire humans would threaten heaven itself. The father of Gods and men decreed that Prometheus should be punished, and that humankind, too, should be weakened so that their threat to the Gods would be diminished.

The Olympian Gods created a woman to bring ruin to mankind, with each God endowing her with a gift which would serve as a lure to Epimetheus - who was to be the bridge between mortals and the immortals - taking the woman as his wife and fathering the present race of men. Hephaistos mixed earth and water, and from this clay made a woman in the image of the Goddesses, endowed with both voice and strength; Athene taught her weaving; Aphrodite poured *charis* and the inciting of desire about her; Hermes gave to her a quick and persuasive tongue; Athene dressed her with the help of the Charites and Peitho, who put golden chains around her; and the Horai gave her a crown of spring flowers; she was also given a wondrous crown by Athene which had been made by Hephaistos, upon which were fashioned all kinds of monsters. The woman was named Pandora, because she was a gift to man from all the Gods. With Pandora came a jar with a lid, which was not to be opened. Hesiod seems to suggest that Pandora understood in advance what the consequences of opening the jar would be, but she still removed the lid - and thus unleashed from its dark receptacle all the ills which now torment the world. Only one thing was left trapped in the jar, *elpis*, and whether this means 'expectation' (and thus the despair which might have overwhelmed mankind once the other evils had been released was avoided) or 'hope' is a matter of debate.

Zeus then turned his attention to the punishment of Prometheus: Zeus decreed that the Titan should be taken to the Caucasian mountains by Kratos and Bia [Force and Life] and chained to a rock (or possibly impaled upon a column); further, that an eagle (or vulture) should eat the immortal liver of Prometheus by day, the organ regenerating itself every night. In some versions the bird feasts on the liver every other day, the intermediate day allowing for the regrowth. This punishment was originally set to be perpetual.

So Prometheus remained until eventually Heracles came upon him during his series of twelve labours; there is some confusion as to whether Heracles then acted on his own initiative or whether he had been commanded by Zeus to free the fire-stealer. Some versions of the myth suggest that there was a deal struck between Zeus and Prometheus - the Titan gaining his freedom in return for revealing prophetic knowledge concerning Zeus. It seems, in this version, that Prometheus knew which Goddess would bear Zeus a son who would overthrow him, and that just before Zeus coupled with Thetis, he warned the king of the Gods that it was this Goddess who was to be avoided. Heracles shot the tormenting bird with an arrow and then broke the chains which held Prometheus to the cold mountains of the Caucasians.

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Pro-metheus – lit. *forethought*; epi-metheus – lit. *after-thought* or that thought which arises after experience; Titan – the word is formed around the Greek word *ti* which indicates particularity; anagogic – meaning that which elevates to divinity.

## From Damascius' Commentary on the Philebus

### I

*Prometheus*, says Damascius, is the inspective guardian of the descent of rational souls: for to exert a *providential energy* is the employment of the rational soul, and, prior to anything else, to know itself. Irrational natures, indeed, perceive through percussion, and prior to impulsion know nothing; but the rational nature is able, prior to information from another, to know what is useful. Hence, *Epimetheus* is the inspective guardian of the irrational soul, because it knows through percussion, and not prior to it. Prometheus, therefore, is that power which presides over the descent of rational souls. But *fire* signifies the rational soul itself; because, as fire tends upwards, so the rational soul pursues things on high. But you will say, Why is this fire said to have been stolen? Because that which is stolen is transferred from its proper place to one that is foreign. Since, therefore, the rational soul is sent from its proper place of abode on high, to earth, as to a foreign region, on this account the fire is said to be stolen. But why was it concealed in a reed? Because a reed is cavernous, and therefore signifies the flowing body, in which the soul is

carried. But why was the fire stolen, contrary to the will of Zeus? Again, the fable speaks as a fable: for both Prometheus and Zeus are willing that the soul should abide on high; but as it is requisite that she should descend, the fable fabricates particulars accommodated to the persons. And it represents, indeed, the superior character, which is Zeus, as unwilling; for he wishes the soul always to abide on high: but the inferior character, Prometheus, obliges her to descend. Zeus, therefore, ordered *Pandora* to be made. And what else is this than *the irrational soul*?<sup>2</sup> For, as it was necessary that the soul should descend to these lower regions, but, being incorporeal and divine it was impossible for her to be conjoined with body without a medium, hence she becomes united with it through the irrational soul. But this irrational soul was called Pandora, because each of the Gods bestowed on it some particular gift. And this signifies that the illuminations which terrestrial natures receive take place through the celestial bodies.<sup>3</sup>

## II

Prometheus, says Damascius, does not produce good, as a revealing light, but as a Titan. For he employs a providential care upon rational essences which proceed to the extremity, just as Epimetheus provides for irrational natures. For irrational natures proceed to a care of things subordinate, and having proceeded, distribute the whole of divine Providence. Again, the fire which Prometheus stole, and gave to men, is every anagogic essence and perfection, distributed through him to the last of things. Hence it is said to have been *stolen*, because an *anagogic* essence is *deduced*; but through him, because it is alone deduced Titanically, - but other Gods give subsistence to a form of this kind.

## III

Socrates [speaking of the "gift of Gods to men"] is primarily referring to the methods of [dialectical] division and analysis, but ultimately the whole of dialectic, of the four methods [division, definition, demonstration and analysis] are parts.

The method of division is bound up with emanation, that of analysis with reversion, while the others are intermediate and resemble existence itself; but in the case of the method of definition this is existence resting on itself, in the case of deduction [or demonstration] it is existence dependent on a cause.

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<sup>2</sup> The reader must remember, that the true self, or the rational soul, consists of *intellect*, *the dianoëtic power*, and *opinion*; but the summit of the irrational life is the *phantasy*, under which *desire*, like a many-headed savage beast, and *anger*, like a raging lion, subsist. - Thomas Taylor.

<sup>3</sup> For the irrational soul is an *immaterial body*, or in other words, *vitalized extension*, such as mathematical bodies which we frame in phantasy; and the celestial bodies are of this kind. - TT