

Thomas Taylor's Platonic Philosophers' Creed

The following summary of Platonic philosophy was written by Thomas Taylor and published several times with minor variations. This particular version is from Thomas M Johnson's magazine, *The Platonist*. It is called the 'Platonic Philosophers' Creed' with the expectation that students of philosophy will use it not so much as a dogmatic statement that admits of no argument, but rather as a starting point for a series of studies and meditations: this version has each point starting with the words "I believe", while other versions omit this opening – we offer this one because we wish to emphasize the close relationship between knowledge and belief. The attempt to isolate either knowledge or belief from the other either dismisses philosophy, or reduces it to a lifeless body of clever facts.

The Creed was included in Taylor's essay on 'The Theology of the Greeks', which is to be found in the fourth volume of the Thomas Taylor Series, *Collected Writings on the Gods and the World*

The Platonic Philosophers' Creed

1 I believe 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.

2 I believe, 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.

3 I believe that this immense principle produced such things as are first and proximate to itself, most similar to itself; just as the heat *immediately* proceeding from fire is most similar to the heat in the fire; and the light *immediately* emanating from the sun, to that which the sun essentially contains. Hence, this principle produces many principles proximately from itself.

4 I likewise believe that since all things differ from each other, and are multiplied with their proper differences, each of these multitudes is suspended from its one proper principle. That, in consequence of this, all beautiful things, whether in souls or in bodies, are suspended from one fountain of beauty. That whatever possesses symmetry, and whatever is true, and all principles are in a certain respect connate with the first principle, so far as they are principles, with an appropriate subjection and analogy. That all other principles are comprehended in this first principle, not with interval and multitude, but as parts in the whole, and number in the monad. That it is not a certain principle like each of the rest; for of these, one is the principle of beauty, another of truth, and another of something else, but it is *simply principle*. Nor is it simply the *principle of beings* but it is *the principle of principles*: it being necessary that the characteristic property of principle after the same manner as other things, should not begin from multitude, but should be collected into one monad as a summit, and which is the principle of principles.

5 I believe, therefore, that such things as are produced by the first good in consequence of being connascent with it, do not recede from essential goodness, since they are immovable and unchanged, and are eternally established in the same blessedness. All

other natures, however, being produced by the one good, and many goodnesses, since they fall off from essential goodness, and are not immovably established in the nature of divine goodness, possess on this account the good according to participation.

6 I believe that as all things considered as subsisting *causally* in this immense principle, are transcendently more excellent than they are when considered as effects proceeding from him; this principle is very properly said to be all things, *prior* to all; *priority* denoting exempt transcendency. Just as number may be considered as subsisting occultly in the monad, and the circle in the centre; this *occult* being the same in each with *causal* subsistence.

7 I believe that the most proper mode of venerating this great principle of principles is to extend in silence the ineffable parturations of the soul to its ineffable co-sensation; and that if it be at all lawful to celebrate it, it is to be celebrated as a thrice unknown darkness, as the God of all Gods, and the unity of all unities, as more ineffable than all silence, and more occult than all essence, as holy among the holies, and concealed in its first progeny, the intelligible Gods.

8 I believe that self-subsistent natures are the immediate offspring of this principle, if it be lawful thus to denominate things which ought rather to be called ineffable unfoldings into light from the ineffable.

9 I believe that incorporeal forms or ideas resident in a divine intellect, are the paradigms or models of every thing which has a perpetual subsistence according to nature. That these ideas subsist primarily in the highest intellects, secondarily in souls, and ultimately in sensible natures; and that they subsist in each, characterised by the essential properties of the beings in which they are contained. That they possess a *paternal, producing, guardian, connecting, perfective* and *uniting* power. That in *divine beings* they possess a power fabricative and gnostic; in *nature* a power fabricative but not gnostic: and in *human souls* in their present condition through a degradation of intellect, a power gnostic, but not fabricative.

10 I believe that this world, depending on its divine artificer, who is himself an intelligible world, replete with the archetypal ideas of all things, is perpetually flowing, and perpetually advancing to being, and, compared with its paradigm, has no stability, or reality of being. That considered, however, as animated by a divine soul, and as being the receptacle of divinities from whom bodies are suspended, it is justly called by Plato, a blessed God.

11 I believe that the great body of this world, which subsists in a perpetual dispersion of temporal extension, may be properly called a *whole, with a total subsistence*, or a *whole of wholes*, on account of the perpetuity of its duration, though this is nothing more than a flowing eternity. That the other wholes which it contains are the celestial spheres, the sphere of æther, the whole of air considered as one great orb, the whole earth, and the whole sea. That these spheres are *parts with a total subsistence*, and through this subsistence are perpetual.

12 I believe that all the parts of the universe, are unable to participate of the providence of divinity in a similar manner, but some of its parts enjoy this eternally, and others temporally; some in a primary and others in a secondary degree; for the universe being a perfect whole, must have a first, a middle, and a last part. But its first parts, as having the most excellent subsistence, must always exist according to nature; and its last parts must sometimes exist according to, and sometimes contrary to nature. Hence the celestial bodies, which are the first parts of the universe, perpetually subsist according to nature, both the whole spheres, and the multitude co-ordinate to these wholes; and the only

alteration which they experience is a mutation of figure, and variation of light at different periods; but in the sublunary region, while the spheres of the elements remain on account of their subsistence, as wholes, always according to nature; the parts of the wholes have sometimes a natural, and sometimes an unnatural subsistence: for thus alone can the circle of generation unfold all the variety which it contains. The different periods therefore in which these mutations happen, are with great propriety called by Plato, periods of *fertility* and *sterility*: for in these periods a fertility or sterility of men, animals, and plants, takes place; so that in fertile periods mankind will be both more numerous, and upon the whole superior in mental and bodily endowments to the men of a barren period. And a similar reasoning must be extended to irrational animals and plants. The most dreadful consequence, likewise, attending a barren period with respect to mankind is this, that in such a period they have no scientific theology, and deny the existence of the immediate progeny of the ineffable cause of all things.

13 I believe that as the divinities are eternally good and profitable, but are never noxious, and ever subsist in the same uniform mode of being, we are conjoined with them through similitude when we are virtuous, but separated from them through dissimilitude when we are vicious. That while we live according to virtue we partake of the Gods, but cause them to be our enemies when we become evil: not that they are angry (for anger is a passion, and they are impassive,) but because guilt prevents us from receiving the illuminations of the Gods, and subjects us to the power of dæmons of fateful justice. Hence, I believe, that if we obtain pardon of our guilt through prayers and sacrifices, we neither appease the Gods, nor cause any mutation to take place in them; but by methods of this kind, and by our conversion to a divine nature, we apply a remedy to our vices, and again become partakers of the goodness of the Gods. So that it is the same thing to assert, that divinity is turned from the evil, as to say that the sun is concealed from those who are deprived of sight.

14 I believe that a divine nature is not indigent of any thing. But the honours which are paid to the Gods are performed for the sake of the advantage of those who pay them. Hence, since the providence of the Gods is extended every where, a certain habitude or fitness is all that is requisite for the reception of their beneficent communications. But all habitude is produced through imitation and similitude. On this account temples imitate the heavens, but altars the earth. Statues resemble life, and on this account they are similar to animals. Herbs and stones resemble matter; and animals which are sacrificed, the irrational life of our souls. From all these, however, nothing happens to the Gods beyond what they already possess; for what accession can be made to a divine nature? But a conjunction of our souls with the gods is by these means effected.

15 I believe that as the world considered as one great comprehending whole is a divine animal, so likewise every whole which it contains is a world, possessing in the first place a self-perfect unity proceeding from the ineffable, by which it becomes a God; in the second place, a divine intellect; in the third place, a divine soul; and in the last place a deified body. That each of these wholes is the producing cause of all the multitude which it contains, and on this account is said to be a whole prior to parts; because considered as possessing an eternal form which holds all its parts together, and gives to the whole perpetuity of subsistence, it is not indigent of such parts to the perfection of its being. And it follows by a geometrical necessity, that these wholes which rank thus high in the universe must be animated.

16 Hence I believe that after the immense principle of principles in which all things causally subsist absorbed in superessential light, and involved in unfathomable depths, a beautiful series of principles proceeds, 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*, deified natures proceeding from deities. That each of these monads is the leader of a series which extends to the last of things, and which, while it proceeds from, at the same time abides in, and returns to its leader. 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. That all these great monads are comprehended in the first one, from which both they and all their depending series are unfolded into light. And 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.

17 I also believe, that of the Gods some are mundane, but others super-mundane; and that the mundane are those who fabricate the world. But of the supermundane, some produce essences, others intellect, and others soul; and on this account, they are distinguished into three orders. Of the mundane Gods also, some are the causes of the existence of the world; others animate it; others again harmonise it, thus composed of different natures; and lastly, others guard and preserve it when harmonically arranged. Since these orders are four, and each consists of things first, middle, and last, it is necessary that the governors of these should be twelve. Hence Zeus, Poseidon, and Hephaestus, fabricate the world; Demeter, Hera, and Artemis, animate it; Hermes, Aphrodite, and Apollo, harmonise 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 harmonises the lyre; Pallas Athena is invested with arms; and Aphrodite is naked; since harmony produces beauty, and beauty is not concealed in subjects of sensible inspection. I likewise believe that as these Gods primarily possess the world, it is necessary to consider the other mundane Gods as subsisting in them; as Dionysius in Zeus, Aesculapius in Apollo, and the Graces in Aphrodite. We may also behold the spheres with which they are connected, *viz.* Hestia with the earth, Poseidon with water, Hera with air, and Hephaestus with fire. But Apollo and Artemis are assumed for the sun and moon; the sphere of Kronos is attributed to Demeter; Æther to Pallas; and heaven is common to them all.

18 I also believe that man is a microcosm, comprehending in himself *partially* every thing which the world contains divinely and *totally*. That hence he is endued with an intellect subsisting in energy, and a rational soul proceeding from the same causes as those from which the intellect and soul of the universe proceed. And that he has likewise an ethereal vehicle analogous to the heavens, and a terrestrial body composed from the four elements, and with which also it is co-ordinate.

19 I believe that the rational part of man, in which his essence consists, is of a self-motive nature, and that it subsists between intellect, which is immovable both in essence and energy, and nature, which both moves and is moved.

20 I believe that the human as well as every mundane soul, uses periods and restitutions of its proper life. For in consequence of being measured by time, it energizes transitively, and possesses a proper motion. But every thing which is moved perpetually, and participates of time, revolves periodically, and proceeds from the same to the same.

21 I also believe that as the human soul ranks among the number of those souls that *sometimes* follow the mundane divinities, in consequence of subsisting immediately after angels, dæmons and heroes the *perpetual* attendants of the Gods, it possesses a power of descending infinitely into the sublunary region, and of ascending from thence to real

being. That in consequence of this, the soul, while an inhabitant of earth, is in a fallen condition, an apostate from deity, an exile from the orb of light. That she can only be restored, while on earth, to the divine likeness, and be able after death to re-ascend to the intelligible world, by the exercise of the *cathartic*, and *theoretic* virtues; the former purifying her from the defilements of a mortal nature, and the latter elevating her to the vision of true being. And that such a soul returns after death to her kindred star from which she fell, and enjoys a blessed life.

22 I believe that the human soul essentially contains all knowledge, and that whatever knowledge she acquires in the present life, is nothing more than a recovery of what she once possessed; and which discipline evocates from its dormant retreats.

23 I also believe that the soul is punished in a future for the crimes she has committed in the present life; but that this punishment is proportioned to the crimes, and is not perpetual; divinity punishing, not from anger or revenge, but in order to purify the guilty soul, and restore her to the proper perfection of her nature.

24 I also believe that the human soul on its departure from the present life, will, if not properly purified, pass into other terrene bodies; and that if it passes into a human body, it becomes the soul of that body; but if into the body of a brute, it does not become the soul of the brute, but is externally connected with the brutal soul in the same manner as presiding dæmons are connected, in their beneficent operations, with mankind; for the rational part never becomes the soul of the irrational nature.

25 Lastly, I believe that souls that live according to virtue, shall in other respects be happy; and when separated from the irrational nature, and purified from all body, shall be conjoined with the Gods, and govern the whole world, together with the deities by whom it was produced.

