



The Philosopher in the Soul

New Acropolis, 18th February 2013

"It is difficult to become good, for the Gods have placed sweat before virtue. But he who has arrived at the summit will find that to be easy, which it was difficult to acquire." (Hesiod)

I would like to begin by making a few comments about the work and purpose of The Prometheus Trust – this is not by way of some advert, or to promote it or to sell it – it is simply for the sake of clarity and to avoid potential misunderstanding. The purpose of the Trust is summed up in one line, and that is, *"To encourage, promote and assist the flowering of philosophy as the living love of wisdom."* Hence, it does not seek to develop Platonists, or Aristotelians, Christians, Buddhists, Taoists, Hindus, Islamists or any other *ist or ism* or sect of specific doctrine. For philosophy itself has no sects; it is simply the love and admiration of all that is real and good – and whoever does this as the great work of his or her life is to be called a philosopher. Philosophy is *the* voyage of discovery of that which is already there, and always has been and always will be there..... Whatever names, whatever divisions, whatever paths to and true visions of things which essentially *are*, are all discovered through the love of wisdom, by whatever name anyone may choose to call it. And it is not human wisdom which is to be sought and discovered, though this must inevitably be a fruit of this type of love, but it is the wisdom of the real, that singular fullness which is generative and perfective of all truth and every species of beauty, the foundation and end of every kind of being – wisdom itself or herself – beyond adequate naming, yet united to

and penetrated by love, and by the most ardent and comprehensive energies for this true and beautiful copulation.

And yet, the love of wisdom exhibited by the Platonic tradition is possibly the most reliable, scientific and vitally consistent aid to any that are embarking upon or are engaged in this voyage of discovery. But it is not nor ever was intended to be an end in itself, but is simply the best attempt by truly worthy and adept souls, through a wisdom born from experience, to assist all voyagers and to help them to transcend the vast and multitudinous deep sea of opinion – and it is not to be taken up or put aside lightly..... Anyway, enough of that for now, I should get back to reason why I am here talking with you this evening.....

There are numerous questions of importance to all philosophically inclined souls, such as: How do I discover what is real?

How can I become truly happy?

What is the meaning of life?

Is there a God or Gods?

Is there more to life than that which is contacted by the senses?

What is my purpose?

How can I understand the universe and my place in it?

And I am sure there are many more of such like questions which come to mind. And far from there being numerous answers to these questions, there is, in the first place, just one – and it is the answer that the inspired Oracle uttered and had inscribed at the entrance to the sacred heart of Delphi, so as to be at the very foundation of all human pursuit of the real and the true, and that is – KNOW THYSELF! And where else would any sane man or woman start from in order to understand or to know anything else? For if we do not know what we are, or assume that we are something we are not, how can it be possible for us to know what we can do and become? How else can we know what is good for us at any given moment or throughout our lives? And even more importantly, how can we appreciate the place man has in the larger scheme of things, his true place in the universe, and what real use we can be to the universe and therefore to ourselves? For only by knowing our selves can we hope to answer the most basic of all questions that confront us, that is – what is the point of man? Why is he or she at all?

There is an old saying that that he or she who possesses and energizes according to the greater virtues necessarily possesses the lesser, but the converse is not true. Hence, the exercise of what is called the political virtues begins to set aright our relationships with each other, with ourselves, with this beautiful planet Earth, and with the universe itself. For as a sage old American Indian famously said, *"All things are connected, this we know; man did not weave the web of life, he is but a strand in it; and whatever he does to the web he does to himself."* Thus, these types of virtues evolve to a degree the conscious perfection of our kind, and enable us to use such powers as we possess to live a harmonious life. Yet virtue of this kind only begins the journey, but on its own will not lead us to a full appreciation of the various relationships we enjoy with everything else, or to an accurate understanding of what we are. For there may well be many other animals and beings in the cosmos which have the capacity for self-knowledge, but I suggest that there are few, if any, that combine this with our amazing propensity for self-ignorance.

Adepts of the Platonic tradition have often said that man is a microcosm of the macrocosm, and that all such things subsist in him partially, as the world or the universe contains divinely and totally. Yet so many of us may lead our lives as if the converse is the true state of things, that is, that the universe is a macrocosm of the microcosm – leading to the most arrogant of assumptions that man is the measure of all things, and that the universe is there for us to use in whatever manner we desire. And though there are some, and always have been some, who set themselves up as judges and lords of all that they survey, and may well acquire considerable fame and wealth through their facile interpretations of what they observe and measure before their eyes – they survey but a tiny fraction of the all, through the lens of practical science and opinion; and hence the world they see is what they themselves are, thereby corrupting the relationship of man with the universe, the universe with man, and man with man in the final analysis.

To corrupt something is to destroy the purity of that same thing, and this applies even more when considering the relationships I just mentioned. For material things when corrupted are eventually reduced again to the matter from which they were formed; but relationships continue to express the corruption until some form of restoration is achieved. This process of restoration is called

catharsis, and the virtues by which this is enabled are called cathartic – and it is through these that man is truly able to realize the injunction or answer, Know Thyself.

For to purify is to make pure, to cleanse, to free from adulteration, to remove impurities, to clarify, and to restore a thing to what it in reality simply *is*. It is a reversion to simplicity, and a removal of everything unnecessary and un-essential.

Other traditions may have different names and terms for this essential passage or stage of development, but the goal will be one and the same – purification and self-realization. And far from this being an end in itself, catharsis is preparatory and necessary in order for man to be able to play his rightful role in the universe as a whole; and this is illustrated beautifully by the philosopher, Proclus, when he says:

*As we are parts of the universe
It is fit that we should be in want of the universe.
For a conversion to the whole
Imparts salvation to every thing.*

*If therefore you possess virtue,
You should invoke that which antecedently
Comprehends all virtue.
For that which is all-good,
Will also be the cause to you
Of appropriate good.*

But catharsis must have a subject and in this case it is the self of man, which is only to be understood and realized by the virtue of wisdom, perfecting that power in us which is capable of accurate and vital self-knowledge. Yet what *is* this self that we are exhorted to know? And what is the good that is appropriate to it, and to the macrocosm at large? For this is surely the first step and beginning of catharsis – the passage from opinion to stable knowledge. We need to bring reason to bear upon our nature and begin to see it for what it really is – not ratiocination, or logic, or sophisticated opinion or any type of rationality which is void of life and power – but that essential element in us which illuminates and gives reason to all that we are and do, and which does not err in its life giving power, but is the very reason of and for our existence.

In modern terms, this stage of catharsis requires guts from those that embrace it, sheer guts and sweat and fortitude, and courage, and temperance when cries of distress begin to emerge; and the distribution of goodness through every power we possess and to everything that we are trying to become, which is justice in energy – and the striving after wisdom, which of all things to man is the most difficult and necessary virtue to unite with. This is the way of the hero and the heroine inspired by love, and *never* willing to give up! As it has been said, that,

*we do not admire the pilot's art
During the tranquillity of the sea and air,
But in tempest and storm;
Nor virtue in an affluence of human good,
But in those things which the violent attacks
Of fortune cannot shake. (Proclus)*

Know thy self and know the universe, know the universe and know thyself – it is like breathing essential air....

In Plato's dialogue *The First Alcibiades*, Socrates puts before us four possible answers as to what the self of man is, either he is a body, or a compound of soul and body, or a soul, or nothing. Which is to be? A reasonable decision cannot be made without some examination of each position, and of some of the conclusions to which each leads.

Firstly then, is man a body only? This would seem to be the preferred, if poorly examined, view of many of the present time. And this should not be surprising, as it is the easiest and most obvious view to take, for it is easy to see and obvious that we are or have a body at least; just a look in the mirror proves the existence of body. Yet, when we look in a mirror we do not see the whole body, we see only some of the surface of the body, not that which is contained within and beneath the skin, and bones, and hair, and eyes. We appear to be whole, but we know we have parts, thousands upon thousands of parts which, if the body is to function normally and healthily, must work together in harmony and with near perfect timing. We know also that most of these parts function alone, and together with others, without conscious effort, or without us having to consciously concentrate on the workings of

each and every part. We know also that initially, at least, we have had to concentrate on the movements and efficiency of most of the larger parts of the body, that is the legs, the arms, the hands, the feet, the spine, the stomach, the chest, the head, and the coordination between them all. And as we become proficient in their uses they become taken over by habit, and sub-conscious spontaneous natural control.

Further to this, we have the organs of sense and the senses, which collect and receive exterior and interior physical information, which again are parts contributing to the whole. But if body is simply and only what man is, and that this is what his self consists of, what then controls all the parts, and coordinates them into the healthy, or otherwise, state of a whole animated being? Of course, it is said, it is the brain - that mighty organ which defines each man or woman, and is the essence of what man is, and the self. Yet the brain, even more so than the rest of the body, is not only a whole composed of parts, but is itself a part and completely dependent upon other major parts of the body for its health and life.

Where in all these parts, and wholes composed of parts, is man's self? Where is its seat? Where can it reside in order to receive and decide upon every inner and outer stimulus, to which it is forever passive? In which part will it be found in parts that are so interdependent? The self appears then, from this standpoint, to be a part of the body, itself composed of parts, whose major energy is to be devoted to the continuous function of every other part, and of the whole of which it is a part. Yet which part the self is in cannot as yet be apprehended, for when the foot is rejected as not being the self, and then the knee, the hand, the ear, the hair, the teeth, the spine, the heart, and the parts of the brain, and the parts of these parts, what then is left? Either, that the self is a chemical compound to be found somewhere in the caverns of the yet uncharted recesses of the brain, and which lives and dies with the brain, or, that it is nothing, and does not possess any substantial existence.

The second answer must then be considered, that is, that man's self is a compound of soul and body. A compound, by its nature, is composed of two or more different parts which together produce a whole. Also, this whole is not necessarily just a mixture of the properties of the parts, but possesses its own properties as a whole, which are not possessed completely by any of the parts separately.

If either of the parts is removed, the whole fails, and is no longer the compound it was. If, then, man's self is a compound of soul and body, it is dependent totally upon the joining up of both parts, and cannot exist if either one or the other is not present.

The body, we know, is mortal, subject to birth, growth, maturation, decay, and death. Hence, the self is destined to a short life and inevitable dissolution - this is inescapable. Even if there is, in this case, a soul present as an animating principle, it is not the self; it is merely an element in its composition, and cannot survive even as this element without the body and its contribution to the self. It is then as mortal as the body, and cannot be the self without body. Either way, the parts dominate the whole, and if the parts are mortal and subject to change and dissolution, so too is the whole, and it is destined for oblivion. If, then, the self is a compound of soul and body, it is truly temporary and, at best, enjoyable.

What then of the third answer, that man's self is a soul, and that he is soul? This position poses a number of further questions that must be answered if this kind of self is to be known and understood. If the self is an animating principle, or soul, is it then mortal or immortal? And further, is it irrational or rational? Does it possess life from itself, or is it dependent upon another for its life and existence? And does it move itself or is it moved by something else? Is it self-conscious, possessing the power to know itself, or is it self-ignorant and only conscious of any parts which may depend on it for their life? If mortal, how long does it live? As long as the body, a bit longer, or a lot longer? And if immortal, can it only animate a body for a single life, and is then forever incorporeal? Or can it ensoul another body, and another, for so many and for so long as its needs require?

Further to these, we may well conclude that if the self is irrational, it is not capable of the self-knowledge of its own reason and nature, but will only know its own opinions, or judgements, or feelings, or appetites, or a combination of some or all of these, yet will be ignorant of how they will contribute or detract from its own well-being and increase, or decrease. Yet if the soul is rational, does this mean that it may not only know its own reason or nature, but that it may know also the reasons of other things, or of all things? And is a rational soul the only type of soul, or are there irrational souls, natural souls, or super-rational souls? And what are their several

relationships to bodies? These differing questions and viewpoints are a meditation in themselves, and are capable of being answered and clarified by frequent and prolonged consideration, and through intimate contact with the things themselves, and can only stimulate our innate impulse to know what, and why, we are.

The fourth answer is the most curious, and the most difficult to comprehend, *viz.* that man's self is nothing. If, then, man's self is nothing, without existence, then that which we see in the mirror is also nothing and does not exist. The I, which we believe ourselves to be when we say I am, or I have, or I want, or I need, I know or I love, is then nothing, without existence, life, or intelligence, without feeling, or desire, or reason. It is purposeless, pointless, without substance or quality, not even a figment of imagination or delusion or dream - it is simply nothing and void of all reality. Much food for thought . . .

It is not too difficult to think of other questions or conclusions which are sponsored by the viewpoints that man's self is either body, or a compound of soul and body, or soul, or nothing. But why, it may be asked, do we need to know this? Why do I need to know what I am? Does it make any difference if I know my self or not? Does it matter whether I have a self or not? These questions are the defence of the ignorant, or the cries of the suffering and the desperate.

One answer could be that if we do not know what the self is, we cannot know what is good for the self; not only what is good in any particular circumstance which may be pleasurable or painful, but what is good for us in all circumstances and at all times. And it follows from this, that if we do not know what is good for ourselves, we cannot know what is good for others of a similar nature. Consequent to this, it must be said that if we do not know what is good for ourselves, or for others, we also do not know what is evil for ourselves, or for others. Hence, if we do not know ourselves, or what is good for us, or evil for us or for others, we can only live by our opinions formed from the conjunction of sense and memory.

Opinions may conform to truth, and may not, and range from the most probable to the impossible, but, by their very nature, they are not certain. Therefore, at best, if the self is not known, nor the good or evil which the self desires or avoids, and the opinion is

sometimes right and sometimes not, a good life will be dependent mainly upon fortune, and what is called by many, chance.

Yet, it could be said, I may not know myself, but if I spend my life trying to do good for others surely this cannot be wrong. Of course it is not wrong attempting to do good for others, but, even more so than a knowledge of self, the knowledge of what *good* is, is not easily attained without prolonged effort and directed energy. For what *is* truly good for man will always be good in every and any circumstance, and what *may be* good for man will only be good in certain and definite circumstances. And this applies equally to the universe itself, and to all the beings and lives it contains.

Hence, it is vital for man to know what he is and what is good for him, whether he believes himself to be body alone, or a compound of soul and body, or a soul. But if a man believes he has no self and is nothing, it really does not matter at all what he does for good or evil, as there can be no consequences, damage, or purpose to a self which does not exist. Yet there are some who have indeed lived and died according to this dark view, with fatal effects for many others. And if we hold to the self-evident truth that man is a microcosm of the great cosmos, the same or similar deep meditations will need to be engaged in, that is, is the self of the universe a body only, or a compound of soul and body, or soul, or nothing, or some other conception we may generate or apprehend. And again, whatever we see will be a projection of what we have become.

As there are certain consequences to the self being nothing, so too if *the good* is not, that is, possessing no reality, certain other things follow: for if the good *is not*, then all things are destitute of it. If all things are destitute of good, they can never be useful, as the useful is no otherwise useful than from it being good for the use it was created. If all things can never be useful, neither can they be of value, for all things are of value in proportion to their goodness and usefulness. If all things are of no value, never can they be the objects of desire, as all objects of desire are so because of their goodness, usefulness, or value. If no thing can be the object of desire, all desires are vain and hopeless, empty and trifling. If all desires are of such-like qualities, there will be no progress, for progress is the result of the desire for increased being or well-being, or life, or intelligence. If there is no progress there can never be growth, as growth, even in nature, is facilitated by the desire for

that which is naturally good to itself. If there is no growth, neither can there be life, for the indications of life are increase and decrease, but the indication of death is decrease. If there is no life, then there can be no being, for a being void of life is dead and redundant. If there is no being, there is no thing, non-being here signifying absence of being and reality, and destitution of essence. If there *is* nothing, then nothing possesses being and is the principle of that which has no being, which is most obviously ridiculous. Therefore, if the good is not, neither *is* any thing else - all is nothing, empty, lifeless and barren.

Yet we do possess, along with all living things, some notion or impression of what is good, as we can express, sometimes with amazing alacrity that such a thing is not good, or is bad, or evil, or ugly, or beautiful, or desirable or good. And, although some elements of these judgements may be inherited or learned, they are most often the spontaneous conceptions of our nature comparing that which is experienced to that which is firmly believed or known. Hence we compare things good, or true, or beautiful, or real, or their opposites, to our own standards or conceptions, or to ideas.

Here we should observe the gravity of what we are considering. For if we are to examine what the self of man is, we are led then to consider what self itself is; what does it mean to be self? For man itself, which includes us all, is one thing, but what of the universe itself, being itself, or life, or wisdom, or beauty, or justice, or virtue, or science? Do these then have no self? No substantial existence apart from every thing which depends upon them, and of which parts they are composed? We are in danger here of negating the reality of every thing which is of value to past and present and future generations of all the various forms of life. Be cautious here: for this path is degenerating and ruinous, and leads to ignorance and to immense darkness.

And what of love? And what of beauty? And what of permanent happiness? And what of the fulfillment of dreams and aspirations? Illusions all, or ideals to be realized? All of us must consider and decide. But in your considerations reflect upon this: if man's self is an illusion, or transient, or the result of a spectacular accident, or a compound of nature and body, or a purposeless being, then the life of a man or a woman is but false, mortal, incidental, desire driven,

and unnecessary. In other words, a temporary tick on the temporary body of the universe.

There are many other conclusions towards which the various conceptions of self lead, but, as a man or a woman, the primary consideration must be whether the self of man, and therefore the self of all other things, is real, permanent, and overflowing with potential, or is a non-entity, fleetingly transient, and limited by its own impotence and pointlessness. Whatever we decide will influence our present and our future. And the so-called middle ground of "I do not know" or "I do not care" or "it is not possible to know these things with any certainty" will not only stifle purposeful inquiry, but will effectively castrate the will to penetrate the veils of self, of truth, of beauty, and of reality.

The Platonic tradition adheres to the judgment that the immortal soul is the self of man, and is essentially self-motive, and that it is intimately related to and dependent upon the comprehending soul of the universe; for that which is the principle and supplier of life will not be the cause of the privation of life also. It likewise affirms that our soul is using the body as an instrument. The confusion arises when the needs, desires and appetites of the body, together with its irrational vital nature, are perceived as being those of the soul likewise; so that whatever happens to the body happens also to the soul. Hence, she suffers through and with the body, both its pleasures and its pains, and the passions of the instrument become those also of its user.

Bodies are the most wonderful things..... and experience such a vast variety of sensations and sensual conditions, again both pleasurable and painful - and hence the beginning of catharsis is the setting aright of the microcosmic world, knowing of what it comprises, what its essence is, what its powers are, and to what best ends it should direct its various energies. But at the very same time a realignment of the microcosm to the macrocosm needs to be brought into energy - by the seeing of what it comprises, what the many and various beings are that generate and inhabit it, and the multiform lives it sustains and is sustained by, and the beautiful order of all things that are moved by and moved with intelligence. Through catharsis we set aright the relationship of soul to body, of soul to soul, and prepare ourselves for the true work and purpose of man, which this process also unveils.

When all is well, when all is calm, when life is pleasant and good, when comfort abounds, when success is enjoyed, when contentment wraps around us like a warm embrace, when we appreciate ourselves and are appreciated by those around us, when we feel good and are seen as good, when life continues to enrich our every motion and decision – then wisdom, justice, temperance, fortitude, faith, sanctity, will and all the other virtues appear to be living through us, and may well be – yet an aged wise woman once looked deep into my eyes, into the eyes of a young man brimming with self-confidence, full of certainty and pride in his burgeoning so called spirituality, and his obvious conviction that according to every virtue he was truly vitalized and that perfection was there for the taking – and in looking, with a certain compassion and love she said, “Guy, my dear, never trust a virtue that hasn’t been tested.” And at the time it was to me like water off a duck’s back, as is said, and I did not at all see the profound import of her kind injunction.

Yet, when we pray for wisdom, when we meditate upon the profundities of life, and desire to be at its heart, enlightened and playing our full part in the divinely inspired and guarded universe within and without, do we really and truly appreciate what will be required of us? For the way of philosophy is the way of the hero and of the heroine, and demands of each one who longs for permanent and good empowerment that he or she becomes wise, becomes brave, becomes just, and temperate, faithful and pious and willing of only good – and those that are wise in their turn will assist in providing every opportunity for us to become so, giving us ample and varied times in which to develop and test our fortitude and courage, our temperance, our justice, our faith and our wisdom, through circumstances that require them, throughout as many lives as it takes; until the soul shines out from herself, like some vital golden orb, impervious to any and every impurity and attack, a self-shining light and good according to every virtue.....

Then her prayers are what she is and she is her own prayer, her reason for being becomes her, and she contemplates the universe from her centre conjoined with the greater soul that abides there, beholding the beginnings of her real and permanent life, and upon which so very many other lives will depend.

Virtue, as I see it now, is the perfection of power – and to this perfection catharsis leads the way.

In finishing this brief exploration of some of the implications involved in the soul's engagement with cathartic virtue, I add these few words from Proclus which unveil the true way of *catharsis*:

*It is necessary that the soul
Which is hurled like seed
Into the realms of generation,
Should lay aside the stubble and bark,
As it were, which she obtained
From being disseminated
Into these fluctuating realms;
And that purifying herself
From every thing circumjacent,
She should become an intellectual flower and fruit,
Delighting in an intellectual life,
Instead of doxastic nutriment,
And pursuing the uniform and simple
Energy of the period of sameness,
Instead of the abundantly wandering motion
Of the period which is characterized by difference.
For she contains each of these circles,
And twofold powers.*

Guy Wyndham-Jones

