THE MEANING OF LIFE, OR, PHILOSOPHY’S GREATEST HITS, ACCORDING TO DAVE

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Before proceeding, I want to make it clear that I do not have knowledge (or personal experience) of what follows, but mere opinion. In my opinion, there are three philosophers who are worthy of much study: Plato, Plotinus, and Buddha. I believe that these three philosophers have experienced the same ultimate principle of the universe (also referred to below as The Source of All Things and in other ways), and so it is worth finding out if we can ourselves duplicate this experience. In short, these men may have found the ultimate truth for which philosophy currently strives. [Please note that I am not claiming either that no other philosophers are worth reading or studying, or that no other philosophers have experienced anything like what these three philosophers appear to have experienced on my reading of their material.]

I. PLATO:

Here is something that I think is true of Plato’s thought that most lecturers of Plato fail to emphasize or sometimes even mention: Plato thinks that we can have a single experience of the ultimate entity of the universe that tells us what exists (i.e., answers the ultimate question of metaphysics), and this experience gives us ultimate knowledge (i.e., answers that we can know and what we can know, the ultimate questions of epistemology), and tells us how we should live (i.e., answers the ultimate question of ethics). Here’s a quote from the Republic, where Plato says what this experience tells you:

... in the region of the known the last thing to be seen and hardly seen is the Idea of Good, and that when seen it must point us to the conclusion that this is indeed the cause for all things of all that is right and beautiful, giving birth in the visible world to light, and the author of light and itself in the intelligible world being the authentic source of truth and reason, and that anyone who is to act wisely in private or public must have caught sight of this.

I concur, he said, so far as I am able. (Republic VII 517a-c; adapted from Shorey;
In the Phaedo, note that Socrates agrees with what Simmias says about having first hand experience of divine things. Simmias says:

> I think, Socrates, as perhaps you do yourself, that it is either impossible or very difficult to acquire clear knowledge about these matters in this life. And yet he is a weakling who does not test in every way what is said about them and persevere until he is worn out by studying them on every side. For he must do one of two things; either he must learn or discover the truth about these matters, or if that is impossible, he must take whatever human doctrine is best and hardest to disprove and, embarking upon it as upon a raft, sail upon it through life in the midst of dangers, unless he can sail upon some stronger vessel, some divine revelation, and make his voyage more safely and securely . . . .

> And Socrates replied: “Probably, my friend, you are right.” (Phaedo 85c-e; adapted from Fowler’s translation)

Here Socrates is agreeing with Simmias that we must “learn or discover the truth” for ourselves, if we cannot have “some divine revelation.” This passage may help us make sense of the claim made in the Meno that virtue is a gift from the Gods, because Plato does not say that everyone will see the Idea of the Good (or, as Plato alternatively refers to it: “the Good Itself,” or “Form of the Good”). Most everyone can know the Form of the Good, if they apply much effort to its search. Here’s more about the Form of the Good:

This reality, then, that gives their truth to the objects of knowledge and the power of knowing to the knower, you must say is the Idea of Good, and you must conceive It as being the cause of knowledge, and of truth in so far as known. Yet fair as they both are, knowledge and truth, in supposing It to be something fairer still than these you will think rightly of It. But as for knowledge and truth, even as in our illustration it is right to deem light and vision sunlike, but never to think that they are the sun, so here it is right to consider these two their counterparts, as being like the Good or boniform, but to think that either of them is the Good is not right. Still higher honor belongs to the possession and habit of the Good. (Republic VI 508d7-9a10; adapted from Shorey)

And Beauty:

> “This, my dear Socrates,” said the stranger of Mantinea, ”is that life above all others which man should live, in the contemplation of beauty absolute; a beauty which if you once beheld, you would see not to be after the measure of gold, and garments, and fair boys and youths, whose presence now entrances you; and you and many a one would be content to live seeing them only and conversing with them without meat or drink, if that were possible -- you only want to look at them and to be with them.” (Symposium 210e-211d)

This experience is difficult: Plato says in a Letter to Dionysius that this experience is very difficult to achieve:
You, however, declared to me in the garden, under the laurels, that you had formed this notion yourself and that it was a discovery of your own; and I made answer that if it was plain to you that this was so, you would have saved me from a long discourse. I said, however, that I had never met with any other person who had made this discovery; on the contrary most of the trouble I had was about this very problem. So then, after you had either, as is probable, got the true solution from someone else, or had possibly (by Heaven's favor) hit on it yourself, you fancied you had a firm grip on the proofs of it, and so you omitted to make them fast; thus your view of the truth sways now this way, now that, round about the apparent object; whereas the true object is wholly different.

Nor are you alone in this experience; on the contrary, there has never yet been anyone, I assure you, who has not suffered the same confusion at the beginning, when he first learnt this doctrine from me; and they all overcome it with difficulty, one man having more trouble and another less, but scarcely a single one of them escapes with but little. (Letter II 312e-313c)

The difficulty and rarity (mentioned elsewhere by Plato) help to explain why it is not surprising that many people both are not familiar with this experience and also why many people have not had this experience.

The Good is ‘beyond being’: Plato says that the Form of the Good is beyond “essence,” which I take to imply that the Good is beyond being. Here is what he says:

You would say, would you not, that the sun is only the author of visibility in all visible things, but of generation and nourishment and growth, though he himself is not generation?

Certainly.

In like manner the good may be said to be not only the author of knowledge to all things known, but of their being and essence, and yet the good is not essence, but far exceeds essence in dignity and power. (Republic VI 509b)

This feature makes Plato’s view one of only three other philosophical views that hold that the highest principle or the Source of All Things is beyond being – that is, the highest principle does not exist as a thing, but is beyond it.

The experience is ineffable: He also says that he cannot really explain this ultimate source in words, so he implies that this experience of the ultimate nature of the universe is something that you cannot just verbally share with someone else and have them really understand the nature of the universe from simply hearing you talk about it. He says:

No, sweet sirs, let us not at present ask what is the actual nature of the good, for to reach what is now in my thoughts would be an effort too great for me. But of the child of the good who is likest him, I would fain speak, if I could be sure that you wished to hear --otherwise, not.

By all means, he said, tell us about the child, and you shall remain in our debt for the account of the parent.
I do indeed wish, I replied, that I could pay, and you receive, the account of the parent, and not, as now, of the offspring only; take, however, this latter by way of interest, and at the same time have a care that I do not render a false account, although I have no intention of deceiving you.

Yes, we will take all the care that we can: proceed. (*Republic VI* 506d-507c)

Dear Glaucon, I said, you will not be able to follow me here, though I would do my best, and you should behold not an image only but the absolute truth, according to my notion. Whether what I told you would or would not have been a reality I cannot venture to say; but you would have seen something like reality; of that I am confident.

Doubtless, he replied.

But I must also remind you, that the power of dialectic alone can reveal this, and only to one who is a disciple of the previous sciences.

Of that assertion you may be as confident as of the last. (*Republic VII* 533a)

Beware, however, lest these doctrines be ever divulged to uneducated people. For there are hardly any doctrines, I believe, which sound more absurd than these to the vulgar, or, on the other hand, more admirable and inspired to men of fine disposition. For it is through being repeated and listened to frequently for many years that these doctrines are refined at length, like gold, with prolonged labor. But listen now to the most remarkable result of all. Quite a number of men there are who have listened to these doctrines -- men capable of learning and capable also of holding them in mind and judging them by all sorts of tests -- and who have been hearers of mine for no less than thirty years and are now quite old; and these men now declare that the doctrines that they once held to be most incredible appear to them now the most credible, and what they then held most credible now appears the opposite. So, bearing this in mind, have a care lest one day you should repent of what has now been divulged improperly. The greatest safeguard is to avoid writing and to learn by heart; for it is not possible that what is written down should not get divulged. For this reason I myself have never yet written anything on these subjects, and no treatise by Plato exists or will exist, but those which now bear his name belong to a Socrates become fair and young. Fare thee well, and give me credence; and now, to begin with, read this letter over repeatedly and then burn it up. So much, then, for that. (*Letter II* 314a-c)

But thus much I can certainly declare concerning all these writers, or prospective writers, who claim to know the subjects which I seriously study, whether as hearers of mine or of other teachers, or from their own discoveries; it is impossible, in my judgement at least, that these men should understand anything about this subject. There does not exist, nor will there ever exist, any treatise of mine dealing therewith. For it does not at all admit of verbal expression like other studies, but, as a result of continued application to the subject itself and communion therewith, it is brought to birth in the soul on a sudden, as light that is kindled by a leaping spark, and thereafter it nourishes itself. Notwithstanding, of thus much I am certain, that the best statement of these doctrines in writing or in speech would be my own statement; and further, that if they should be badly stated in writing, it is I who would be the person most deeply pained. And if I had thought that these subjects ought to be fully stated in writing or in speech
to the public, what nobler action could I have performed in my life than that of writing what is of great benefit to mankind and bringing forth to the light for all men the nature of reality? But were I to undertake this task it would not, as I think, prove a good thing for men, save for some few who are able to discover the truth themselves with but little instruction . . . (Letter VII 341b-e)

But the father and maker of all this universe is past finding out, and even if we found him, to tell of him to all men would be impossible. (Timaeus 28c)

I read Plato (on the whole, from these and other similar passages) as saying that he has had an experience that most people have not had, but could have if they were so interested. He is saying knowledge is possible not because it is theoretically possible, or fits in well with the rest of his theory, or because he wants there to be knowledge, but because he actually has knowledge! But put yourself in Plato’s shoes: How would you explain this to anyone else were you to have this kind of experience? It is certainly impressive the way in which Plato lays out the earlier arguments in what are commonly known as the Socratic dialogues. What I am most impressed with in Plato is that he never really veers from anything that he says, and tells us exactly the way he sees the world as being. Other philosophers are not always this clear, whether or not you agree with what they’re saying. It is also remarkable that others have claimed to have this experience that Plato seems to claim to have had (Besides Plotinus and Buddha (see below), I should mention Porphyry, Plotinus’ student).

Here is one last quote from Plato, on the greatest happiness for man, which at its end shows that Plato probably had the Golden Mean in mind before Aristotle:

And here, my dear Glaucon, is the supreme peril of our human state; and therefore the utmost care should be taken. Let each one of us leave every other kind of knowledge and seek and follow one thing only, if peradventure he may be able to learn and may find some one who will make him able to learn and discern between good and evil, and so to choose always and everywhere the better life as he has opportunity. He should consider the bearing of all these things which have been mentioned severally and collectively upon virtue; he should know what the effect of beauty is when combined with poverty or wealth in a particular soul, and what are the good and evil consequences of noble and humble birth, of private and public station, of strength and weakness, of cleverness and dullness, and of all the soul, and the operation of them when conjoined; he will then look at the nature of the soul, and from the consideration of all these qualities he will be able to determine which is the better and which is the worse; and so he will choose, giving the name of evil to the life which will make his soul more unjust, and good to the life which will make his soul more just; all else he will disregard. For we have seen and know that this is the best choice both in life and after death. A man must take with him into the world below an adamantine faith in truth and right, that there too he may be undazzled by the desire of wealth or the other allurements of evil, lest, coming upon tyrannies and similar villainies, he do irremediable wrongs to others and suffer yet worse himself; but let him know how to choose the mean and avoid the extremes on either side, as far as possible, not only in this life but in all that which is to come. For this is the way of happiness. (Republic X 618b-9b)
II. PLOTINUS:

Plotinus lived from 205 – 270 C.E., and was born and raised in Egypt. So he lived roughly 550 years after Plato. He got really interested in philosophy and searched far and wide for a teacher at the age of twenty-six. He found Ammonius Saccas (of whom very little is known, and he wrote nothing) and studied under him for awhile. Then he left for Rome and taught there for many years. A wealthy Roman Senator was so impressed with what Plotinus said and believed, that he gave away all of his wealth and studied with Plotinus. Though he never married, many people left their children in his care upon their death – so he took care of many children. He wrote the Enneads, and often wrote that he was only a follower of Plato and added nothing new to what Plato said. Because of this, he is known as a Neo-Platonist. (Incidentally, though this is a small matter, it perturbs me when people write “Neoplatonism,” when other views are referred to as “Neo-Aristotelianism” and “Neo-Kantianism” – we should respect Plato in like manner.)

Scholars today tend to think that Plotinus has his own theory that has Platonic elements but is not the same theory. In the Enneads, Plotinus writes that he had an experience of the One (his name of the Source of All Things) and that the One is beyond being and not being, similar to what Plato says about the Form of the Good. He spent the rest of his writing discussing the Soul, “Intellect” (or the region of Plato’s Forms), and the One. He says that the One is infinite in power, but should not really be named, because it is unlimited and cannot be limited in any way.

Here are two quotes from Plotinus from his treatise on Beauty:

"Therefore we must ascend again towards the Good, the desired of every Soul. Anyone that has seen This, knows what I intend when I say that it is beautiful. Even the desire of it is to be desired as a Good. To attain it is for those that will take the upward path, who will set all their forces towards it, who will divest themselves of all that we have put on in our descent: so, to those that approach the Holy Celebrations of the Mysteries, there are appointed purifications and the laying aside of the garments worn before, and the entry in nakedness- until, passing, on the upward way, all that is other than the God, each in the solitude of himself shall behold that solitary dwelling Existence, the Apart, the Unmingled, the Pure, that from Which all things depend, for Which all look and live and act and know, the Source of Life and of Intellec and of Being.

And one that shall know this vision- with what passion of love shall he not be seized, with what pang of desire, what longing to be molten into one with This, what wondering delight! If he that has never seen this Being must hunger for It as for all his welfare, he that has known must love and reverence It as the very Beauty; he will be flooded with awe and gladness, stricken by a salutary terror; he loves with a veritable love, with sharp desire; all other loves than this he must despise, and disdain all that once seemed fair. (Beauty I.6.7)"

"Withdraw into yourself and look. And if you do not find yourself beautiful yet, act as does the creator of a statue that is to be made beautiful: he cuts away here, he smoothes there, he makes this line lighter, this other purer, until a lovely face has grown upon his work. So do you also: cut away all that is excessive, straighten all that is crooked, bring light to all that is overcast, labour to make all one glow of beauty and..."
never cease chiselling your statue, until there shall shine out on you from it the godlike splendour of virtue, until you shall see the perfect goodness surely established in the stainless shrine.

When you know that you have become this perfect work, when you are self-gathered in the purity of your being, nothing now remaining that can shatter that inner unity, nothing from without clinging to the authentic man, when you find yourself wholly true to your essential nature, wholly that only veritable Light which is not measured by space, not narrowed to any circumscribed form nor again diffused as a thing void of term, but ever unmeasurable as something greater than all measure and more than all quantity- when you perceive that you have grown to this, you are now become very vision: now call up all your confidence, strike forward yet a step- you need a guide no longer- strain, and see.

This is the only eye that sees the mighty Beauty. If the eye that adventures the vision be dimmed by vice, impure, or weak, and unable in its cowardly blenching to see the uttermost brightness, then it sees nothing even though another point to what lies plain to sight before it. To any vision must be brought an eye adapted to what is to be seen, and having some likeness to it. Never did eye see the sun unless it had first become sunlike, and never can the soul have vision of the First Beauty unless itself be beautiful. (On Beauty I.6.9; translated by Stephen MacKenna)

III. BUDDHA:

Buddha’s life (c. 560-480 B.C.E.): Buddha was born a prince into a royal family. His father was presented with a prophesy that said that he would lose his son to the world outside of royalty, so his father had him under constant surveillance and provided him with every pleasure that you can imagine. Women, fine clothes and food – whatever he wanted he got. He was protected in a controlled environment – his father made sure that he did not see any dead, sick, or old people, because he wanted him to be really happy so he had no reason to leave the palace. One day on a parade, much to the chagrin of his father, Buddha saw an old man by accident and it started a flood of questions: What is old age, what is sickness, what is death? Will these things happen to me? What is suffering? And from there, he said that he was going to devote his life to finding the end of suffering. He became an ascetic and fasted and meditated and ate almost nothing even when he wasn’t fasting. No baths or any bodily pleasures. But he found that this was just as extreme as his previous lifestyle was too lavish, so he decided that the Middle path was the best path to pursue: eating, drinking and taking care of the body in moderation. After meditating some more years, he came to the point where he resolved not to get up from meditation or eat until he achieved enlightenment, and in that spot, he did.

He said that there were four Noble Truths:

1. That there is suffering; rebirth is suffering, wanting something and not getting it, getting something you did not want is suffering, etc.
2. The cause of suffering is our desire or craving, a clinging to our possessions, persons, or life itself
3. There is freedom from the cessation of suffering which comes from eliminating thirst, and
4. The way to freedom is the Middle Way or Noble Eightfold Path:
   1. Right View
   2. Right Intention
   3. Right Effort
   4. Right Action
   5. Right Livelihood
   6. Right Speech
   7. Right Mindfulness
   8. Right Meditation

When I compare what the Buddha purportedly said with what Plato and Plotinus wrote, Buddha focused almost exclusively on the way to achieve enlightenment, whereas Plato and Plotinus spent more of their time laying out exactly everything that exists, exactly what the objects of knowledge are, etc. (See, however, a possible connection between Plato and Plotinus’ metaphysics with Buddha’s below.)

Here is a very impressive thing that I think the Buddha said, which is very handy for (even) philosophers to keep in mind:

A disciple of the Buddha was having a problem accepting the Buddha’s teachings, since he had not declared (among other issues) whether ‘the world is eternal’, ‘the world is not eternal’, ‘the world is finite’, ‘the world is infinite’, ‘the soul is the same as the body’, and ‘the soul is one thing and the body another.’ He threatened to abandon his training if he did not get a good answer to these questions. The Buddha’s answer was this:

Suppose . . . a man were wounded by an arrow thickly smeared with poison, and his friends and companions, his kinsmen and relatives, brought a surgeon to treat him. The man would say, “I will not let the surgeon pull out this arrow until I know the name and clan of the man who wounded me; … until I know whether the man who wounded me was tall or short or of middle height; … until I know whether the man who wounded me was dark or brown or golden-skinned; … until I know whether the man who wounded me lives in such a village or town or city; … until I know whether the bow that wounded me was a long bow or a crossbow; … until I know whether the bowstring that wounded me was fibre or reed or sinew or hemp or bark; … until I know whether the shaft that wounded me was wild or cultivated; ….

All this would still not be known to that man and meanwhile he would die. So too, … if anyone should say thus: “I will not lead the holy life under the Blessed One until the Blessed One declares to me: ‘the world is eternal’, [‘the world is not eternal’, ‘the world is finite’, ‘the world is infinite’, etc.] . . .,” that would still remain undeclared by the [Buddha] and meanwhile the person would die.

. . . Whether there is the view, ‘the world is eternal’ or the view ‘the world is not eternal’, there is birth, there is aging, there is death, there are sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair, the destruction of which I prescribe here and now.” (Culamalunkya Sutta 63, The Shorter Discourse to Malunkyaputta, from The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha, Majjhima Nikaya, trans. Bhikkhu Nanamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi)
Also, to tie the Buddha’s metaphysics to Plato’s and Plotinus’, he says: “Monks, there is a not-born, a not-become, a not-made, a not-compounded.” (Udana, VIII 3) This is what enlightenment or Nirvana is an experience of, which I believe to be equivalent to Plotinus’ One and Plato’s Form of the Good, in my opinion.

In 1897, every major sect of Buddhism (Theravada, Mahayana, Tibetan, Zen, etc.) got together and agreed on 14 tenets of Buddhism, the fourteenth of which went like this:

XIV. Buddhism discourages superstitious credulity. Gautama Buddha taught it to be the duty of a parent to have his child educated in science and literature. He also taught that no one should believe what is spoken by any sage, written in any book, or affirmed by tradition, unless it accords with reason. (From "The Buddhist Catechism," ed. H.S. Olcott, in The Dhammapada with the Udanavarga, ed. Raghavan Iyer, Santa Barbara: The Pythagorean Sangha and Concord Grove Press, p. 479).

Using our reason, instead of accepting what others say as being true without reflection or study seems like a very good method. Other religions (though I do not view Buddha as the founder of a religion; I view him as a philosopher) do not accept scientific conclusions if those conclusions contradict the religions’ teachings. This is an attractive point to Buddhism, but also is in accord with what Plato says about the importance of sciences, such as math, astronomy, etc. In a related quote, in the Mahaparinibbana Sutra (the last days and actions of the Buddha), the Buddha is said to have said:

Therefore, Ananda, you should live as islands unto yourselves, being your own refuge, with no one else as your refuge, with the Dhamma as an island, with the Dhamma as your refuge, with no other refuge. And how does a monk live as an island unto himself, … with no other refuge? Here, Ananda, a monk abides contemplating the body as body, earnestly, clearly aware, mindful and having put away all hankering and fretting for the world, and likewise with regard to feelings, mind and mind-objects. That, Ananda, is how a monk lives as an island unto himself, … with no other refuge. And those who now in my time or afterwards live thus, they will become the highest, if they are desirous of learning. (Mahaparinibbana Sutra, Sutra 16.2.26 (or Pali: ii.101-102), trans. Maurice Walshe, from The Long Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Digha Nikaya, Somerville: Wisdom Publications, 1987, rep. 1995.)

Buddhism is a system of thought that says that you contain within yourself the answers to what life is about, and that you should decide for yourself about its truth (or lack thereof). This is not a dogmatic system of thought that says, in effect, “It’s my way or the highway.” More likely, it seems that with this “island” quotation, the Buddha in effect gives a “disclaimer” not found in any other religion; he says that with his Noble Eightfold Path, he is only trying to give you a way to achieve enlightenment, but if you do not think that it works, you should try whatever method you can, implying both that there is more than one way to achieve it, and also that it’s arriving at the goal that really matters (not the method). In other words, the Buddha is not saying and does not say that his way is the only way.
IV. SIMILARITIES BETWEEN PLATO, PLOTINUS AND BUDDHA:

Plato, Plotinus, and Buddha each describe the same experience, from what I can tell. In Plotinus’ case, he says that he is adding nothing really to Plato’s view, and that he believes that Plato is right. All three of them hold that there is reincarnation, and Plato and Plotinus both assert the existence of Forms or essences. Buddha does not say anything about our having souls or there being Forms, but he wanted people to focus on the path, and not focus on the “answers,” “results,” or “conclusions” of the experience. Buddha, Plato and Plotinus all state that the Source of All Things is beyond being, unqualified and unconditioned. You cannot limit it even by naming it. In fact, it is not even an “it.” The most significant and amazing thing about these three views is that they were arrived at independently, in three different cultures, at three different time periods. To me at least, this lends credence to the veracity of these claims. These men were all very intelligent, were searchers of knowledge, and report that there is such a thing as knowledge. From what I can tell, most if not all commentators on Plato today ignore, are not aware of, or downplay the existence and/or importance of Plato’s experience.

V. THE MEANING OF LIFE:

So, the meaning of life as I see it is to have this experience that these men have had, or die trying. Think about it: These men, if what they say is true, have reached the end of philosophy: To know what exists, to know what we can know, and to know how we should live. This goal is worth striving for, no matter what else we may want to achieve in life and would seem to be our key to happiness.

COMMENTS, ANYONE?

I would appreciate receiving your comments, whether or not you are one of my students. Please keep in mind that this is a work in progress. Click Here to see the Title page, (Tentative) Table of Contents, and Preface of Plotinus: THE Platonist. In my book there will be many more passages (I argue that on 150 different issues, Plato and Plotinus have essentially the same view), plus consideration of virtually every objection against my view that I've read in English. This webpage is really just a thumbnail sketch of my thoughts on these philosophers.

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