

Philosophy and Creativity

“But to what shall I compare the visions of a philosopher? to a clear dream by Zeus, circularly borne along in all directions; in which, indeed, the body does not move, but the soul travels round the whole earth, from earth ascends to heaven, passes over every sea, flies through every region of the air, runs in conjunction with the sun, revolves with the moon, is carried round with the choir of the other stars, and nearly governs and arranges the universe, in conjunction with Zeus! O blessed journey, beautiful visions, and true dreams!” - Maximus of Tyre

In the Platonic tradition Zeus is the great creator, calling into being the whole manifested Cosmos by his contemplation of the living paradigm which resides in the eternal and ideal world - as described by Plato in the *Timaeus*. So the claim by Maximus that the inspired philosophic soul “nearly governs and arranges the universe in conjunction with Zeus” is no small one. For Plato the key to creativity requires us to discover the divine element of human nature – an element which gives us access to the various forms of inspiration which descend from the heavens.

The Platonic tradition holds that there is a five-fold order which outlines the human relationship to knowledge and understanding which takes through these phases:

1) **Double ignorance** – this is the most abject and dangerous condition, in which we are not only ignorant, but are ignorant that we are ignorant. It is abject because while in that condition we are unlikely to make any effort to free ourselves from it; it is dangerous because this more than anything else lures us into taking catastrophic actions – falsely imagining that we know how to navigate a boat across a stormy sea, is likely to end in a watery death, if ever we have the means to attempt it.

2) **Simple ignorance** – while ignorance is not to be welcomed, being so and being aware of it is at least one step up from the basement of double ignorance. There are several places in Plato's dialogues where it is necessary for Socrates to question someone to the point at which they become aware of their own ignorance about an issue: this service he renders in order to move them onwards to better states of understanding, but even before any subsequent movement takes place, Socrates claims that they are in a better condition than before he engaged with them. It is possible to be satisfied with one's state of simple ignorance – I am happy, for example, to be ignorant of the art of navigation across stormy seas – but if the subject is one that is seen as vital to one's well-being, we are likely to move to the third phase.

3) **Desire** – the urge to become knowledgeable and even wise in important matters should be fundamental to all healthy human beings. As Aristotle says in the opening line of his *Metaphysics*, "all human beings naturally desire to know . . ." As creatures who are constantly having to make decisions, we are aware that the difference between a directed life and one of chance is centred on our understanding of ourselves and the reality within which we make those decisions. In the *Symposium*, the philosopher (literally the "lover of wisdom") is aligned with Eros – the great daemon, whose mixed parentage (he is the

offspring of Poverty and Wealth) puts him in a halfway condition: he is in want, but strongly desires to obtain Beauty, the Form of Goodness.

4) **Discovery** – once desire has set us on the path to knowledge, the Platonic tradition sees the next phase as discovery: a phase in which we gather knowledge through our various gnostic faculties and attempt to organize this within our consciousness. This seems obvious enough but in the light of modernist thought perhaps it should be emphasized why the tradition calls it discovery – that is to say, bringing *already existing* truth to light. The Greek God of knowledge and learning is Hermes, the son of Zeus and Maia, and while Zeus is the Creator God, Maia is a Goddess who is connected with searching and bringing forth; Proclus says,¹ "Hermes is the source of invention; and hence he is said to be the son of Maia; because search, which is implied by 'Maia', leads invention into light." Her name is not only the root of the month May, but also the word *maietic* – or pertaining to the art of midwifery by which young are brought forth into light. For the Platonic tradition truth is discovered not invented – this is in contrast to many theories of truth dreamt up over the last few centuries, in which – somehow – the human mind is the source of truth. Only when we have gone through the processes of discovery do we arrive at the last of the five phases:

5) **Creation** – the human soul, has a nature which is both gnostic and vital: that is to say it has the power to know and the power to produce into life. The two sides are never truly separated, and I think we all understand that once an element of knowledge becomes active in our consciousness, it naturally seeks to become manifested through the arts and activities of life. We have various levels of gnostic interaction with intelligible and sensible reality, and we have various levels of vital agency: at the most outward and material level, there is a significant degree of separation between the two sides, but as we rise through the levels towards the most inward and powerful, so the separation is over-passed. It is this area of convergence which I hope we can look at tonight through the lens of Platonic texts.

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Here is a passage from Proclus' treatise on Providence,² which describes five levels of knowing (we might notice that he does not include the senses or the faculty immediately above the senses which automatically and relatively passively combines the streams of sense data coming from our different senses, but begins with the lowest form of what one might call rational knowledge):

1 "Well then, among the [many] kinds of knowledge discussed by Aristotle and also by Plato, we shall consider [first] the knowledge that only grasps the truth of the fact without its cause, which they call opinion (doxa). . . .

. . . another form of knowledge leading upwards, namely that which proceeds from principles taken as suppositions and which knows causes and draws necessary

¹ *Commentary on the Alcibiades*, 187. Note that May is the month in which the fruits of summer make their first appearance.

² The treatise is sometimes simply known as *On Providence*, and sometimes as *On Providence, Fate, and That which is in our Power*. This passage is abridged from sections 27-31.

conclusions in all cases. They found out that arithmetic and geometry are such a kind of knowledge. Because those sciences argue and conclude from necessary premises, they take precedence over knowledge based purely on opinion; but because they stop at their own principles and leave, above them, the principles of these without bothering about them, they show that they fall short of the most perfect knowledge. . .

Ascending higher, 'allow me to speak of a third' form of knowledge of the human soul, that which ascends 'through all' the forms, so to say, towards the One and 'unconditional' principle, dividing some, analysing others, 'making the one multiple' and 'the multiple one'. . .

The fourth kind of knowledge you need to understand is even simpler than the latter, as it no longer uses methods such as analysis or synthesis or division or demonstration, but contemplates beings by means of simple intuitions, as it were with immediate vision (autoptic). Those capable of such activity praise it, calling it with reverence 'intellect', and no longer 'science'. . . Plato in the *Timaeus*³ declares that intellect and science are forms of knowledge of the soul concerning [real] beings. For science seems to belong to the soul, insofar as the soul is knowledge, whereas the intellect belongs to it, insofar as the soul is an image of what truly is intellect. This is because the latter sees the intelligible forms, or rather is those forms, in one intuition, . . .

After all of these, I want you to accept even a fifth meaning of 'knowledge', . . . [and] to follow Plato and the theologians before Plato, who are accustomed to praise for us a knowledge beyond the intellect and who commonly call it a truly 'divine madness', and to arouse what is called the 'one of the soul', and no longer our intellectual faculty, and to connect it with the One itself. For all things are known by something similar to them: the sensible by sense perception, the scientific object by science, the intelligible by the intellect, the One by what is like the One. So then, when thinking, the soul knows both itself and what it thinks through 'touch', as we said, but when it is transcending thinking, it knows neither itself nor that towards which it directed its own 'one'. It loves then to be quiet, having closed its eyes to thoughts that go downward, having become speechless and silent in internal silence. For how else could it attach itself to the most ineffable of all things than by putting to sleep the chatter in it? Let it therefore become one, so that it may see the One, or rather not see the One. For by seeing, the soul will see an intelligible object and not what is beyond intellect, and it will think something that is one, not the One itself."

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Proclus, in this fifth and last form of knowledge, is particularly thinking of a passage in the *Phaedrus*,⁴ in which Socrates is defending the "madness" or "inspiration" of love (*Eros*) claiming that purely human rationality falls short of what is required to fulfill our highest aspirations. Before moving on to that of love, he mentions three other forms of mania –

2 "For if it was simply true that mania is evil, this [claim that the madness of Love is to be avoided] would be beautifully asserted. But now the greatest goods are produced for us through mania, and are assigned to us by a divine gift. For the predicting prophetess at

³ At 37c

⁴ 244a-245b

Delphi, and the priestesses in Dodona, have, when insane procured many advantages, both privately and publicly, to the Greeks; but when they have been in a prudent state, they have been the cause of very trifling benefits, or indeed of none at all. . . .so much did the ancients testify that mania proceeding from divinity is more beautiful than prudence which proceeds from men. But indeed, in the greatest diseases and labours to which certain persons are sometimes subject through the indignation of the Gods in consequence of guilt, mania when it takes place, predicting what they stand in need of, discovers a liberation from such evils, by flying to prayer and the worship of the Gods. Hence, obtaining by this means purifications and the advantages of initiation, it renders him who possesses it free from disasters, both for the present and future time, by discovering to him who is properly insane and possessed by divinity a solution of his present evils. But the third species is a possession and mania descending from the Muses, which receiving a soul tender and solitary, rouses and agitates it with Bacchic fury, according to odes and other species of poetry; in consequence of which, by adorning the infinite actions of antiquity, it becomes the means of instructing posterity. But he who approaches to the poetic gates without the mania of the Muses, persuading himself that he can become a poet, in a manner perfectly sufficient from art alone, will, both as to himself and his poetry, be imperfect; since the poetry which is produced by prudence vanishes before that which is the progeny of mania. So many then are the beautiful works arising from divine mania, and still more than these, which, if it was requisite, I should relate."

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Whether knowledge and its various levels are exactly as the Platonic tradition describes them we can, I think, see that as we progress upwards from the senses, through the various kinds of reason to inspiration, there is one characteristic which becomes more and more dominant – the gap between the knower and the known narrows. With sense data the object of perception is always separate from the seer; reason draws closer; intuition yet closer; the final form – whether we call that "possession" or give it some other name – seems to dissolve entirely the barrier between the knower and known.

In the light of this, we can now turn to the great act of creation as described in Plato's *Timaeus* – the ever-continuing creation of the Cosmos, or manifested universe, by the prime intellectual creator, who Timaeus calls the "Demiurge" – which means, literally, "the craft worker." The main speaker, Timaeus, starts by distinguishing two differing orders of things:

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"In the first place, therefore, as it appears to me, it is necessary to define what that is which is always *real being*, but is without generation; and what that is *which is generated indeed*, or *consists in a state of becoming to be*, but which never *really is*. The former of these indeed is apprehended by *intelligence* in conjunction with *reason*, since it always subsists according to *same*. But the latter is perceived by *opinion* in conjunction with *irrational sense*; since it subsists in a state of generation and corruption, and never truly is."⁵

In order to produce something, the maker must look to some kind of paradigm and, says Timaeus,

⁵ *Timaeus* 27d.

3b "When, therefore, an artificer, in the fabrication of any work, looks to that which always subsists according to *same*, and, employing a paradigm of this kind, expresses the idea and power in his work, it is then necessary that the whole of his production should be beautiful. But when he beholds that which is in generation, and uses a generated paradigm, it is alike necessary that his work should be far from beautiful. . . . So, this is to be considered concerning him, I mean, according to what paradigm extending himself, he fabricated the Cosmos whether towards an exemplar, subsisting according to that which is always the same, and similarly affected, or towards that which is generated. But, indeed, if this world is beautiful, and its artificer good, it is evident that he looked towards an eternal exemplar in its fabrication. But if the world be far from beautiful, which it is not lawful to assert, he necessarily beheld a generated instead of an eternal exemplar. But it is perfectly evident that he regarded an eternal paradigm. For the world is the most beautiful of generated natures, and its artificer the best of causes. But, being thus generated, it is fabricated according to that which is comprehensible by reason and intelligence, and which subsists in an abiding sameness of being."⁶

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This relation between the Demiurge and the eternal paradigm (in the dialogue called "autozoon" or *animal itself*) is, then, necessarily of the most inward and united contemplation – if, at least, we are to agree with Timaeus that both the paradigm and the artificer are "the best." The Orphic mythological equivalent of this philosophic description of the Demiurgic creative act is the story of Zeus (whom the Platonists identified with the Demiurge) who, following the counsel of the Oracle of the Goddess Nyx (or Night), swallows down whole the primordial God Phanes – and thus he is able to produce the whole of the universe as one all-encompassing manifested order. Again, the Platonists of antiquity were clear that Phanes is to be identified with Plato's *animal itself* – a single living idea which includes in itself all other eternal ideas causally. Here in mythological imagery we have the most unified relationship between knower and known.

So what does that tell us about our own powers of creativity? Here is Hermias⁷ discussing the nature of the human soul in a section of his *Commentary on the Phaedrus* which comes just before his exploration of the passage from that dialogue which we're just read:⁸

4 "On the one hand the rational soul exists thanks to all the causes prior to it, that is to say, thanks to intellect and gods. But on the other it also exists thanks to itself since it perfects itself. Insofar, then, as it has its existence from gods,⁹ it possesses the One, which unifies and unites into one all of its powers and all of its plurality, and which first receives goods from gods and [then] renders the whole substance of the soul boniform, since it [sc. the rational soul] is [thereby] bound to the gods and united to them. And, insofar as it exists thanks to intellect, it possesses intellection, as a result of which it grasps the forms by means of simple intuitions and not discursively in that it is also joined to the

⁶ *Timaeus* 28a, 28c-29a.

⁷ A student who studied alongside Proclus under the tutelage of Syrianus.

⁸ *Commentary on the Phaedrus*, 89.

⁹ Of course it is from the Gods from which Plato understands the flow of inspiration – for Platonists the Gods are the unities which transcend the highest forms of being and intellect.

intellect above it. And insofar as it also causes itself to exist,¹⁰ it possesses the capacity for discursive thought, as a result of which it generates sciences and conceptions and operates discursively and argues to a conclusion from premises. For that it does also cause itself to exist is clear from the fact that it also perfects itself. For a thing that brings itself to perfection and furnishes itself with well-being will much more so furnish itself with being; for well-being is superior to being, so if it furnishes itself with what is superior, it will all the more furnish itself with what is inferior. So the inspiration that is primarily and properly speaking and truly from gods occurs in connection with this one of the soul that is above discursive thought and above the intellect in it [sc. in the soul] - a one that is at other times [sc. in the absence of inspiration] like someone who is exhausted and asleep. But when this one is illuminated, the whole of life - the intellect, discursive thought, the irrational [part of the soul] - is illuminated and a reflection of the inspiration is granted all the way [down] to the body itself."

¹⁰ It causes itself to exist because the soul has all its intellectual reasons in seed-form within itself at all times: as it brings these into operational effectiveness, so it actualises itself – in other words, "causes itself."