

The philosopher and the objects of her search

The nature of the philosopher and her path through life is, of course, a recurring theme in the writings of Plato: a typical example of this is found in the *Republic*, book 5. Here Socrates and Glauco discuss the difference between true philosophers (“lovers of wisdom”) and “lovers of sights and sounds” –

In this manner then, said I, I separate these, and set apart those you now mentioned, the lovers of public shows, of handicrafts, and mechanics; and then apart from these I set those of whom we discourse at present, whom alone we may properly call philosophers.

How do you say? replied he.

The lovers of common stories and of spectacles delight in fine sounds, colours, and figures, and everything which is compounded of these; but the nature of *beauty itself* their dianoëtic part is unable to discern and admire.

Indeed the case is so, said he.

But as to those then who are able to approach this beauty itself, and to behold it as it is in itself, must they not be few in number?

Extremely so.

He then who accounts some things beautiful, but neither knows beauty itself, nor is able to follow if one were to lead him to the knowledge of it, does he seem to you to live in a dream, or to be awake? Consider now, what is it to dream? Is it not this, when a man, whether asleep or awake, imagines the similitude of a thing is not the similitude, but really the thing itself which it resembles?

I for my part would aver, replied he, that such a person is really in a dream.

But what now as to him who judges opposite to this, who understands what beauty is itself, and is able to discern both it and such things as participate of it, and neither deems the participants to be beauty, nor beauty to be the participants? whether does such a one seem to you to live awake, or in a dream?

Perfectly awake, said he.

May we not then properly call this man’s dianoëtic perception, as he really knows, knowledge, but that of the other, opinion, as he only opines? **(476a-d)**

This is an important claim with far-reaching implications: it is not that the lover of sights and sounds does not appreciate beauty, or justice or goodness as it appears in worldly things and actions – but that she does recognize these as they are in themselves, as they are without a covering of matter, so to speak, nor as possessing a power to shape the material world and its contents. But since, according to Plato, the object of the philosophical endeavour is to contemplate these real beings – ideas, or forms – if such things did not

exist philosophy itself would be no more. All that would be left for us is the measuring and testing of the natural world. As Lloyd Gerson writes,

If Plato is right to identify the subject matter of philosophy with the intelligible world, then anyone who denies the existence of this subject matter would be absolutely right to reject a distinct subject matter for philosophy. And insofar as we recognize Platonism as essentially committed to the articulation of the intelligible world and to its causal role in explaining all reality, Platonism itself can hardly be expected to survive the banishment of the subject matter of philosophy as he conceives of it.”

Lloyd Gerson, *Platonism and Naturalism: the Possibility of Philosophy*, p.44-5

The contents of the intelligible world are characterized by a sameness of being – as Timaeus says, “it is necessary to define what that is which is always *real being*...[which is] apprehended by *intelligence* in conjunction with *reason*, since it always subsists according to *same*.” (Timaeus, 27d). But although the aim is to contemplate ideas in themselves, this is by no means an easy task – primarily because our habitual state of consciousness is conditioned by our misunderstanding of the nature of reality. As Plotinus says,¹ “Since all men from their birth employ sense prior to intellect, and are necessarily first conversant with sensibles, some proceeding no farther pass through life, considering these as the first and last of things.” He further says that there are some who lift themselves a little above this condition in varying degrees, but very few who can be said to be in a “divine class of persons”, who,

“through a more excellent power, and with piercing eyes, acutely perceive supernal light, to the vision of which they raise themselves above the clouds and darkness as it were of this lower world, and there abiding despise everything in these regions of sense; being no otherwise delighted with the place which is truly and properly their own, than he who after many wanderings is at length restored to his lawful country.”

Now it is possible to acknowledge that, for example, Beauty is an idea which is participated by many things – material objects, human actions, souls – while being less inclined to allow more apparently abstract characteristics to flow from Platonic ideas. But the apprenticeship of philosophy is largely centred on an increasing sensitivity to real rather than the apparent. We should ask ourselves a fundamental question: what is being? Once settled, we could then consider whether being appears in different states. The Elean Stranger in the *Sophist* (247e) makes this foundational statement: “I say then that whatever possesses any power, whether of doing anything naturally, or of suffering though in the least degree from the vilest thing, and though this takes place but once, - everything of this kind truly *is*. For I define being to be nothing else than power.”

Can we accept this statement? From one point of view it is unarguable, for how can anything that does not exist in any way exercise a power of doing something, or equally, have something done to it? At a basic level, what does not exist is not real (unless we want to make a special case for that which does not exist because it transcends being), and what has no reality cannot cause an effect, nor receive something as an effect of a cause. In Greek the word *on* (on) indicates both *being* and *real* – so that the *ontos on*, frequently used by philosophers, can be translated as the *really real* or as *real being*.

¹ At the opening of Ennead V, 9.

The next question is can we postulate degrees of being or reality? Or is something simply in a state of being or non-being with no middle ground? Perhaps, if power is the mark of being, we may be able to distinguish differences of being: for a start, if something has the power to be what it is entirely within itself, that surely indicates a different status than something which is reliant upon something external to itself.

Proclus, as so often, allows us to pick a careful dialectic path towards an understanding of being in its various forms. In his *Elements of Theology* he discusses the difference between something possessing an active power (“perfect” or “complete”) and a passive power (“imperfect” or “incomplete”). The three propositions which explore this are 77-79:

77. *Everything which is in capacity proceeds from that which is in energy.² And that which is in capacity, proceeds into energy. That also which is in a certain respect in capacity, so far as it is in capacity, is the offspring of that which is in a certain respect in energy. But that which is all things in capacity, proceeds from that which is all things in energy.*

For that which is in capacity is not naturally adapted to produce itself into energy, because it is imperfect. For if being imperfect it should become the cause to itself of perfection, and this in energy, the cause will be more imperfect than that which is produced by it. Hence, that which is in capacity, so far as it is in capacity, will not be the cause to itself of a subsistence in energy.³ For on this hypothesis, so far as it is imperfect, it would be the cause of perfection; since everything which is in capacity, so far as it is in capacity, is imperfect, but that which is in energy is perfect. Hence, if that which was in capacity becomes in energy, it will have its perfection from something else. And this will either be in capacity; but thus again the imperfect will be generative of the perfect; or it will be in energy, and either something else, or this which was in capacity will be that which becomes in energy. But if something else which is in energy produces, operating according to its own peculiarity, it will not by being in capacity make that which is in another to be in energy;⁴ nor will this which is now made to be in energy, unless it becomes this so far as it was in capacity. It remains, therefore, that from that which is in energy, that which is in capacity must be changed into energy.

78. *Every power is either perfect or imperfect.*

For the power which is prolific of energy is perfect. For it makes other things to be perfect through its own energies. That, however, which is perfective of other things is in a greater degree perfect, as being more self-perfect. But the power which is indigent of another that pre-exists in energy (see above in 77), according to which indigence it is something in capacity, is imperfect. For it is indigent of the perfection which is in another, in order that by participating of it, it may become perfect. Hence, such a power as this is of itself imperfect. So that the power of that which is in energy is perfect, being prolific of energy. But the power of that which is in capacity is imperfect, and obtains perfection from the power which is in energy.

79. *Everything which is generated, is generated from a two-fold power.⁵*

For it is requisite that the thing generated should possess aptitude and an imperfect power. And that which makes being in energy that which the thing generated is in capacity, antecedently comprehends a perfect power. For all energy proceeds from inherent power. For if that which

² Being “in capacity” refers to potential, while that which is “in energy” refers to something which is actual active.

³ It is a primary axiom that that which is a true cause is always greater than its effect.

⁴ A cause produces a character in its effect which is already in the cause itself.

⁵ *i.e.* As the Greek Scholiast observes in the margin of this Proposition, from the efficacious cause of that which acts, and the aptitude of that which suffers.

makes did not possess power, how could it energize and produce something else? And if that which is generated did not possess power according to aptitude, how could it be generated? For that which makes or acts, makes or acts in that which is able to suffer [i.e. to receive passively], but not in any casual thing, and which is not naturally adapted to suffer from the agent.

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We might see from this why Plato in the *Timaeus* (at 27d) frames his cosmic analysis in terms of that which is always being, and without generation, and that which is generated but never truly *is*. Everything in the intelligible order has a perfect power, and does not stand in need of another's perfective power,⁶ while everything in the order of time always has an element, at least, of imperfect power passive to some other causal power.

Matter itself is always empty of active power – that is to say matter bereft of form – and so insofar as anything is material or dependent upon the existence of material for its unfoldment it must in some respect be in capacity.

Anyone perceiving a generated nature is, for this reason, seeing only a part of what seems to be and, on more careful inspection, a measure of its privation (for it includes an as yet unfulfilled capacity). The “lovers of sights and sounds” are trapped in a world of becoming, while the philosopher longs to open the eye of intellect - that eye worth saving more than 10,000 eyes, by which alone truth is discovered. For as *Timaeus* says (27d), real being “is apprehended by intellect in conjunction with reason.”

When we perceive with opinion and sense we may see, for example, *difference* manifested in a circle which is different from a square, or in a horse which is different from an ant, but in neither instance is the full range of *difference* seen. Only by closing the outward eye and exploring the real being of *difference* with that inner eye can we approach it in all its universal power.

Every characteristic arising in many sense objects but traced by intellect and reason back to an immaterial singularity is derived from a real being – and the more commonplace that characteristic is, the more powerful that real being is.

⁶ Of course from our limited perspective, it might seem that any Platonic form is in need of materiality for its manifestation, but we must remember that anything truly eternal has not only its essence complete, but also its full activity. All the possible animals that could arise from the idea of animal is already present with it, as Proclus makes clear in his 79th proposition – that which makes “antecedently comprehends a perfect power.” All intelligibles have both their essence and the activities present in eternity.