

The Platonic Life

The Philosopher amongst the Stars

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Those who have attended our previous lectures will have heard that the Platonic view of the human self centred upon the soul firstly as an essence which is self-motive; and secondly as something which acts through three main faculties of powers – the reason which seeks the truth of things, the thumos ("the spirited part", or "anger") which seeks to ordinate, and the desire nature which pursues that which appears to be beautiful and good. It is this triple activity of the soul leads commentators to call the soul "tripartite" – not that the soul itself has three parts, but that it extends itself through three channels.

In our lectures so far we have looked the unfolding of human life in what is called by the Platonic tradition "the political sphere" – that is to say in the outer world that we help to create and order – and in the inner world of the self, or soul. In the first, our soul powers are turned outwards and in the cultivation of the virtues or excellences of wisdom, temperance, fortitude and justice, they join with the commonwealth of the manifested universe to add a certain goodness due from each human individual. In the second, our soul powers are turned inwards – and here again the excellences are cultivated in order to adorn, beautify and order our own nature. This second movement – this deepening of our powers – is the field of the cathartic virtues: they are so called because through the cultivation of cathartic wisdom, temperance, fortitude and justice we purify ourselves from the illusions, errors and attachments which seem to have become a part of the soul in its dealings with the material and natural universe.

We do, I think, need to clarify what we mean by this: there is a tendency for some to think that the soul's descent into body and its consequent life is in some way harmful and to be avoided. But this is not the case – for Plato the material world is good, for as he writes in the *Timaeus*,¹ "the world is the most beautiful of generated natures, and its artificer the best of causes" and then that the creating divinity "was willing that all things should be good, and that as much as possible nothing should be evil." The descent of the human soul into a body is a natural and normal part of the great scheme of the universe which distributes goodness from the highest and most transcendent principle downwards and outwards to the least particle of matter. The problem according to the Platonic traditions is not embodiment, but the failure to understand

¹ Tim. 29a, and 30a.

the reality of the immaterial self and the principles from which it springs: this failure of understanding leads the embodied soul to consider matter as the primary reality – perhaps the only reality – and the body as the self.

Such a view cannot be squared with our ability to contact unchanging intelligible natures, with our possession of reason, or with the ability of the soul to give life to the body: but if these things are ignored we begin to behave as if material satisfaction is the only criteria for judging what is and what is not a good life. Further, because we do have reason and the ability to manipulate our world in accordance with powerful ideas, our pursuit of material goods is likely to be so far out of balance with the rest of terrestrial nature that we will have a deeply harmful effect upon the world in which we live. We will also have an equally harmful effect upon ourselves: as Plato says, in the *Phaedo*,² "Because every pleasure and pain, as if armed with a nail, fasten and rivet the soul to the body, cause it to become corporeal, and fill it with an opinion, that whatever the body asserts is true. For, in consequence of the soul forming the same opinions with the body, and being delighted with the same objects, it appears to me that it is compelled to possess similar manners, and to be similarly nourished, and to become so affected, that it can never pass into Hades in a pure condition; but always departs full of a corporeal nature; and thus swiftly falls again into another body, and, becoming as it were sown, is engendered; and lastly, that from these it becomes destitute of a divine, pure, and uniform association."

Whether or not we accept the view that the soul passes from an Earthly existence onto one in Hades (not, we should note, equivalent to hell – but a experiential state between earthly lives): the important principle we should take from this passage is that of the effect of the corporealisation of the essential immaterial soul when we mistake the body for the self. When Plato says "the soul is compelled to possess similar manners as the body" he means several specific things – firstly, that it surrenders, more or less, the ability to move itself, and instead becomes something that is moved by exterior things, just as a stone is only moved by some exterior force being applied to it, rather than from self-volition; secondly, it must, to a certain degree, find the ability to perceive truth above and without a material instance more and more difficult; thirdly, it becomes severely disrupted by changes of state – that is to say the continuity of the soul as a conscious entity is subjected to fragmentation, or, in other words, we are subject to a much greater form of forgetfulness than is healthy for an essentially rational and gnostic creature.

² *Phaedo* 83d

In the political life we perceive eternal ideas in material forms – for example we see a number of beautiful things, but we don't see beauty just by itself; we see a number of instances of equality, but not the equal itself; and we see a whole range of things grouped into, say, fives, but we never perceive five just as itself. Nevertheless, we could not bring to bear our reason upon the outer world of "instances" unless we were able to affirm the presence of beauty, equality, fiveness and a host of other ideas within the mundane world. The attempt to apply reason to that world – and I'm using the word reason in its widest and deepest sense, so that it includes intuition as well as more the more usual forms of reason - is a necessary part of soul life: it places the human soul in the great chain of goodness which connects all things in a procession from, and a return to, the ineffable Principle of Principles.

In the cathartic life we begin to perceive eternal ideas more clearly – we move inwards to apply our faculties upon ourselves and the more opaque clothing of materiality around the ideas drops away. Now we see those ideas in terms of the soul – which is immaterial, an essence, and the first of moving things – in other words we see ideas as reasons which are the real and immaterial streams of truths which emerge from eternal unmoving but dynamic ideas.

But this is by no means the end of the journey – indeed the cathartic life stands in relation to the true life of the soul as the preliminary purifications stood in relation to the ritual initiations of the lesser and greater mysteries of Eleusis. Where ideas are unities with implied pluralities, reasons are pluralities with implied unities: the real task of the soul is to trace the reasons back to their eternal causes, following the streams, so to speak, back to originating springs upon the sacred mountain. It is as the soul connects with these ideas that it begins to play its part as an effective cause in the universe.

The next step then, after the cathartic life, is that of the theoretic life – using the word theory in its original Greek meaning, which is to *contemplate*. In the theoretic or contemplative life the four primary virtues we have seen operating firstly as *political* and then as *cathartic* now arise as *theoretic* wisdom, fortitude, temperance and justice: they are to be cultivated as perfecting the upward tending powers of the soul.

What does this mean? Firstly, we should not imagine that the theoretic life abandons the gains made in the political and cathartic sphere: the whole basis of Platonic philosophy as a living practice rests upon the affirmation that to contemplate and take into ourselves the intellectual ideas of the eternal world changes both the contemplating self and, subsequently, our actions. To contemplate beauty itself by itself is to become beautiful and to express beauty in all our activities; to contemplate wisdom is to become wise, and to act wisely; and the same may be said of all the great ideas which have given birth to the manifested universe. Perhaps at this point it

is worth recalling a profound passage from Plotinus, in which he imagines the response of Nature when asked about her productive powers:³

"whatever is produced is my spectacle, produced while I am silent, a spectacle naturally produced; and that I, who spring from a certain contemplation of this kind, possess a nature desirous of beholding; hence that which retains in me the office of a speculative power, produces a spectacle or theorem, in the same manner as the geometrician, from speculating on his science, describes a variety of figures, yet the lines of bodies emanate from hence, not by my engraving them in matter, but drop, as it were, from the energy of my contemplation."

So while it is good that we attempt while at the political stage of development to bring good order to our surroundings, nevertheless, our power to do this is immeasurably greater once we begin to unfold our true contemplative powers – the effects of contemplative creation are more secure, lasting, and purer than that of political fabrication. This is because the power of an idea in its intellectual subsistence is greater than that of its enmattered image – and the contemplative soul centres herself upon that level of reality, letting her "lines of body" drop from the energy of her contemplation. This, I think, is the secret of all great works of art – whether we be talking about the fine arts, or any other sphere of human endeavour.

Likewise, the discoveries of the cathartic phase of soul growth are enhanced rather than diminished by the theoretic life – for the cathartic purifications reveal the microcosmic counterparts of macrocosmic forms, but the contemplations of the theoretic philosopher reveal the divine sources of those forms. (The watchword of the cathartic philosopher is "know thyself" – and we know something when we know the essence of that thing, but we fully know something when we not only know its essence, but also its causes). It is natural for the soul, once she has purified herself from the obscurities and misunderstandings arising from her descent into body, to move on into the theoretic life. As Proclus tells us,⁴

"The life of the soul is triple. The first indeed, being that which represses and adorns the irrational part by justice, and governs it in a becoming manner. But the second being that which is converted to itself, and desires to perceive itself intellectually, in consequence of subsisting according to its own justice. And the third ascending to its causes, and establishing in them its proper energies."

³ Ennead III, 8, 3.

⁴ Com. Timaeus, (1, 29), TTS XV, p. 37

The tripartite nature of the soul – so obvious in the separative world of the *polis*, become that much more unitive and tightly woven as she rises towards intellect: nevertheless, there are still distinctions between the various powers of the soul, and the virtues which perfect them in the contemplative life. We will look at how those distinctions were seen by one writer in the Platonic tradition later, but allow me to explain first why I have called this lecture, "The Philosopher amongst the Stars".

I mentioned in my first lecture how one of the key Platonic dialogues on the nature of the soul, the *Phaedrus*,⁵ likens our souls to a winged chariot drawn by two horses and guided by a charioteer: these three – the charioteer and the two horses – can be seen as representing the three powers of the soul, reason, anger and desire. It may be worth noting in passing that in another dialogue, the *Timaeus*,⁶ the creation of the soul by the Demiurge is described as a mixing of three elements in a crater, or mixing bowl: the three elements are essence, sameness and difference. Various grades of soul – one of which is the human rational soul – are produced by varying the ratios of this basic mixture. We could spend a whole lecture and more examining the profundities of this presentation of the creation of soul, but suffice here to say that we should not wonder that a thing derived from three elements, then expresses itself through three faculties.

But to return to the image of the *Phaedrus* of the winged chariot: what Plato then goes on to describe⁷ is a procession of the Gods who are joined by souls in their train – the procession rises up through a series of arches – the sub-celestial first, then the celestial, and finally the super-celestial. (Those of you familiar with Egyptian mythology and its iconography may see here a connection between these three arches and the inner surface, the body and the outer surface of Nut as her starry body arches over her brother husband Geb, the Earth: several Platonic writers call the supercelestial arch "the back of heaven"). The experience of the soul in this procession gives rise to the whole of its cycle through the worlds of time: it is worth, I think, quoting the dialogue's words here:⁸

"But the supercelestial place has not yet been celebrated by any of our poets, nor will it ever be praised according to its dignity and worth. It subsists, however, in the following manner; for we should dare to affirm the truth, *especially when speaking concerning the truth*: without colour, without figure, and without contact, subsisting as true essence, it alone uses contemplative intellect, the governor of the soul; about which essence, the genus of true

⁵ *Phaedrus* 246a-b.

⁶ See *Timaeus* 35a and 41d.

⁷ *Phaedrus* 246e-247c.

⁸ *Phaedrus* 247c-e; the italics are mine.

science, resides. As the dianoëtic power, therefore, of divinity revolves with intellect and immaculate science, so likewise the dianoëtic power of every soul, when it receives a condition accommodated to its nature, perceiving being through time, it becomes enamoured with it, and contemplating truth, is nourished and filled with joy, till the circumference by a circular revolution brings it back again to its pristine situation. But in this circuit it beholds justice herself, it beholds temperance, and science herself: not that with which generation is present, nor in which one thing has a particular local residence in another, and to which we give the appellation of beings; but that which is science in *true being*. And, besides this, contemplating and banqueting on other true beings in the same manner, again entering within the heavens, it returns to its proper home."

The dialogue continues with this symbolic description, suggesting that while the Gods of the procession have chariots entirely good and easily controlled, souls such as ours, having one horse which is unruly – that of desire – find the control of the chariot much more difficult, and therefore we are only able to take a glimpse of the true beings of the supercelestial place before the wings of the chariot are broken amongst the tumult and confusion, and we plunge downward until our descent is arrested by the solidity of the Earth.

The fact that we saw the beautiful truths of that high place is, for Plato, the very qualification which allows the soul to be rational and to be able to enter the body of a human being: for, as I have said, reasons are pluralities which imply unities – and it is the unities of the celestial regions from which reasons spring. The *Phaedrus* puts it this way:⁹ "Indeed it is necessary to understand man, denominated according to species, as a being proceeding from the information of many senses to a perception contracted into one by the reasoning power. But this is a recollection of what our soul formerly saw with divinity, when in a perfect condition of being; and when she looked down upon what we now consider as realities, and was supernally elevated to the contemplation of that which is true." The celestial vision of real beings – which to our intellects appear as eternal ideas also means that we are excited when we see their reflected images here in the material world, and our desire nature sets off in pursuit of these images unable to distinguish between the ideas in themselves and the appearances which are their reflections. It is the ability to make that distinction that is gradually acquired in the political and cathartic phases of development.

In the first lecture of this series, I mentioned that fact that we have both a gnostic and vital side to our natures – that is to say we can both know truth and experience life. From one point of view our faculty of reason is most concerned with the gnostic side, and the desire faculty is most

⁹ Phaedrus 249c

concerned with the expression and experience of life – although I would hesitate to make too firm a division in this way – but as we get closer to the celestial experience the two sides become more intimately connected because the eternal ideas perceived in the contemplative life are both true and beautiful. Thus, the goals of both reason and desire are met in the theoretic life.

We can, perhaps, see how close the faculties and their respective virtues become when we read Porphyry's description of the theoretic virtues:¹⁰

" . . . *wisdom* and *prudence* [here] consist in the contemplation of those things which intellect possesses. But *justice* consists in performing what is appropriate in conformity to, and energizing according to intellect. *Temperance* is an inward conversion of the soul to intellect. And *fortitude* is apathy, according to a similitude of that to which the soul looks, and which is naturally impassive."

All these virtues are clearly collecting around the stillness of intellect – the word apathy meaning, in this passage, that which is not moved by outward things. The same idea emerges from Socrates words in the *Phaedo*,¹¹ when he says that the whole of philosophy "is nothing else than how to die and be dead." Olympiodorus says¹² that the while the phrase "to die" is an indication of the cathartic philosopher who is undergoing a process of separating the self from externalities, the phrase "to be dead" indicates the theoretic philosopher who is actually separated from the passivity of matter and its subsequent whirlings – so that the contemplative philosopher finds the still centre of him or herself, and, simultaneous, the still centre of the ontological universe itself.

Part of the cathartic and theoretic life is the exercise of dialectics – the process by which we divide and collect our concepts in order to find their relationships to truth, looking to real being as the start and end points to our thoughts. Dialectic is a dance of four steps: we divide, define, demonstrate and analyse until we arrive at true knowledge or, to use a word in its best meaning, until we arrive at science. But what does real knowledge – pure science – imply? Let me repeat a little section from my first lecture on the "Philosopher in the World", which may now be seen in its proper context:

"we shouldn't run away with the modernist idea that a reasoning person gathers objective facts as truths which have no interior connection or effect on that person – we can, of course, gather facts which have no effect upon us as persons, but the cultivation of wisdom and the contact with the truths that wisdom brings *always* affects the soul. This view lies at

¹⁰ Porphyry's *Auxiliaries to the Perception of Intelligibles*, 34 (ITS vol II, p. 184).

¹¹ *Phaedo* 64a.

¹² *Com. Phaedo*, 3.1.

the heart of the Platonic life – we cannot, for example, learn in wisdom's school about justice without ourselves becoming more just, and our actions manifesting justice. Nor can we learn about the good without becoming better. As Porphyry says,¹³ "Beatific contemplation does not consist of the accumulation of arguments or a storehouse of learned knowledge, but in us theory must become nature and life itself."

When we consider things dialectically we come to know the essence of things, the way in which they are the same as other things, and the way in which they are different: but essence, sameness and difference are the very elements of our own nature. As Guy said in the last lecture, we are a microcosm of the macrocosm – we are a universe in miniature, with a counterpart to everything that is above and below, within the soul. To truly know that which intellect holds is to re-ignite in ourselves its counterpart: that is why when we finally see an important truth, we don't feel that it is something alien and unfamiliar, but rather we have rediscovered something of the self – something beautiful and precious, something that is intimately a part of the inner self.

Platonic philosophy and the Platonic life rests upon the affirmation that truth is to be found within the soul: it is, therefore, the safest path to the restoration of the soul to its divine likeness, because it does not impose a set of doctrines and practices upon the individual, but rather allows the lover of wisdom to grow naturally from the divinely implanted paradigm within.

The movement of dialectic is a meditation which ends in a contemplation of the beautiful ideas that have formed our universe: Diotima, in her discourse to Socrates on the loving path to the Beautiful herself says,¹⁴ "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."

In his Seventh Letter, Plato spells out the path which leads from the outermost symbol of anything – its name – to the very being of the thing:¹⁵

"There are three things belonging to each of those particulars through which science is necessarily produced. But the fourth is science itself. And it is requisite to establish as the

¹³ Abstin. from Animal Food I, 29, trans. P Hadot.

¹⁴ Symposium 212a.

¹⁵ Epistle VII, 342a-b.

fifth that which is known and true. One of these is the name of a thing; the second its definition; the third the resemblance; the fourth science."

And of the thing which is "known and true" he has said, in the same letter,¹⁶

"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."

So we move from name, via definition, resemblance, and science to the thing itself – the real being which resides as a star in the eternal heavens.

We have thus travelled through the levels upon which the human soul itself can act – from the life of the polis, through the purifications of catharsis, to the recovery of the vision of the starry region of the celestial arches. We have not, however, quite finished the story: the theoretic virtues do indeed perfect the power of the soul to look to intellect and the ideas which live in that realm. But intellect looks to intelligible being and desires it: there is a level of virtue known as the paradigmatic which the soul, when identified with and elevated to all-seeing intellect, can share in. And what lies beyond being itself? Only the unities which the Platonic tradition called Gods – and eventually the soul presses on into its own unity where she delights in their company and in the final expression of virtue – called the hieratic virtues. This great sublime ascent is summarized by Proclus in these words:¹⁷

For the soul when looking at things posterior to herself, beholds the shadows and images of beings, but when she converts herself to herself she evolves 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. When however, she proceeds into her interior recesses, and into the adytum 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.

He also says,¹⁸

"Every soul when on high is conversant with sublime concerns, governs the whole world, and ascends, together with the presiding Gods, to the contemplation of the felicitous and

¹⁶ Epistle VII, 341d.

¹⁷ *Theology of Plato* I, 3.

¹⁸ *On the Subsistence of Evil*, 23, 10 (TTS vol. XVIII, p 109).

most perfect energy of truly existing being, and surveying all the forms that it contains, is filled with the nectar which is there."

This is the philosophical life, brought to a perfection which only a cultivation of the virtues at ever-ascending levels can produce. It at once brings a friendship with the world, with our fellow dwellers in time, with the immortals, and with ourselves. For this reason, says Plato,¹⁹

"... it is requisite to show that philosophy is a thing of the greatest consequence, and that it is only to be obtained by great study and mighty labour. For he who hears that this is the case, if he is truly a lover of wisdom, and is adapted to and worthy of its acquisition, being a divine person, will think that he hears of an admirable way, that he ought immediately to betake himself to this path, and make it the great business of his life. After this, he will not cease exciting both himself, and the leader of this way, till he either obtains the consummation of his wishes, or receives a power by which he may be able to conduct himself without a guide.

Such a one, therefore, will so live, that all his actions may accord with these conceptions. But before all things he will be perpetually intent on philosophy, and will daily procure for himself such nutriment, as may especially render him docile, of a good memory, and able to reason . . ."

According to the *Phaedrus*, the soul started its activity by attempting to follow the procession of the Gods through the celestial regions, but must now find a way to regrow her broken wings, in order to recover her place in that procession. A wise and just life is the only means by which we can achieve this, for as the dialogue says, in highly symbolic terms²⁰ -

"But in all these [varying conditions of terrestrial life], he who passes his life justly will afterwards obtain a better condition of being: but he who acts unjustly will pass into a worse state of existence. For no soul will return to its pristine condition till the expiration of ten thousand years: since it will not recover the use of its wings before this period; except it is the soul of one who has philosophized sincerely, or together with philosophy has loved beautiful forms. These, indeed, in the third period of a thousand years, if they have thrice chosen this mode of life in succession, and have thus restored their wings to their natural vigour, shall in the three thousandth year, fly away to their pristine abode."

¹⁹ Epistle VII 340b-d.

²⁰ *Phaedrus* 248e-249a.