

## Inspiration in the Platonic Tradition

The general view is that Plato holds knowledge – that is knowledge of real being (essentially forms, or ideas) – as the primary goal of philosophy; further that the all-important distinction the philosopher makes is that between opinion and appearance (*doxa*) on the one hand and knowledge (*episteme*) on the other. In the *Sophist*, the main speaker says this concerning knowledge of a philosopher:

Dividing according to Kinds, not taking the identical Form for a different one, nor a different one for the identical one – is that not dialectical knowledge?

Yes.

And then, one who is able to see one Idea throughout many, where each one is separate, and many Ideas, different from each other, encompassed externally by one; and again, one connected to a unity through many wholes, and many separately defined. This means knowing how to distinguish the Kinds, that is, how they are associated and how they are not.<sup>1</sup>

Plato in his *Seventh Letter* summarizes the art of co-operative philosophy which leads from outer perceptions to inner truths in these terms:

. . . after agitating together the several names and reasons, and sensible perceptions of these things, confuting in a benevolent manner, and employing questions and answers without envy, then striving as much as is possible to human power, prudence and intellect about each of these will scarcely at length shine forth.<sup>2</sup>

The philosopher has, it seems, a clear path to enlightenment: patiently working his or her way towards wisdom through reason and arriving at that real being which abides eternal and unchanging behind the flux of time:

. . . the philosopher who by means of reasoning always staying near to the Idea of Being, is difficult to see because that region is so bright.<sup>3</sup>

But although by far the greater part of the texts of all Plato's dialogues addresses the cultivation of dialectical reasoning, emphasizing its superiority to mere opinion, there are dialogues where such reasoning is shown to be inferior to what is called *divine inspiration*. The most explicit expression of this is to be found in the *Phaedrus*. Here Socrates has finished a major speech praising the rational approach to relationships, but has heard his guiding voice saying that he ought not to leave until he has reversed his position – that is to say, to praise divine inspiration and the resultant state of mind (which he here calls “mania” or “insanity”) above reason:

But now the greatest goods are produced for us through mania, and are assigned to us by a divine gift. For the predicting prophetess at Delphi, and the priestesses in Dodona, have, when insane procured many advantages, both privately and publicly, to the Greeks; but when they have been in a prudent state, they have been the cause of very trifling benefits, or indeed of none at all. . . .

Further he says a second form of mania is the inspiration through which certain priests reveal how diseases due to a misalignment with the divine universe and which cause a human to labour in life “discover a solution to his evils.” Thirdly, there is the inspiration of the Muses:

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<sup>1</sup> *Sophist* 253d.

<sup>2</sup> *Seventh Letter* 344b.

<sup>3</sup> *Sophist* 254a.

But he who approaches to the poetic gates without the mania of the Muses, persuading himself that he can become a poet, in a manner perfectly sufficient from [human] art alone, will, both as to himself and his poetry, be imperfect; since the poetry which is produced by [rational] prudence vanishes before that which is the progeny of mania.

He will later introduce a fourth form of inspiration, or madness – that of Eros – by which a lover brings the greatest good both to him or herself, and to the beloved:

This enthusiasm, therefore, is of all enthusiasms the best, and is composed from the best, both to the possessor and the participant: and he who is under the influence of this mania when he loves beautiful objects, is denominated a *lover*.

The power of Eros is particularly the subject of the *Symposium*: Socrates in his major speech relates how the priestess Diotima initiated him into the mysteries of Love which, she says, rise from the love of body, through that of good conduct, the arts, the sciences and eventually to the moment of revelation:

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.<sup>4</sup>

Less well-known than the *Phaedrus* and the *Symposium* is a shorter dialogue, the *Ion*, in which the titular character discusses with Socrates his experience as a rhapsode when handling the works of Homer. He claims that whereas when dealing with other poets he remains in an ordinary condition, when performing Homeric poems he becomes aroused and profoundly altered. The difference, Socrates suggests, may be explained in this way:

That you are able to discourse well concerning Homer is not owing to any art of which you are master; nor do you explain or illustrate him, as I said before, upon the principles or from the rules of [human] art; but from a divine power, acting upon you, and impelling you: a power resembling that which acts in the stone, called by Euripides the magnet, but known commonly by the name of the loadstone. For this stone does not only attract iron rings, but imparts to those rings the power of doing that very thing which itself does, enabling them to attract other rings of iron. So that sometimes may be seen a very long series of iron rings, depending, as in a chain, one from another. But from that stone, at the head of them, is derived the virtue which operates in them all. In the same manner, the Muse, inspiring, moves men herself through her divine impulse. From these men, thus inspired, others, catching the sacred power, form a chain of divine enthusiasts.

In other words, Ion is one of the iron rings, so to speak, charged with a power from Homer's contact with the Muses which is passing down through him in some mysterious way, as divine inspiration: a divine power greater than a merely human one. The only problem for Socrates is that he worries that if Ion is unable to fully ground that power through intellect and reason, it may lead him (and his audience) to think that he knows more than he actually does, especially once the inspiration has passed.

The philosophers who followed Plato pondered the implications of this proposed model where sense sits underneath opinion, which in turn sits under discursive reason, which then arrives at intuitive intellect, all of which is surpassed by divine inspiration. The first four steps are

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<sup>4</sup> *Symposium* 212a.

outlined in the *Republic*'s 'divided line', but the state beyond these requires us to explore the architecture of the soul.

The human soul is able to extend itself towards body, projecting powers which enable it to govern and direct the embodied life; but in itself it is an immaterial essence, which is both gnostic and life-bearing so that it knows and chooses with reference to itself as it makes its way through the path of time; reverting, however to its source, it is able to touch upon the world of ideas which themselves are above time; finally, Platonism considers that these ideas the images of which lie hidden in the depth of the soul are themselves sprung from the Gods – the unities which produce the real and immutable beings which we know as ideas. For this reason the soul itself has a unity which the Platonists call “the one of the soul” or, “the flower of intellect” – Hermeas says it is “the most unified of the entire soul, that wants what is good for all things and always devotes itself to the Gods and is ready to bring about whatever they wish.”<sup>5</sup> We might think that this “one” is entirely detached from the rest of the soul’s powers and activities but Hermeas continues:

So the inspiration that is primarily and properly speaking and truly from the Gods occurs in connection with the one of the soul that is above discursive thought and above the intellect in it [the soul] – a one this is at other times [in the absence of inspiration] like someone who is exhausted and asleep. But when this one is illuminated, the whole of life – the intellect, discursive thought, the irrational – is illuminated and a reflection of the inspiration is granted all the way [down] to the body itself.<sup>6</sup>

The fact that inspiration appears at the lower levels of human activity should not lead us to suppose that inspiration occurs because of material causes. Hermeas cautions “those who attribute inspiration to bodily constitutions or favourable atmospheric conditions or to different types of exhalations or to the suitability of the times or places of the actions of the bodies that revolve in the heaven are talking about contributory and material causes of the phenomenon rather than its causes properly speaking.”<sup>7</sup> In reality “inspiration properly speaking and in the true sense is when this one of the soul [that is] above intellect is awakened to the Gods and receives inspiration from that source.”<sup>8</sup>

Proclus also addresses these matters in his treatise *On Providence*, although in this work he is more concerned with, firstly, showing how the Gods themselves know in a providential manner, and secondly what our own relationship is with providence and what way, therefore, we may be divinized. He writes:

After all these modes of knowledge, I wish you . . . to assume a fifth intelligence; in so doing, following Plato, and prior to Plato theologians, who are accustomed to celebrate a knowledge which is above intellect, and have divulged this as a truly divine mania. But they say that this is obtained by exciting the profundity of the soul, which is no longer intellectual, and adapting it to union with *The One*. For all things are known by the similar, that which is sensible by sense, that which is the object of science by science, that which is intelligible by intellect, and that which is one by that which is characterized by unity. For the soul indeed being intellectual knows herself, and knows whatever she understands, by contact, as we have before observed. But being superintelligent, she is ignorant both of herself and of the objects of knowledge, and being near to *The One*, she loves quiet, having shut up her knowledge, becoming mute, and being silent with internal silence. For how can she be adjacent to the most ineffable of all things, except by laying

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<sup>5</sup> Hermeas, *Commentary on the Phaedrus*, 88, 28.

<sup>6</sup> Hermeas, *Commentary on the Phaedrus*, 89, 15.

<sup>7</sup> Hermeas, *Commentary on the Phaedrus*, 90, 7.

<sup>8</sup> Hermeas, *Commentary on the Phaedrus*, 89, 34.

asleep the garrulous matter that is in her? Hence, she must become one that she may see *The One*, or rather that she may not see *The One*. For seeing, she will see that which is intellectual, and not that which is above intellect, and will intellectually perceive a certain one, and not *The One Itself*. He, my friend, who energizes according to this most divine energy of the soul, trusting solely to himself, viz. to the flower of his intellect, causing himself to be at rest not from external, but from internal motions, and becoming a God as far as it is possible for the soul to be so, will understand how the Gods alone ineffably know all things, according to *The One* of themselves.<sup>9</sup>

The Platonic tradition does not pit rationality and inspiration against each other, but sees them as part of a greater upward-tending art. Proclus in his *Commentary on the Republic*, for example, says,

Homer, speaking from divine inspiration and possession by the Muses, teaches us about matters divine and human. Plato establishes these same things by the irrefutable methods of knowledge, and through his demonstration makes them clearer for the majority of us, who need such assistance for understanding truly existent things.<sup>10</sup>

He says, further, that the best form of poetry,

. . . is the highest and full of divine goods. It establishes the soul in the very causes of being and draws together by some ineffable unification that which is filled and that which fills. It stretches out, immaterially and without contact, that which is filled towards illumination, and it calls forth that which fills to share its light: “as the channels are mingled together [the highest life] perfects the works of imperishable fire.”<sup>11</sup> [This type of poetry] establishes the lesser part as a whole in the power of the greater, and brings it about that only the more divine is active, while the lesser part is subordinated and conceals its own character in the greater. So this is a madness greater than self-control, to say it briefly, and is defined in accordance with the divine measure itself . . . this type of [of poetry] fills the soul with proportion.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Proclus, *On Providence, Fate and What is up to us*, 31-32.

<sup>10</sup> Proclus, *On the Republic*, Essay 6, 159.1

<sup>11</sup> *Chaldean Oracles*, 66 (Majercik),

<sup>12</sup> Proclus, *On the Republic*, Essay 6, 178, 10.