

Plato: A Forerunner¹

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Plato (428–348 BCE) was greatly influenced by Pythagoras who lived roughly seven generations before him. He also admired his teacher Socrates, and in the *Dialogues* many of Plato's own teachings are attributed to Socrates. In turn, Plato's most famous student at the academy in Athens was Aristotle. Plato's work was extended by the Neoplatonists at the beginning of the Common Era. It would continue to dominate western philosophy for another 1,000 years, and several Platonic and Neoplatonic revivals have occurred since that time. As we shall see, important echoes of Platonic philosophy are found in the teachings of none other than the Tibetan Master Djwhal Khul. In many ways Plato laid the groundwork for modern esoteric philosophy.

Plato's Contribution

Plato made significant contributions to urban studies, political theory, and metaphysics (although this last term was coined by Aristotle). He studied linguistics and took a particular interest in the significance of names. People's names are important symbols of identity and selfhood, and divine names conveyed to ancient cultures the power of invocation. In the lesser-known dialogue, *Cratylus*, Socrates contends that "true" names, whose sounds capture the entity's essence, were assigned by ancient "legislators" who had special insights.² Perhaps the reference to these legislators reflected a dim memory of a time when masters walked the earth. The Egyptians and Hebrews also believed that the names of things, people, and gods were not arbitrary but had intrinsic "rightness." It is not known whether this rightness was believed to extend to all languages; but the belief was strong in the case of the sacred languages of Greek, Hebrew, and Sanskrit.

In several areas Plato built upon the work of earlier Greek philosophers. A good example is the theory of the four elements. Thales had spoken of the element water, Anaximenes of air, Xenophanes of earth and water, and Heraclitus of fire. Empedocles (490–430 BCE) synthesized their work by theorizing that the world was composed of all four.³ The same elements were also known to the ancient Egyptians and the Vedic Hindus. The water element has always been associated with formlessness, and many ancient cultures conjectured that the world had emerged from a primal watery chaos. In contrast, "earth"—that is solid matter—is capable of being molded into any desired form. Today's chemists scoff at the naivety of a four-element system, compared, say, with Mendeleev's table of elements. But it is important to remember that, to the ancients, "elements" were not chemical substances but rather states of matter; they were also archetypes of profound significance and vitality. The four elements survive in modern esoteric teachings, particularly in classifications of the elemental kingdoms.

Plato related the elements to four of the five regular "Platonic" solids: the cube, icosahedron, octahedron, and tetrahedron. He assigned the fifth regular solid, the dodecahedron, to the cosmos as a whole.⁴ It is interesting to note that the 20th-century artist Salvador Dali has a dodecahedron hovering over Christ in his painting "Sacrament of the Last Supper." The relationship between the elements and the Platonic solids is echoed in geometric symmetries discussed in modern physics and chemistry.

The Soul as Archetype

One of Plato's most significant contributions was his doctrine of Forms. A Form (*eidos*) is a divine idea or archetype, the eternal and immutable reality lying outside space and time.⁵ The physical object that we see and touch is merely a transient, imperfect copy of the Form. Form was to Plato what Number had been to Pythagoras. According to Platonic principles knowledge is to be acquired not through em-

pirical observation of the manifest world but by discovery and contemplation of the Forms that overshadow it. This deductive approach to knowledge is still referred to as “Platonic,” even in fields far removed from philosophy.

An important application of the theory of Forms was to the soul. Plato considered the soul (*psyche*) to be the Form that overshadows the physical body, the source of intelligence, harmony, beauty, and meaning. In *Timaeus*, we read that God “put intelligence in soul, and soul in body, that he might be the creator of a work which was by nature fairest and best.” Also, the soul “partakes of reason and harmony, and being made by the best of intellectual and everlasting natures, is the best of things created.”⁶

The Platonic soul is capable of long-term growth, but relative to the body it serves as the perfect archetype. It is preexistent, descending into the body to impart life and then ascending to its rightful home after death. The soul is immortal, but successive incarnations provide opportunities for experience in a physical body. “Resurrection” only occurs in a reincarnational context, and Plato rejected any doctrine of body–soul indivisibility, on the lines proposed by Aristotle or later by Thomas Aquinas or Benedict de Spinoza.

Plato contended that rebirth provides a means for the soul to accrue knowledge beyond what could be acquired in a single lifetime. He even cited philosophers’ great knowledge to support a belief in reincarnation; for example, in *Phaedo*, Cebes is made to say:

Your favorite doctrine, Socrates, that knowledge is simply recollection, if true, also necessarily implies a previous time in which we learned that which we now recollect. But this would be impossible unless our soul was in some place before existing in the human form; here, then, is another argument of the soul's immortality.⁷

Plato’s work influenced Carl Jung (1875–1961). Jung spoke of the *anima* and *animus* as archetypes residing in the unconscious mind: the feminine anima in a man’s and the masculine animus in a woman’s. While reluctant to identify the anima or animus as a soul, Jung does give it a certain independence and life-giving power:

The anima is not the soul in the dogmatic sense, not an anima rationalis, which is a philosophical conception, but a natural archetype... It is something that lives of itself, that makes us live.⁸

The Soul as Mediator

Pythagorean influence is conspicuous in Plato’s belief that the cosmos is ordered by harmonious relationships between pairs of opposites. Plato tells us in *Timaeus* that God created the “body of the universe” from fire and earth, but that “two things cannot be rightly put together”—that is, put together harmoniously—“without a third; there must be some bond of union between them.”⁹ However, in an interesting subtlety, because the universe is “solid” this bond requires not one but *two* intervening elements: air and water.

In *Timaeus* the four elements are mutually related by mathematical proportions which turn out to be the ratios: 1, 4/3, 3/2, and 2. These are precisely the ratios that form the basis of the Pythagorean musical scale: the tonic, subdominant (major fourth), dominant (major fifth), and octave or diapason. In his famed experiments on the monochord, Pythagoras had shown that dividing the length of a vibrating string in integer fractions, like 2/3 or 3/4, produced pleasing tonal intervals. The experiments contributed to music theory, but the monochord also served as a powerful metaphor for the universe—or perhaps a more accurate term would be *analogy* (*analogia*), a word that comes from the same root as “Logos.”¹⁰ If the “vibrating string” linked spirit and matter or heaven and earth, the vibration was not just ordered, but harmonious, meaningful, and redemptive. Pythagoras performed the experiments, but it was Plato who recorded and interpreted them.

In due course, the monochord analogy would be extended to the human constitution. Plato was particularly interested in the soul's role as a mediator. The soul was placed in harmonious relationship between the eternal, undifferentiated spirit and differentiated matter:

Out of the indivisible and unchangeable, and also out of that which is divisible and has to do with material bodies, [God] compounded a third and intermediate kind of essence [the soul], partaking of the nature of the same and of the other, and this compound he placed accordingly in a mean between the indivisible, and the divisible and material.¹¹

Correspondence between the human soul and the world soul, the *anima mundi*, was a popular theme in Greek thought; man was the *microcosm*, and the universe the *macrocosm*. A similar theme would emerge in Judaism and Christianity in the notion that man is made in the image and likeness of God. Human souls, according to Plato, were made from the same ingredients as the world soul:

[O]nce more into the cup in which he had previously mingled the soul of the universe, [God] poured the remains of the elements, and mingled them in much the same manner... And having made it he divided the whole mixture into souls equal in number to the stars, and assigned each soul to a star.¹²

The comment that each soul is assigned to a star is worthy of special note and will be referred to later. In the Tibetan's teachings also, soul mediates between spirit and matter at both the macro- and micro-levels:

The soul, macrocosmic and microcosmic, universal and human, is that entity which is brought into being when the spirit aspect and the matter aspect are related to each other... The soul is the mediator between this duality; it is the middle principle, the link between God and His form.¹³

Furthermore, "soul" is a concept with far-reaching, cosmic relevance:

The term "soul," with its major attribute of enlightenment, includes the *anima mundi*, the animal soul, the human soul, and that consummating point of light which we regard as the "overshadowing" soul of humanity. It is an aspect of the divine manifestation to which that great Son of God refers when (as Shri Krishna) He remarks, "Having pervaded this entire universe with a fragment of Myself, I remain." That fragment is the soul of all things. That soul brings light and spreads enlightenment.¹⁴

The Tibetan may not require body, soul, and spirit to conform to precise mathematical proportions, but like Plato he too invokes the musical analogy:

God created by the power of sound, and the "music of the spheres" holds all life in being (note that phrase). The soul on its tiny scale can create "the new man" by the power also of sound, and a musical rhythm can usefully be imposed upon the personality life by the disciple... Let love and light and music enter more definitely into your daily life. Spurn not this practical suggestion, but give your mind the opportunity, through the massed sound of music, to break down the personality-imposed barriers between the free flow of soul life and you.¹⁵

Indeed, man's spiritual evolution involves the gradual establishment of harmony:

At first, there is dissonance and discord... and a fight between the Higher and the Lower. But as time progresses, and later with the aid of the Master, harmony of colour and tone is produced (a synonymous matter), until eventually you will have the basic note of matter, the major third of the aligned Personality, the dominant fifth of the [soul], followed by the full chord of the Monad or Spirit.¹⁶

It is interesting that the Tibetan mentions the major third, which, under Pythagorean and just-intonation tuning, gave early musicians so much trouble because of discord with the tonic-dominant combination. Composers steered clear of the major third until the late Renaissance period when tempered scales be-

gan to appear.¹⁷ Tonal temperament was condemned by many preachers as an affront to God who created in integer ratios, but in this respect perhaps it helped fight the prevailing “dissonance and discord.”

In the Tibetan’s teachings the human soul occupies a middle ground between the personality—the aggregate of the physical, emotional, and mental natures—and the divine spark, or monad. But it is also a mediator in another sense, linking higher beings with the mineral, vegetable, and animal realms and taking on redemptive responsibilities with respect to the lower kingdoms:

[F]or the soul of mankind is not only an entity linking spirit and matter, and mediating between monad and personality, but the soul of humanity has a unique function to perform in mediating between the higher three kingdoms in nature and the lower three.¹⁸

The notion of the Logos as mediator between heaven and earth, and a correspondence with the human soul, were discernable in Plato’s Greece but developed further in Hellenic Christianity where the Logos became identified with the Christ. The Tibetan, too, recognizes the logocic correspondence: “Therefore the soul is another name for the Christ principle, whether in nature or in man.”¹⁹ The soul is the inner Christ.

The Threefold Soul

The notion of a third element mediating between a pair of opposites grew into the Platonic belief in an essential “threeness” in the soul and indeed in creation generally. Not only did the soul complete the human trinity of body, soul, and spirit, but Plato identified three functions within the soul itself, listing them variously as existence, sameness, and difference;²⁰ the source of intelligence, harmony, and beauty;²¹ and “the desirous,” the “spirited,” and the “rational.”²² Again invoking the musical analogy, Plato urged that these last three be brought into mutual harmony:

He must have put all three parts in tune within him, highest and lowest and middle, exactly like the three chief notes of a scale, and any other intervals between that there may be; he must have bound all these together and made himself completely one out of many, temperate and concordant.²³

Plato’s soul was also the source of intelligence, harmony, and beauty. God, we read

put intelligence in soul, and soul in body, that he might be the creator of a work which was by nature fairest and best... [the soul] partakes of reason and harmony, and being made by the best of intellectual and everlasting natures, is the best of things created.²⁴

Note that Plato’s soul-triplicity is functional in nature. The Tibetan also regards the soul as a functional triplicity, consisting of knowledge, love and sacrifice.²⁵ But, in addition, he explores its structural complexity; the human soul emerges, as a “middle principle” between the animal soul and an overshadowing divine soul:

The soul is the perceiving entity produced through the union of Father-Spirit and Mother-Matter... This it is which enables him eventually to discover that this soul in him is dual and that part of him responds to the animal soul and part of him recognises his divine soul.²⁶

The “animal soul” relates to the physical nature that we share with the animal kingdom and which may form the basis of Jung’s collective unconscious. We learn elsewhere that the “divine soul” is the solar angel, referred to in various traditions as the “angel of the presence,” “lord of the flame,” “holy guardian angel,” or “higher genius.” The angel has served as our long-time spiritual mentor,²⁷ a service involving great sacrifice:

The great solar Angel... is literally [man’s] divine ancestor, the “Watcher” Who, through long cycles of incarnation, has poured Himself out in sacrifice in order that man might BE.²⁸

Perhaps the solar angels are related to the stars, in *Timaeus*, to which God assigned human souls for protection and guidance. But more specifically, Plato speaks of individual guardians: “We are told that when each person dies, the guardian spirit who was allotted to him in life proceeds to lead him to... the underworld.”²⁹

Tension between Body and Soul

Plato regarded man as the pride of creation. In *Timaeus*, God “made the soul in origin and excellence prior to and older than the body, to be the ruler and mistress, of whom the body was to be the subject.”³⁰ Referring to the soul as “mistress” was common among Greeks, alluding to the feminine gender of *psyche*. The Hebrew *ruach* and the Latin *anima* were also feminine.

As Plato matures, mediation and harmony between spirit and matter give way to an increasing sense of dualism. In his later works he begins to draw a sharp contrast between the qualities of body and soul:

[T]he soul is in the very likeness of the divine, and immortal, and intelligible, and uniform, and indissoluble, and unchangeable; and the body is in the very likeness of the human, and mortal, and unintelligible, and multiform, and dissoluble, and changeable.³¹

Plato sees the body more and more as a burden, even an embarrassment, to a thinking person. In *Phaedo*, Socrates who faces execution later in the day laments:

[W]hile we are in the body, and while the soul is mingled with this mass of evil, our desire will not be satisfied, and our desire is of the truth. For the body is a source of endless trouble... [T]he soul when using the body... is then dragged by the body into the region of the changeable, and wanders and is confused; the world spins round her, and she is like a drunkard when under their influence.³²

The best that can be done is to focus on purity and harmony, and abstain from “pleasures and desires and pains and fears” until that blessed moment—soon to come for Socrates—when the physical body is cast off: “And then the foolishness of the body will be cleared away and we shall be pure and hold converse with other pure souls, and know of ourselves the clear light everywhere; and this is surely the light of truth.”³³

The Tibetan avoids such pessimistic dualism but still acknowledges a struggle between the higher and lower natures:

Human consciousness... [is] neither purely animal nor entirely divine, but fluctuating between the two stages, thus making the human kingdom the great battleground between the pairs of opposites, between the urge or pull of spirit and the lure of matter or mother-nature, and between that called the lower self and the spiritual man.³⁴

The soul does not necessarily evolve at the expense of the lower nature. Rather, the lower nature can be redeemed and used as a basis for the expression of soul life through service; as the Tibetan notes:

Service is a life demonstration. It is a soul urge, and is as much an evolutionary impetus of the soul as the urge to self-preservation or to the reproduction of the species is a demonstration of the animal soul. This is a statement of importance. It is a soul instinct, if we may use such an inadequate expression and is, therefore, innate and peculiar to soul unfoldment. It is the outstanding characteristic of the soul, just as desire is the outstanding characteristic of the lower nature.³⁵

Differences in terminology must be noted. For Plato “Form” was the perfect archetype, while for the Tibetan “form” refers to its imperfect copy in the three worlds. Nevertheless, we see a clear statement that the soul’s function is to build the lower forms necessary for spirit to dwell in the world of matter and to impel the entity toward perfection. The soul, in the Tibetan’s words,

brings the form into being, which enables it to develop and grow so as to house more adequately the indwelling life, and which drives all God's creatures forward along the path of evolution... towards an eventual goal and a glorious consummation.³⁶

Whereas Plato's soul is the agent of proportion and order, the Tibetan's soul is the seat of consciousness. The closest Plato comes to a recognition of consciousness is a reference to "intelligence." The Tibetan's concept of consciousness goes much further; "Throughout the universe," he states, "it is the soul which is the conscious, sensitive theme of the divine plan."³⁷ Consciousness, in fact, results from the very penetration of matter by spirit:

Therefore the soul, through these qualities and characteristics, manifests as conscious response to matter, for the qualities are brought into being through the interplay of the pairs of opposites, spirit and matter, and their effect upon each other. This is the basis of consciousness.³⁸

Despite the encroaching dualism, *Phaedo* also records an interesting discussion on whether harmony can survive destruction of the musical instrument; the consensus was that it could, implying that spiritual harmony remains with the soul after physical death. The soul mediates between spirit and matter, not just in one lifetime but in many, advancing toward ultimate harmony and perfection. We find here an interesting parallel to the Tibetan's words:

It is at this point that the doctrine of reincarnation becomes of supreme value; the disciple begins to institute those conditions, to create those forms and build those vehicles which, in another life, will prove more suitable for soul control and more adequate instruments with which to carry forward the perfecting process which the soul demands.³⁹

Concluding Remarks

In important areas Plato's writings anticipate the teachings of the Master Djwhal Khul. There is no evidence that the Tibetan—or for that matter Alice Bailey—intentionally used Greek philosophy as a model. In Bailey's 24 books there are occasional references to Greek philosophers but scarcely any mention of their teachings. Nevertheless, we find striking parallels between the Tibetan's work and Plato's. Examination of their respective works yields valuable insights into the development of esoteric philosophy from antiquity to the present, and to examine the ideas of these two teachers separated by 2,300 years is useful and rewarding.

The main areas of similarity are the notion of the soul as mediator between spirit and matter; music as a metaphor for the establishment of harmony between pairs of opposites; correspondences between the individual human and world souls; the immortality of the soul; reincarnation as a basis for the gradual approach to perfection; and the soul's threefold functional and/or structural nature.

Plato and the Tibetan both invoked the concept of resolution of pairs of opposites, and they both viewed the soul—macrocosmic and microcosmic—as the mediator between the ultimate pairs of opposites: heaven and earth, spirit and matter. Interestingly, in serving as Djwhal Khul's amanuensis, Alice Bailey saw herself as an intermediary between the masters and humanity.⁴⁰

Plato and the Tibetan both recognized that musical tones provide an apt metaphor for the soul's relationship with spirit and matter and the outcome of its existence. However, their views diverged on what that outcome might be; Plato's soul primarily brought order, whereas the Tibetan's produces *consciousness*—indeed the expansion of consciousness. The Tibetan develops the theory of the soul's nature in greater depth, emphasizing its strong ethical qualities. The soul is the driving force behind spiritual growth, group consciousness, and service.

The Tibetan does not support Plato's view that the body should be "cast off" as soon as possible because of it "foolishness" and impurity. However, they adopt similar eschatological positions involving the soul's essential divinity as well as its preexistence, survival, and reincarnation. Both viewed the soul as a triplicity, but they disagreed as to the precise nature of the three elements; Plato's soul-triplicity was

primarily functional, whereas the Tibetan's exhibits both functional and structural features. The Tibetan teaches that the soul embraces the animal soul, which we share with the lower kingdoms; the human soul, *per se*; and an overshadowing divine soul. This divine soul is the solar angel: interestingly, a kind of reincarnation of Plato's "guardian spirit."

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- ¹ An earlier version of this work was presented to the American Academy of Religion, March 2003.
- ² Plato. *Cratylus*. (Trans: Benjamin Jowett). Internet Classics Archive.
- ³ Empedocles' life ended in an unsuccessful attempt to prove his divinity by flinging himself into the volcano on Mount Etna.
- ⁴ Both the Hindus and Aristotle added a fifth element, completing the correspondence with the five regular polyhedra.
- ⁵ The theory of Forms was developed in several of Plato's books. For discussions of the theory see: Richard Kraut (ed.). *The Cambridge Companion to Plato*. Cambridge University Press, 1992.
- ⁶ Plato. *Timaeus*, 36E. (Transl: Benjamin Jowett). Internet Classics Archive. See also: Peter Kalkavage. *Plato's Timaeus*. Focus Books, 2001.
- ⁷ Plato. *Phaedo*, 72E-73A. (Transl: G. M. A. Grube.) *Plato: Five Dialogues*. Hackett, 1981.
- ⁸ Carl G. Jung. *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*. Princeton University Press, 1959, p. 27.
- ⁹ *Timeus*, 31C.
- ¹⁰ *Logos* has rich meanings, including "ratio" "proportion," and "harmony."
- ¹¹ *Timeus*, 35A. In this and following quotations, square brackets, [], indicate interpolations or substitutions made by the present author. Any parentheses, (), are in the originals.
- ¹² *Timaeus*, 41E.
- ¹³ Alice A. Bailey. *Treatise on White Magic*. Lucis Publishing Company, 1934, pp. 34-35.
- ¹⁴ Alice A. Bailey. *Discipleship in the New Age, II*. Lucis Publishing Company, 1955, p. 158
- ¹⁵ *Discipleship in the New Age, II*, pp. 699-700
- ¹⁶ Alice A. Bailey. *Letters on Occult Meditation*. Lucis Publishing Company, 1922, p. 62.
- ¹⁷ See for example: Stuart Isacoff. *Temperament*. Alfred Knopf, 2001, pp. 97-118.
- ¹⁸ *Treatise on White Magic*, p. 47.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 35.
- ²⁰ Plato. *Commentary*, II, 298. Internet Classics Archive.
- ²¹ *Timaeus*, 37A.
- ²² Plato. *Republic*, Book IV, 439E-441D. (Transl: W. H. D. Rouse.) Mentor Books, 1956, pp. 240-241.
- ²³ *Republic*, Book IV, 443D-F. In Benjamin Jowett's translation we find "temperate and perfectly adjusted nature."
- ²⁴ *Timeus*, 37A.
- ²⁵ *Treatise on White Magic*, p. 396.
- ²⁶ *Ibid*, p. 37.
- ²⁷ For a detailed exploration of the Tibetan's teachings on these topics, see: John Nash. "The Solar Angel." *The Beacon*, March/April 2001, pp. 7-14. Also: "The Human Soul." *The Beacon*, January/February 2003, pp. 6-10, and March/April 2003, pp. 6-10.
- ²⁸ Alice A. Bailey. *Initiation, Human and Solar*. Lucis Publishing Company, 1922, p. 115. Emphasis in original.
- ²⁹ *Phaedo*, 107d.
- ³⁰ *Timeus*, 34C.
- ³¹ *Phaedo*. 80B.
- ³² *Phaedo*, 66B.
- ³³ *Phaedo*, 67A.
- ³⁴ *Treatise on White Magic, op. cit.*, p. 38.
- ³⁵ Alice A. Bailey. *Esoteric Psychology II*. Lucis Publishing Company, 1942, p. 125.
- ³⁶ *Treatise on White Magic, op. cit.*, p. 35.
- ³⁷ Alice A. Bailey. *Esoteric Astrology*. Lucis Publishing Company, 1951, p. 295.
- ³⁸ *Treatise on White Magic, op. cit.*, p. 36.
- ³⁹ *Esoteric Healing, op. cit.*, p. 193.

⁴⁰ Alice A. Bailey. *The Unfinished Autobiography*. Lucis Publishing Company, 1951, p. 14.