

Gods and Ideas – where's the difference?

PT open session, August 2024

Ideas

Both modern and ancient commentators on Plato agree that eternal ideas or forms play an immensely important role in his philosophical project, and we could take any number of extracts from his dialogues to illustrate this. Here is a short passage from the fifth book of the *Republic*, where he has Socrates distinguish between philosophers who seek Beauty itself, and non-philosophers who do not acknowledge the reality of that, but only beauty as a quality in material or quasi material things:

Those then who contemplate many beautiful things, but who never perceive *beauty itself*, nor are able to follow another leading them to it; and many just things, but never *justice itself*, and all other things in like manner, we will say that they opine all things, but know none of the things which they opine.

Of necessity, said he. But what now?

Those who perceive each of the things themselves, always existing in the same manner, and in the same respect, shall we not say that they know, and do not opine?

Of necessity this likewise.

And shall we not say, that these embrace and love the things of which they have knowledge, and the others the things of which they have opinion? Or do we not remember, that we said they beheld and loved fine sounds and colours, and such things, but that *beauty itself* they do not admit of as any *real being*?

We remember.

Shall we then act wrong in calling them lovers of opinion, rather than philosophers? And yet they will be greatly enraged at us if we call them so.

Not, if they be persuaded by me, said he; for it is not lawful to be enraged at the truth.

Those then who admire everything which has a *real being*, are to be called philosophers, and not lovers of opinion.

By all means.

Proclus, in his *Commentary on the Parmenides* (a dialogue where the nature of ideas and the way in which they shape the manifested cosmos takes up most of the first part) provides us with several insights into the nature of ideas:

“Ideas are at once the demiurgic and the intelligent causes of all things that naturally come into existence—being established as unchangeable and prior to the changing, simple and prior to compounds, separable and prior to the things that are inseparable from Matter.” (732)

“In sum, then, the Idea in the truest sense is an incorporeal cause, transcending its participants, a motionless Being, exclusively and really a paradigm, intelligible to

souls through images, and intelligising causally the existents modelled upon it. So that from all these problems we have ferreted out the single definition of an Idea in the true sense.” (935)

“. . . for with respect to the One they [forms] are monads because each of them is a *plurality* and a *single being* and a *life-principle* and an *intellectual Form*, but with respect to the things produced from them and the series which they establish, they are *henads*. For the divisible things that come after them derive multiplicity from them, though they themselves remain indivisible.” (880)

We might note that Proclus is using the word *henad* immediately above not in the technical sense of as a synonym for a God, but simply to mean a unity, showing that from one perspective each idea is a plurality, and from another a unity. Elsewhere (in a number of places, for example at 930) he calls things that exist as intellects a one-many: “. . . for Intellect is a one-many in just this way; partlessly, containing a multiplicity in its oneness, because it is not the One Itself subsisting prior to all multiplicity, but rather having oneness and multiplicity together.” Note, too, that this is a formulation which can be seen in the words of Socrates in the *Philebus* (16d), “that those beings said *to be for ever* derive their essence from one and many; and therefore have in themselves bound and infinity connatural to them . . .”

Gods

That Plato recognizes a unity transcending being can be seen from the sixth book of the *Republic* (509c) where it is claimed that “*the good* itself is not essence,¹ but beyond essence, transcending it both in dignity and in power.” We may also look at the treatment of the One in the first hypothesis of the *Parmenides*, where the leader of the dialectical examination of the One removes all conditions which attach to being – including the primary fact that it is a being. This examination culminates with this conclusion (142a): “it is not in such a manner as *to be* one, for thus it would be being, and participate of essence: but, as it appears, the one neither *is one* nor *is*, if it be proper to believe in reasoning of this kind. . . *The one*, therefore, *is* in no respect. . . Neither, therefore, does any name belong to it, nor discourse, nor any science, nor sense, nor opinion. . . Hence, it can neither be named, nor spoken of, nor conceived by opinion, nor be known, nor perceived by any being.”

This would seem to bring the relation of the One to a dead end both ontologically and epistemologically: the pure unity of the One prevents it from being a cause or an object of knowledge. But our experience in both fields makes us question this obstacle, since any being – whether real being, or that being which is ‘always coming to be’ – requires it to possess some kind of unity; and the power of truth underpinning our knowledge is itself unifying, as we intuitively admit.

How are we to respond to this apparently unyielding paradox?

Platonism answers *by admitting the reality of Gods* (or Henads, or Unities): for although the One is unparticipated, the Gods are the smallest possible step from this One – still

¹ By essence we must understand that which is the core and primary element of being – so that that which is beyond essence is necessarily beyond being.

pure unities but unities which are participable. As Proclus tells us (proposition 116) “every deity except the One is participable.”

The Gods have no attribute by participation² and this is the first thing which distinguishes them from Ideas – for all ideas participate, at the very least, in being itself. Each God is what it is simply by its own nature. We can see this being affirmed in Proclus’ *Commentary on the Timaeus*:

“... every God is essentialized in being a God, or rather is super-essentialized, but there is not anything which is participated by him;³ because the Gods are the most ancient and venerable of all things.”

Thus every God is, in him or herself, a simple unity, sharing no common ontological attribute – and while it is tempting for us, in our habitual ontological thinking, to take unity as a common attribute, just as we take being, or life, or intellect as a unifying attribute underpinning ontological entities, this would be an error. For unity is not within ontology but transcends that realm. The providence of the Gods is that they offer the realm of being (and all the entities within it), the goodness of participating in them. Each and every God is a unity, not a multiplicity; and he or she does not descend by becoming part of the ontological world, even in its most rarefied form.

An ontological entity is at least threefold, but no God is: each has a hyparxis which is uniform and an individual characteristic,⁴ but not a third thing which would make it a being. It is by remaining above the multiplicity of being that each God stands as the principal of all, but in a particular fashion:

Nor is it at all wonderful, that each of the Gods should be the universe, but after a different manner, one demiurgically, another connectively, another immutably, another convertively, and another in some other way according to a divine peculiarity. (Proclus, *Commentary on the Timaeus* I, 308)

Each of the Gods however is denominated from his peculiarity, though each is comprehensive of all things. (312)

Every God is the measure of beings. For if every God is unical, he defines and measures all the multitude of beings. For all multitudes being in their own nature indefinite, are bounded through *the one*. (*Elements*, pr. 117)

Every God possesses in his own hyparxis a providential inspection of the whole of things. And a providential energy is primarily in the Gods. (*Elements* pr. 120)

Every God is a self-perfect unity, and every self-perfect unity is a God... But if a God was a unity, yet not a self-perfect unity, or a self-perfect hypostasis, yet not

² Proposition 118: “Everything which is in the Gods pre-exists in them according to their peculiarities. And the peculiarity of the Gods is unical and superessential. Hence, all things are contained in them unically and superessentially.”

³ *i.e.* Every God, so far as he is a God, is a participant of nothing superior to himself. For the procession of the Gods from the principle of all things, is not a participation, but an ἀρρητος εκφανσις, an ineffable unfolding into light.

⁴ Its *idiotes*.

a unity, he would be arranged in another order, on account of the mutation of the peculiarity. (*Elements* pr. 114)

The communities of the Gods and of Ideas contrasted

“. . . all the henads are in each other and are united with each other, and their unity is far greater than the community and sameness among beings. In these too there is compounding of Forms, and likeness and friendship and participation in one another; but the unity of those former entities, inasmuch as it is a unity of henads, is far more unitary and ineffable and unsurpassable; for they are all in all of them, which is not the case with the Forms. These are participated in by each other, but they are not all in all. And yet, in spite of this degree of unity in that realm, how marvellous and unmixed is their purity, and the individuality of each of them is a much more perfect thing than the otherness of the Forms, preserving as it does unmixed all the divine entities and their proper powers distinct, with the result that there is a distinction between the more general and more particular, between those associated with Continuance, with Progression and with Return, between those concerned with generation, with induction to the higher, and with demiurgic administration, and in general the particular characteristics are preserved of those gods who are respectively cohesive, completive, demiurgic, assimilative, or any of the other characteristics of theirs which our tradition celebrates.

Whereas, then, there exists there both indescribable unity and yet the distinctness of each characteristic (for all the henads are in all, and yet each is distinct), we gain knowledge of their unity and their distinctness from things secondary to them and dependent upon them.” (*Commentary on the Parmenides*, 1048-1049)

Thus Proclus offers us the curious insight – that the Gods are both more closely united to each other and yet more distinct. This leave us with at least one puzzle (and perhaps many others!) – how can there be differences in the Gods when, strictly speaking, this is a characteristic which arises within intellect? Since none of the Gods are subject to the limitations introduced by being, whence distinction in the Gods?