

Three Lectures and Seminars on the Platonic Life

I - The Philosopher in the World

Tim Addey, February 2013

Philosophy – the word is derived from the Greek words *philos* (love) and *sophos* (wisdom) – is the love of wisdom: taken in this its simplest sense, philosophy is one of the most fundamental of all human activities and drives – for every human being faced with a choice of actions, takes what he or she considers to be the wisest choice and rejects that which is deemed to be the most foolish. All our activities – with the exception of the most basic life-sustaining functions of the body – are brought before the mysterious judge that sits within us, to be judged according to the universal criterion of goodness. Insofar as this process is done well we move towards goodness and a state of well-being; but to the degree that our judgement is amiss, so we fall away from goodness and lose our well-being. But what kind of creature is the human being – one so locked into the need for the cultivation of wisdom?

I'd like to take some time to consider this question – a knowledge of the self is absolutely necessary to the philosophic and Platonic life: in ancient Greece the oracular centre of Apollo at Delphi was famous, for it was here that questions of importance were asked so that the poor and the wealthy, the high and the low, the individual and the city-state, could be guided towards wise actions. As each entered the sanctuary of the god, seeking for the truth of things, they were greeted by a sign at its entrance: "Know Thyself" it said, simply and directly. Why? Because all insights gained through the oracle would come to nothing if the enquirer was unable to connect the content of the insight with him or herself. That dictum, profoundly embraced by the philosophic tradition, has echoed down the centuries and still stands before us as we enter the sanctuary of philosophy. The oracle warned Oedipus that he would kill his father and sleep with his mother: he fled in horror from his home towards Thebes – little knowing that he had been adopted and that far from removing himself from a proximity to his parents, he was going towards the very place where his real mother and

father lived and ruled: the tragedy that followed rested entirely upon the failure of the prince – otherwise good and intelligent – to know himself.

Every human being stepping into the world has before him or herself a part to play in a drama: whether that drama is a tragedy or not just as clearly depends upon how well the self is known. Indeed, the whole human race living and acting upon this earth also has a collective drama to enact – and the message is still the same: unless we as a global society know what we are, what kind of creatures we truly are, we are likely to find out only through tragedy.

So finding an answer to the question, "what kind of creatures are we that require the art and science of philosophy to move towards the good" is worth whatever effort we are able to give it.

The first truth which must strike us is one that I have already touched upon – we are aware that we have an interior self, which desires the good, which attempts to judge things and actions according to the criterion of goodness, and which persists as our more or less conscious self from moment to moment. It is this interior self which governs, or at least attempts to govern, and it is the more external body which is governed: under extreme circumstances, the governing self sacrifices the body and the external life for the sake of what it considers to be some instance of goodness. This internal self was known by the Greeks as the psyche – literally the breath or spirit which animated the otherwise inanimate matter of the body. It is this psyche – normally translated as 'soul' – which is the source of movement to the body – it is the active pursuer of goodness.

From here onwards I will refer to the inner self as the soul, although the word comes with a great deal of baggage which – at least for the present – I hope we can leave to one side: all we need to agree upon is that this soul has some kind of being upon which our individuality rests and that it brings life and movement to the body: further, that the life and movement that arises from its intrinsic nature are impelled by an inherent desire for the good, and that its attempts to judge what is good and what is not good arise from a profound relationship to truth. We can build up a clearer picture of its essential attributes as we go along, and in so doing we can see how someone who consciously cultivates wisdom – the philosopher – deals with the life lived by the soul when a citizen of the earth.

This said, we can see why the Platonic tradition sees the soul as having various faculties: one might be called the desiring nature, another the knowing nature. The desiring nature, or appetitive faculty pursues goodness – or at least what it takes to be goodness – through an instinctive attraction to whatever appears beautiful. The knowing nature, or rational faculty, pursues goodness through an investigation of its truth – it looks beyond appearance, examining the immaterial causes behind specific effects. Sitting between these two faculties is a third which harmonises their sometimes differing directives: it runs with the appetitive faculty, desiring good and rejecting the less-than-good, but listens attentively to the guidance of the rational faculty: it especially rejoices in good order. In Greek this third faculty was called the *thumos* – translated by some as 'the spirited part' and by others as 'anger' (although one has to be careful to understand anger used in this way, as that which reacts against inordination).

The Platonic view of the soul as a tripartite whole is presented in a number of ways: for example, in the *Republic*, as analogous to a city-state in which there are governors (the rational faculty), the merchant-producers (the appetitive faculty), and the auxiliaries (the faculty of anger). The governors govern by cultivating reason; the auxiliaries attend to the governors and ensure that the city is not subverted by either internal or external threats to good order; the productive class produce by pursuing goods. Another presentation is given in the *Phaedrus*, where Socrates suggests the soul is like a winged chariot directed by a charioteer (the rational faculty) and drawn by two horses, one unruly (the appetitive faculty) the other attentive to the charioteer's reins (the *thumos*, or ordinative faculty).

Now each of these faculties of the soul has a perfection which contributes to the perfection of the soul in itself, and the Platonic tradition has much to say about the perfection of these powers which it denominates *arête* – that is to say virtue or excellence. The excellence of the rational, guiding faculty is wisdom, through which we discern that which is *really* good from that which only *appears* to be good, and through which, also, we can adapt universal truths to particular situations and problems. The excellence of the ordinating faculty of anger is fortitude through which we can remain impassive and stable amidst the storms and trials of life, enabling us to hold true to the directions of the rational faculty. The excellence of the desiring or appetitive faculty is temperance, through which our pursuit of beauty and goodness remains within its proper limits – it especially allows the multitude of differing

desires that are a natural part of life to be gathered together under the more unitive direction of the rational faculty.

These three virtues, or excellences – wisdom, fortitude and temperance – are joined by a fourth, justice, in order to constitute the primary virtues of the Platonic tradition. Justice is the excellence whereby a community arranges the best exchange of merits – each taking and giving according to the nature of the individuals within the community. In the case of the soul, the various faculties stand as the individuals each playing their part in the working of the whole.

The soul's exercise of its powers can be directed outwards into the world, inwards towards itself, or upwards, so to speak, towards its immaterial causes: in each case the four virtues are necessary to this exercise, if the powers are to bear fruit. When directed outwards they are called the civic or political virtues (for the city or polis represented the sphere in which the rational arts and activities of humankind were collected together); when directed inwards they are called the purifying or cathartic virtues (for the inward movement purifies the soul from its over-attachment to the material world); and when directed upwards they are called the contemplative or theoretic virtues (for the causes from which we descend are only to be seen in the purest contemplation).

This then, is the internal constitution of the human soul, with its powers and excellences: but what is the place of such a creature in the world? If justice enables parts to contribute to the whole, what kind of life should we be living in order to both give and take goodness in the universe?

This lecture is especially concerned with the civic or political virtues – or how the lover of wisdom extends the goodness inherent in his or her soul into the material world – but I think we should be aware that the division of the virtues into their hierarchical levels is, to a certain extent, made only for us to be able to think about them clearly. They are not isolated from each other in practice: we cannot exercise our powers in one direction only – the attempt to act with political virtue requires some exercise of the cathartic and theoretic virtues; and so with each level – even the contemplative virtues require an embodied soul to have made peace with the world, and to have acted with justice, as far as possible. Nevertheless, the political virtues are a good starting place for us as embodied souls to

begin: since nothing arises from chance, each of us finds ourselves in this world at this time and in this place for a reason – and our attempt to find what is good in these circumstances leads us towards our much-desired wisdom.

This search for what is good although a universal amongst humankind, is by no means easy: as Plato says in the Republic:

“the idea of the good is the greatest discipline: only with the understanding of this can we exercise justice and every other excellence of our true selves . . . and yet we do not sufficiently know that idea, and that without this knowledge, though we understood every thing else in the highest degree, you know that it is of no advantage to us: . . . This then is that which every soul pursues, and for the sake of this it does every thing, affirming that it is something, but being dubious, and unable to comprehend sufficiently what it is, and to possess the same stable belief respecting it as of other things. . .” (505a)

A key to the discovery of the good and especially what is our own appropriate good, as I have said, lies in the Delphic exhortation "know thyself" – for the good and the beautiful are profoundly allied to each other, and Plotinus tells us that,¹ "Whenever we are beautiful, we become so from the possession of our own nature alone: but we are base, when we are precipitated into an inferior nature. So that we are beautiful when we know, but base when we are ignorant of ourselves." So the part we play in the world – as citizens of the universe in which goodnesses are exchanged according to our particular nature, and our particular circumstances – can only be played well, if we understand what we are.

Now I have suggested that a distinctive human characteristic is that we make our various choices in life according to reason – even if we don't always do so, it least we have the potential to choose according to reason. What does this tell us of our nature? We can, I think, divide reality into two states – that made up of things that are in a continual flux, an ever-moving condition of coming into and going out of being; and, on the other hand, that made up of things which are unchanging, in a stable condition of just *being*. Reason, of course, enables us to think about the changing world but at the core of reason must lie that stable reality of things which *are*. Although our concepts change, the ideas with which we try and align those concepts do not – the idea of sameness, of twoness, of unity, of being, of truth, of permanence,

¹ Ennead V, viii, 13.

do not: if they did and sameness became difference, or twoness became threeness, all of our thinking would be subverted, and the whole universe would vanish from existence – all science would be utterly unreliable, all experience would be worthless, and language would lose its value, for no sentence could be completed if the very ideas upon which it was started changed before its completion. This means that the soul – the reasoning self – must have some kinship with that unchanging world of things which just *are*; for nothing can contact things which are truly unlike. We don't expect the ear to hear light, nor do we expect the eye to see sounds – each organ of sense has been literally in-formed by its appropriate physical stimulus, and each has formed a kinship with the right part of the vibrational spectrum: so it is with the soul – it has been informed by the unchanging ideas of the eternal. This, in brief, is the Platonic view of the immortality of the soul from a gnostic point of view.

It also sees the soul as immortal from a vivific or life-giving point of view: as Plotinus says,² "Soul is the principle of motion, with which it supplies other things, itself moving itself, and imparting life to the animated body. But it possesses life from itself which it will never lose, because it is derived from itself." In other words, the soul supplies both life and motion to the moving universe from itself by its very nature, in the just the same way that fire supplies heat from its own nature, and although fire and heat are not identical, nevertheless fire can never be denuded of heat.

The soul, then, sits between the worlds of mortality and immortality, between the worlds of constant flux and that of eternal stability, having some kinship with both. Our dealings with the mundane world in which forms or ideas are embodied and made manifest in particular instances, must be based just upon this view of ourselves. We should neither think of ourselves as eternal unchanging forms, nor as temporary conglomerations of matter consuming and being consumed in a restless ocean of forces beyond our control.

In the light of this nature, we need to look at our primary powers and virtues:

The power of reason

The Platonic tradition sees this power in a much wider and deeper way that commonly accepted nowadays – we have seen that reason must have some real contact with eternal ideas: the cold-hearted rationalism of modern western civilisation is a pale shadow of true reason which reaches up into true intuition and conducts the soul to the very portals of beautiful truths. To bring reason to bear upon the problems of life is not to reduce

² Ennead IV, vii, 9.

everything to countable quantity – far from it – but to understand things in terms of meaning and quality, and from there to touch upon the very essence of things. Only by understanding the world philosophically, can we hope to live in a happy state: as Plato says in his Seventh Epistle,³ “The human race will not be liberated from evils, till either those who that philosophize with rectitude and truth obtain the government of political affairs, or those that govern in cites from a certain divine allotment, truly philosophize.”

Wisdom is the virtue which brings reason to perfection: in the mundane sphere truths are always clothed in matter of one kind or another, and material instantiations often have an attractive or repulsive power over the body and its impulses – wisdom at this level prevents the reason from accepting the judgments arising from those impulses without a deeper consideration. Although political or civic wisdom lends a certain detachment from such impulses, 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 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,⁴ “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.” And while the full import of this does not become manifest until we reach the contemplative virtues, even at a mundane level, our attempt to bring reason to bear on the outer world is itself a means of adorning the soul with beautiful reasons.

The power of anger (or the ordinating faculty)

In the mundane world there is a constant movement of things coming into and going out of existence – this is entirely natural, and could not be otherwise. Our task is to nurture what is good, and to let go what is no longer good, once it has reached the end of its proper life: fortitude is required in both instances, for effort is required both to take hold and to let go.

³ Epistle VII, 326b

⁴ Abstin. from Animal Food.

The ordinating faculty works well when it is attentive to reason, and when it does not adopt the appetitive faculty's propensity to pursue and hold onto everything which appears to be good and beautiful. One particular problem the soul has is in forming the right relationship to the body – for as Porphyry tells us, the soul is present with body, not by location but by sympathy and alliance: when we begin to identify ourselves as the body rather than the soul, then the fear of death becomes a mighty force, and one that distorts our proper life. A cursory examination of how far nations will go when they perceive a danger to their existence will, perhaps, act as a warning to us as individuals – the reaction of the United States to the threat posed by terrorists some twelve years ago in which 3,000 people were killed has resulted in perhaps 100 times that number of casualties created by the so-called "war on terror." I am not suggesting that nothing should have been done in response to the attack, but I wonder if the reaction was not characterised more by a negative appetency of the desire nature rather than a measured response from a reasoned need to re-ordinate matters: a test, perhaps, in such situations is to ask whether any particular response has extended or diminished the manifestation of justice within the sphere of the responder. Fortitude, says Porphyry,⁵ arises when we do not fear a departure from body as into something void: this hold true for the collective as much as for the individual – over-attachment to bodily forms more often than not distorts the life of the soul and brings about injustice.

If the self is the soul, and the soul is immortal, then fortitude and not fearing death is the wise response to perceived dangers: it was this view which allowed Socrates to affirm that⁶ "nothing can harm a good man either in life or after death."

The appetitive or desiring faculty

When functioning properly the faculty of desire provides the motive force necessary to life: this is true both in the mundane sphere and the more interior planes – the desire for the good is the universal dance which all beings perform about the mysterious One. But who steps beautifully around the One and the Good? "Not those who dance well," wrote

⁵ Sentences, 3.

⁶ The Apology 41d.

Hermeas,⁷ "but those who live well through the whole of the present existence, elegantly arranging their life, and dancing in symphony with the universe."

Temperance is the virtue that leads the desire nature to perfection, for this virtue tempers the excessive, and allows the often conflicting desires of the mundane life to be brought together in a purposeful harmony under the leadership of reason.

It is, perhaps, this faculty with which the modern world has so much difficulty: a worldview has emerged over recent centuries which questions the primacy of reason both in the creation of the universe and in the essence of the human self. The world is seen as a random collection of separated individuals and species, all trying to assert their own desires in conflict with others; every human being is identified as a consumer at the feeding trough of goodnesses, seeking for the momentary satisfaction of pleasure between his or her more or less chance birth, and equally chance-derived death. The traditional view of the soul subscribed to by Platonists amongst many other great religions and philosophies – that it is an essentially intellectual or spiritual being playing a part in the material world according to divine decree – has been largely abandoned. The result is that goodness is identified solely with pleasure which in turn is measured by consumption. As a reasoning animal, of course, the human being has an advantage over irrational animals in this fight, and the world is seen as a ball of earth to be exploited. The need to temper desires is neglected and considered to be foolish.

But if we return to our view that that each of us is an immortal albeit passing from mortal body to mortal body, then it is clear that our goodness is not one that can be measured in terms of mere material pleasure: rather it must be concerned with a recovery of a consciousness of the self as an intellectual⁸ being. Happiness, according to Aristotle's ethics, stems from the unfolding of virtue, and the highest happiness from the unfolding of the highest virtue that a creature may manifest. Likewise, the contribution of the part to the whole is really only valuable if it is contributing its best and most intrinsic merits to the community. And what may be said of each individual human being may also be said of the entire human race: as a species of rational, immortal creatures, our contribution to the universe as a whole is a very different thing to what is generally being offered at present. Temperance of desires leads to the best desires being activated and all others taking a lesser place in the life. Only in this way will our mundane lives be truly useful to the whole, and only in this way will we find our own happiness.

⁷ In his *Commentary on the Phaedrus*.

⁸ Or in modern terminology, a *spiritual* being.

The three faculties as a harmonious whole

As we can see, each faculty has a distinct but linked part to play – to govern, to ordinate, to be governed. But since each produces some particular good for the soul, and in turn receives the others' goods, there must be a fair exchange: all this is enabled by the virtue of justice.

And so when we look at the running of every community – the family, the village, the city, the nation, the global society, the universe – justice must be the hallmark of each if they are to move towards the good.

In the *Republic*, this is the very reason why the city, when it educates its best citizens to a level at which the Good itself may be contemplated, requires them to involve themselves in the direction of the city, rather than stay in a undisturbed state of contemplation. Socrates says,⁹

“Yet it was not with an eye to this that we established the city; to have any one tribe in it remarkably happy beyond the rest; but that the whole city might be in the happiest condition; for we judged, that in such an one we should most especially find justice, and injustice in the city the worst established: and that, upon thoroughly examining these, we should determine what we have for some time been in search of. Now then, as I imagine, we are forming a happy state, not selecting some few persons to make them alone happy; but are establishing the universal happiness of the whole. . .”

There is no finer example of this than that of Socrates himself, who spent his adult life bringing to his fellow citizens' attention the importance of the examined life, as unpopular as that might have made him with many who desired to be able to get on with the business of acquisition without disturbance.

The soul as a unity

There is an especial sense in which the virtue of the soul itself is wisdom – perhaps a slightly different wisdom to that of the rational faculty – for beyond the direction of a particular life,

⁹ Republic 519e

is the restoration of the soul to its divine paradigm. That is, perhaps, better dealt with the lectures of the next few weeks, but we could consider two little extracts from the dialogues of Plato which point us towards the ultimate purpose which lies behind the tasks which befall us in our mundane circumstances.

In the *Symposium*, Diotima instructed Socrates according to the mysteries of love, which pass from a love of the beauty of body, upwards through the beauty of good conduct, that of the arts and sciences, to the one science of beauty, and eventually to a vision of the Beautiful itself. The life mundane is an integral part of the path – and while we may feel that we may be called to a higher life than that of the daily round, yet behind every action great or small is the call of the Beautiful, and says Diotima,¹⁰

“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.”

The philosophy of Plato – so often misrepresented as being dualistic and disparaging of the mundane life – requires of us that we play our part in every sphere of life. As Diotima relates the accomplishments of embodied humans she says, “By far the most excellent and beautiful part of wisdom is that which is conversant in the founding and well-ordering of cities and other habitations of men.” It is the lessons learnt in this that will draw from us the wisdom inherent in our souls.

The second extract is from the *Republic*, a dialogue in which Plato seeks to show how the good and just life is worthwhile for its own sake without thought of future rewards – an idea which we as embodied souls gliding down the stream of time should always bear in mind – but having related the wonderful myth of Er in which the great choices of life are made both here and in between lives, Socrates says,¹¹

¹⁰ *Symposium*, 212a.

¹¹ *Rep.* 618c

"And hence this of all things is most to be studied, in what manner every one of us, omitting other disciplines, shall become an inquirer and learner in this study, if, by any means, he be able to learn and find out who will make him expert and intelligent to discern a good life, and a bad; and to choose everywhere, and at all times, the best of what is possible, considering all the things now mentioned, both compounded and separated from one another, what they are with respect to the virtue of life. And to understand what good or evil beauty operates when mixed with poverty, or riches, and with this or the other habit of soul; and what is effected by noble and ignoble descent, by privacy, and by public station, by strength and weakness, docility and indocility, and everything else of the kind which naturally pertains to the soul, and likewise of what is acquired, when blended one with another; so as to be able from all these things to compute, and, having an eye to the nature of the soul, to comprehend both the worse and the better life, pronouncing that to be the worse which shall lead the soul to become more unjust, and that to be the better life which shall lead it to become more just, and to dismiss every other consideration. For we have seen, that in life, and in death, this is the best choice. But it is necessary that a man should have this opinion firm as an adamant in him, when he departs to Hades, that there also he may be unmoved by riches, or any such evils, and may not, falling into tyrannies, and other such practices, do many and incurable mischiefs, and himself suffer still greater: but may know how to choose always the middle life, as to these things, and to shun the extremes on either hand, both in this life as far as is possible, and in the whole of hereafter. For thus man becomes most happy."

