

Good, wise and beautiful

In the *Phaedrus* (246e) Socrates says, “But that which is divine is beautiful, wise, and good...” and Proclus in his first book of his *Theology of Plato*,¹ says that this triad pervades to all the progressions of the gods. Part of the Platonic discipline is the conscious and long-term exploration of the systematic unity that constitutes the reality understood by the wise men and women of the Platonic tradition.

Before going any further, it is worth noting Lloyd Gerson’s initial principles he puts forward in his article *What is Platonism?* Put briefly, the first three affirmations are:

1. The universe has a systematic unity.
2. The systematic unity is an explanatory hierarchy.
3. The divine constitutes an irreducible explanatory category.

What follows these affirmations? In his article Gerson arranges philosophical questions of psychology, ethics, existence and knowledge as fitting within these primary points. For something to be a systematic unity it must have a unific principle, or starting point; then it must have some way to unfold that starting point into a more complex multiplicity and, furthermore, everything in the unfolded system must retain a certain contact with that first principle or else fall into non-entity. In other words, nothing can sit outside that unified hierarchy – for otherwise it will certainly fail to provide its participants with an ordered place within the whole, in whatever way they communicate with that whole.

A prolonged meditation on the structure of reality led the Platonic tradition to suppose that there must be some principle or fountain which rests in its own simple self, but that for this to act as a unity which gives rise to multiplicity, there must follow a triple form. That triple form can be considered as one that abides, proceeds and returns. The simple self is not itself part of a related structure but actually transcendent; but the abiding term of the triplicity stands *as if* it were the principle; it provides stability in the implicit multiplicity that will come forth. The proceeding term provides the dynamic power which will unfold the hidden causal nature of the abiding term. The returning term provides the adhesive bond whereby every element in the resulting multiplicity holds itself within the single structure: the Chaldean Oracle says of this third term that it is the bond of love, “that the All might continue in love for an infinite time.”

The Chaldean Oracles, a sacred text highly regarded by the Platonists of late antiquity, says

“In every order shines a triad, ruled by a Monad” (fragment 27)

And

For the world, seeing you as a triadic Monad, has honoured you.” (fragment 26)

The philosophic discipline – or, if you like, the Platonic yoga – comprises a path upon which the philosopher traces the outward and inward breathing of the universe as it proceeds from and returns to the Gods.² The true philosopher takes delight in following the light-bearing universe, wherever it may lead.

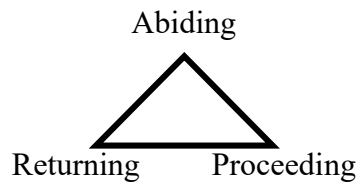
¹ Book I, chapter 21. In passing we might ask why does the *Phaedrus* place these three fundamentals in this order? Perhaps because the dialogue is primarily dealing with the way in which beauty leads the human soul back towards her original home in the intelligible realm – it is beauty which first attracts us to the ideas of truth, and thence to the ultimate stillness of the Good itself.

² Why, the newcomer may ask, should we not call this a procession and return to God? Simply because the Platonic tradition arises from a polytheistic culture, and its philosophic understanding of the nature of the first principle is that is best viewed as a polycentric one – best summed up by the Pythagorean maxim, “All things are in all things, but in each appropriately”. Throughout this paper we will be exploring the way in which Proclus expresses the mystery of the divine universe, and Proclus is expressly a polytheistic philosopher and devotee of the Gods.

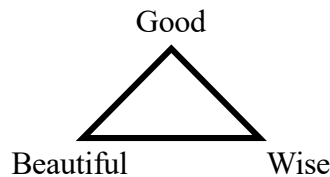
While the Gods in themselves are unknowable, as the fountains of being they are knowable: their gift to the universe is intelligible being. As Parmenides says in his poem *On Nature*, “the same thing there is for thinking and being” (fragment 3) – so to think the universe is to stand near being, and as Plato says,³ the philosopher “being always situated near the idea of being, is by no means easily discerned, on account of the splendour of the region.”

The dynamic universe of real being is, as we have seen, triply active as abiding, proceeding and returning – and hence our thought life is, at its purest, a reflection of this pattern. In the light of this it is worth exploring Proclus’ extended meditation on a line from the *Phaedrus* (246e) as given in his *Theology of Plato*, chapters 21 to 25.

The pattern:



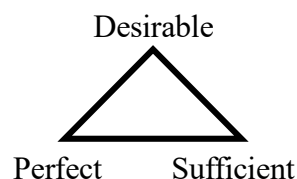
“To us however discussing what pertains to every divine nature, what we assert will be known from those commonly received truths adduced in the *Phaedrus*, and which we have before mentioned. Socrates therefore says that everything divine is *beautiful*, *wise*, and *good* and he indicates that this triad pervades to all the progressions of the Gods. What therefore is the goodness, what the wisdom, and what the beauty of the Gods?” (ch. 21)



Good

“With respect to the goodness of the Gods therefore, we have before observed, that it preserves and gives subsistence to the whole of things, that it everywhere exists as the summit, as that which fills subordinate natures, and as pre-existing in every order analogous to the first principle of the divine orders. For according to this all the Gods are conjoined with the one cause of all things, and on account of this primarily derive their subsistence as Gods. For in all beings there is not anything more perfect than the good, and the Gods.” (ch. 21)

“But in the *Philebus*, Plato delivers to us the three most principal elements of the good, viz. the desirable, the sufficient, and the perfect. For it is necessary that it should convert all things to itself, and fill all things, and that it should be in no respect deficient, and should not diminish its exuberance.” (ch. 22)



³ *The Sophist*, 254a.

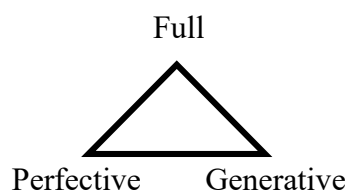
“. . .the desirable of the Gods allures and draws upward all things to the Gods in an ineffable manner by its own proper illuminations . . . And the extension and desire of things towards this is inextinguishable. For all beings aspire after this desirable which is unknown and incomprehensible. Not being able therefore either to know or receive that which they desire, they dance round it . . .”

“But the sufficient is full of boniform power, proceeds to all things, and extends to all beings the gifts of the Gods. For we conceive such a sufficiency as this to be a power pervading and extending to the last of things, extending the unenvying and exuberant will of the Gods, and not abiding in itself, but unically comprehending the super-plenitude, the never-failing, the infinite, and that which is generative of good in the divine hyperaxis. For the desirable being firmly established, and surpassing the whole of things, and arranging all beings about itself, the sufficient begins the progression and multiplication of all good, calls forth that which is primary in the uniform hyperaxis of the desirable, by its own prolific exuberance, and by the beneficent replenishings which pervade to all things . . .”

“All things therefore abide through the desirable of goodness, and generate and proceed into second and third generations through the sufficient. But the third thing, the perfect, is convertive of the whole of things, and circularly collects them to their causes. . . For all things participate of conversion, since the infinity of progression is through this again recalled to its principles; and the perfect is mingled from the desirable and sufficient. . . . The desirable therefore establishes all things, and comprehends them in itself. The sufficient excites them into progressions and generations. And the perfect consummately leads progressions to conversions and convolutions.” (ch. 22)

Wise

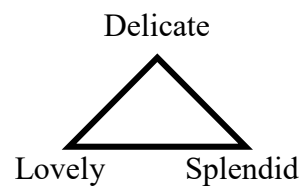
After this, wisdom is allotted the second order, being the intelligence of the Gods, or rather the hyperaxis of their intelligence. For intelligence indeed, is intellectual knowledge; but the wisdom of the Gods is ineffable knowledge, which is united to the object of knowledge and the intelligible union of the Gods. . . . I say then that Diotima in the *Symposium* is of opinion that wisdom is full of that which is known, . . . that which is wise is full and unindigent, and has everything present which it wishes and desires nothing. . . . Socrates, however, in the *Republic* considers that which is generative of truth and intellect, as affording an indication of wisdom . . . For the progression in them [the Gods] is not from an imperfect habit to the perfect; but from a self-perfect hyperaxis a power prolific of inferior natures proceeds. But in the *Theaetetus* he indicates that the perfective of things imperfect, and that which calls forth concealed intelligence in souls, pertains to wisdom. For he says, it compels me to obstetrication, but prevents me from generating. It is evident therefore, from these things, that the genus of wisdom is triadic. Hence it is *full* of being and truth, is *generative* of intellectual truth, and is *perfective* of intellectual natures that are in energy, and itself possesses a stable power. We must admit therefore, that these things pertain to the wisdom of the Gods. For this wisdom is full indeed of divine goodness, generates divine truth, and perfects all things posterior to itself. (ch. 23)



Beautiful

In the next place let us consider the beautiful, what it is, and how it primarily subsists in the Gods. . . . As therefore through the first goodness all the Gods are boniform, and through intelligible wisdom they have a knowledge ineffable, and established above intellect, thus also, I think, through the summit of beauty, everything divine is lovely. For from thence all the Gods derive beauty, and being filled with it, fill the natures posterior to themselves, exciting all things, agitating them with Bacchic fury about the love of themselves, and pouring supernally on all things the divine effluxion of beauty.

Plato also delivers three indications of this beauty, in the *Symposium* indeed, denominating it the delicate;⁴ for the perfect and that which is most blessed, accedes to the beautiful through the participation of goodness. But he thus speaks of it in that dialogue: That which is truly beautiful, is delicate, perfect and most blessed.” One of the indications therefore of the beautiful, is a thing of this kind, viz. the delicate. But we may assume another indication of it from the *Phaedrus*, viz. the splendid. For Plato attributing this to the beautiful says: “It was then that we were permitted to see splendid beauty shining upon us etc.” . . . And at last he says: “But now beauty alone has this allotment to be most splendid and most lovely.” These two things therefore are to be assumed as indications of beauty. Another indication of beauty is this, that it is the object of love, which now also Plato appears to me to have called most lovely. And in many other places he shows that the amatory fury (inspiration) is conversant with the beautiful, defining, and in short, suspending love from the monad of beauty. “For love, says he, is conversant with the beautiful.” (ch. 24)



Because, therefore, beauty converts and moves all things to itself, causes them to energize enthusiastically, and recalls them through love, it is the object of love, being the leader of the whole amatory series walking on the extremities of its feet, and exciting all things to itself through desire and astonishment.

But again because it extends to secondary natures plenitudes from itself, in conjunction with hilarity and divine facility, alluring, enflaming, and elevating all things, and pouring on them illuminations from on high, it is delicate, and is said to be so by Plato. And because it bounds this triad, and covers as with a veil the ineffable union of the Gods, swims as it were on the light of forms, causes intelligible light to shine forth, and announces the occult nature of goodness, it is denominated splendid, lucid and manifest. For the goodness of the Gods is supreme and most united; their wisdom is in a certain respect now parturient with intelligible light, and the first forms; but their beauty is established in the highest forms, is the luminous precursor of divine light, and is the first thing that is apparent to ascending souls, being more splendid and more lovely to the view and to embrace than every luciferous essence, and when it appears is received with astonishment. (ch 24)

⁴ *Abron* – delicate, pretty, dainty, soft, luxurious.