

# Talk: Platonic Philosophy as a Spiritual Path

Tim Addey

*Unlike most fortnightly Wednesday evening sessions we plan to run at Hydra Books where we will have perhaps a five minute introduction to two to four 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 extended talk in order to introduce some important but probably unfamiliar concepts of Plato's philosophy. I will aim to be as brief as possible, so that we still have plenty of time for a discussion about the points raised. 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 acting self:

“the idea of the good is the greatest discipline: only with the understanding of this can we exercise justice and every other excellence of our true selves . . . and yet we do not sufficiently know that idea, and that without this knowledge, though we understood everything else in the highest degree, you know that it is of no advantage to us: . . . This then is that which every soul pursues, and for the sake of this it does everything, affirming that it is something, but being dubious, and unable to comprehend sufficiently what it is, and to possess the same stable belief respecting it as of other things. . .” (*Republic*, 505a)

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**

“The soul also proceeding to, and having now arrived at the desired end, and participating of deity, will know that the supplier of true life is then present. She will likewise then require nothing farther; for on the contrary, it will be requisite to lay aside other things, to stop in this alone, and to become this alone, amputating every thing else with which she is surrounded. Hence, it is necessary to hasten our departure from hence, and to be indignant that we are bound in one part of our nature, in order that with the whole of our [true] selves, we may fold ourselves about divinity, and have no part void of contact with him. When this takes place therefore, the soul will both see divinity and herself, as far as it is lawful for her to see him. And she will see herself indeed illuminated, and full of intelligible light; or rather, she will perceive herself to be a pure light, unburthened, agile, and becoming to be a God, or rather being a God, and then shining forth as such to the view.” (Plotinus, *Ennead VI*, ix, 9)

“But those who are totally filled with the intoxicating nectar of divine contemplation, since beauty diffuses itself through every part of their souls, do not become spectators alone. For in this case the spectator is no longer external to the spectacle: but she who acutely perceives, contains the object of her perception in the depth of her own essence; though while possessing, she is often ignorant that she possesses. For she who beholds anything as external, beholds it as something visible, and because she wishes to perceive it attended with distance. But whatever is beheld as perceptible, is beheld externally: but it is requisite we should transfer the divine spectacle into ourselves, and behold it as one, and as the same with our essence: just as if any one hurried away by the vigorous impulse of some god, whether Apollo or one of the Muses, should procure in herself the intuition of the god; since in the secret recesses of her own essence, she will behold the divinity herself.” (Plotinus *V*, viii, 10)