

## Philosophy as a Spiritual Path

“Philosophy is a thing of the greatest consequence, and 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.” – Plato, Seventh Letter.

Has the West been misreading Plato for the last several centuries? Does the prevailing view that Plato is simply a rationalist with some cultural baggage from his pre-philosophical background stand up to scrutiny? Or should we consider him (and those who followed his tradition in antiquity) as primarily working on a clear spiritual path as profound and as demanding as any from the East. And if this is truly the case, what does this entail and is it still viable in our time? Here are a few thoughts and quotes to get us started on this exploration.

When modern thinkers come to study and write about Plato, his ancient successors, and the philosophy which they espoused. it becomes apparent that most want to place them in the context of our own post-enlightenment rationalist approach to philosophy. Which is to say that since modernism hardly recognizes the existence of the soul (and certainly not as something which itself alone is our primary self), they must set about explaining ancient Platonic writings as – at best – a guide for negotiating mundane life. Of course, this falls under the scope of Platonic philosophy but it is a part only, and by no means its most important part: it must be understood primarily as a means for cultivating the soul. – a soul which is perpetual, has a relationship to eternity, and in the process of unfolding its wings through the trials and experiences of time. Here is Plato saying this quite explicitly:

“As we are not terrestrial plants, but blossoms of heaven . . . he who vehemently labours to satisfy the cravings of desire and ambition, all the conceptions of his soul must be necessarily mortal; and himself as much as possible must become entirely mortal, since he leaves nothing unaccomplished which tends to increase his perishable part. 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.”

Plato, the *Timaeus* 90b

And in the *Phaedo* after Socrates has demonstrated that the soul is immortal and not something which is limited to the life span of a single body, he says:

But it is just, my friends, to think that if the soul is immortal, it requires our care and attention, not only for the present time, in which we say it lives, but likewise with a view to the whole of time: and it will now appear, that he who neglects it must subject himself to a most dreadful danger.

*Phaedo* 107c

In the *Phaedrus* Socrates turns to mythic language and describes the soul as being winged and capable of viewing eternal ideas (or forms), but which has shed its feathers and has therefore fallen into an embodied and terrestrial condition:

While it is perfect, indeed, and winged, its course is sublime, and it governs the universe. But the soul whose wings suffer a defluxion verges downward, till something solid terminates its descent; whence it receives a terrene body, as its destined receptacle, which appears to move itself through the power of the soul: and the whole is called an animal composed from soul and body, and is surnamed a mortal animal.

*Phaedrus* 246c

This earthly condition is a temporary one – the purpose of the philosophic discipline is to recover the soul’s wings and to rise to her “kindred star” – although this is not to say that the soul has her part to play in beautifying the material world.

Plato often resorts to mythic and symbolic language – but this should not be an excuse for reducing what he says to a level which is clearly below his point of focus. A symbol means something – a something which is beyond what can be described by ordinary language and ordinary thought: otherwise why resort to it?

Plato the rational philosopher knows the limits of reason and wants to point his readers to a state beyond that boundary. In his *Seventh letter*<sup>1</sup> Plato discusses the steps to real knowledge (here translated as “science”):

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 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.

*Seventh Letter*, 342b

The *fifth* which is “known and true” is a *real being* – a form, if you like, which is the object of the soul’s philosophical search – a living and eternal thing which exists and

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<sup>1</sup> There is, I know, a dispute as to whether the Seventh Letter is actually by Plato: but whoever wrote it is clearly someone who clearly has a profound knowledge of, and alignment with, Plato. All the ancient commentators accepted the Letter as authentically Platonic.

simply contemplates itself. That self-contemplation produces a vast number of reflections in the world of time: beauty itself contemplates itself and produces things beautiful; the equal itself thus produces things equal, wisdom produces things wise; and so on. Insofar as something is a being it is an intelligible; insofar as it is contemplation itself it is an eternal intellect. How do we pass from the science of something to its very being? The *Seventh Letter* says:

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. (341d)

This is the very essence of a true spiritual path which is not something which is merely the cultivation of objective knowledge, but a fire enkindled within. It is unfortunate that our current culture has commodified spirituality and reduced it to a rather selfish life of tranquil comfort purchased alongside other consumer goods.

The path that Platonism offers when seen in this light requires the greatest effort and its prize is hard-won; but it is one that sits within the soul and which only needs to be recovered from the soul's own divine depths.

To the modern ear, discovering real being does not seem to be of great consequence, but for the Platonist of antiquity, this quest is one of divinization. Within Being there are the Gods, both transcendent and immanent alike, and since the soul is a little cosmos – a mysterious reflection of the intelligible world – there are within the soul those very same Gods. Thus Plotinus is able to claim as the goal of philosophy, that it is not for us “to be without sin, but to be a God.”

“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 himself the intuition of the god; since in the secret recesses of his own essence, he will behold the divinity himself.

But if any one of us who is not able to perceive himself entirely comprehended by this divinity, should produce a spectacle into his view, for the purpose of assisting his vision, he should produce himself; and he will then perceive an image of the intelligible world,<sup>2</sup> now become more beautiful and divine. But afterwards neglecting the image although beautiful, and conspiring with himself into one, and no longer separating his essence, he will become *one all* together with that deity, who silently flows into his soul; and he will be present with him as far as he is able, and as much as he desires.”

Plotinus V, 8, 10

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<sup>2</sup> That is to say, the whole of the eternal order of real being.

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“For the soul, when looking at things posterior to herself,<sup>3</sup> beholds the shadows and images of beings; but when she turns 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. But when she proceeds into her interior recesses, and into the sacred centre, as it were, of the soul, she perceives with her eye closed, the genus of the Gods, and the unities of beings.”

Proclus, *The Theology of Plato*.

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“Perceive you not, said Diotima, 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*.

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<sup>3</sup> By “things posterior to herself”, Proclus means material things.