LOGOS: AFRICAN JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY AND STUDIES Copy Right: © Author (s)
Volume 8 (2026): 1-14
Available online at https://africanjournalofphilosophy.com/ e-ISSN: 2736-008

THE PRAYER OF SOCRATES, PHILOSOPHIC VIRTUE, AND HUMAN FULFILMENT

Linus Okika PhD
Department of Philosophy
Pope John Paul II Major Seminary, Okpuno, Awka-South

Abstract

The prayer of Socrates in *Phaedrus* is an *extra-rational* response to the tragic vision of life in which man is exposed to a continuous risk in such a way that happiness depends on fortune and other forces of nature. In what does the ultimate good lie; is it in the satisfaction of the needs of the body, or by addressing the aspirations of the soul, and by what means is this desired good achievable? The intentions of the prayer reveal the Socratic insights on philosophy as a pious activity, a transformative experience. The prayer is addressed to the gods, specifically to *Pan,* a god associated with wild nature, fertility, and the rustic, wilder sides of life. *Pan* represents the energetic force of nature, and is believed to instil irrational fear (panic) in herds or men. The activities of Pan and the other gods in nature are of mixed nature; they instil in man a feeling he does not understand (*Panic*, disquietude). Insofar as physis (sensible) mediates reality, philosophy remains incomplete if it excludes, instead of including and transcending it. This essay, based on phenomenological and analytical methods, highlights the Socratic notion of philosophy as a rational response to the tragic vision of life; a response that does not exclude a communion with the divine (extra-rational principle). Philosophy is presented as a virtuous activity, viz, a virtue required for a harmonious rapport between the faculties of the body and powers of the soul (mind), the two dimensions or principles of the being of man.

Key words: logos, inner beauty, harmony, virtue, katharsis

1. Introduction

Nature conditions and makes life possible, but some of its aspects threaten life and human fulfilment - flooding, earth-quakes, and other natural disasters. Besides the ugly face of the forces of nature, there is also the phenomenon of fortune which is often felt in the undertakings of man. Like nature, fortune favours man, but on some other occasions, it obstructs and denies him, beyond any possible explanation. Hence when man speaks of destiny, he hardly forgets that it is blind, and its ways are hardly subject to rational explanation or justification. Nature, fortune, and destiny are forces which man has always recognized to be dominant in the world in

LOGOS: AFRICAN JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY AND STUDIES Copy Right: © Author (s)
Volume 8 (2026): 1-14
Available online at https://africanjournalofphilosophy.com/ e-ISSN: 2736-008

which he lives and for which he finds no other remedy but faith in a superior power able to dominate such powers and save him in difficult situations.

The experience of natural phenomena led the pre-Socratics to introduce the concept of the soul (world-Soul); they did not explicitly pose the question of the essence of man because man was considered to be subject to the forces of nature. The Sophists theorized about the existence of human nature, but fell short of saying in what it consists of, viz, its essence. Socrates was the first to formulate the question: 'who is man', to which he gave the response that man is his soul, in the sense that it is soul that governs the body. The body is excluded from participation in governance because it is what the soul 'governs'.

This identification of man with the soul is the source of all other teachings contained in the dialogues, viz, the necessity to know one's soul, to educate it and care for it. The soul is immaterial, and does not share the same identity with the other created things in the cosmos, as the natural philosophers postulated. Socrates provides hints of the nature of the soul in his discussion of virtue, namely, the excellence, the perfection which everyone should seek in life. The identification of virtue with knowledge means that for Socrates the essence of the soul is reason, capable of knowing the good, namely, the universal Idea. This rational approach is deployed in the *Apology* where he affirms that the gods command him to question, and cross-examine himself and others, for the sake of attaining what is best for the soul[1]. He insists that a daily discussion of virtue "is the greatest good of man, and that the unexamined life is not worth living"[2].

The Socratic conception of man is obviously intellectualistic, if not expressly rationalistic. He underlines like no other philosopher before him what he considers to be specifically human (*ratio*), what distinguishes man from other animals and makes him akin to the gods, but this view fails to consider the fact man is a being of nature.

In its literal sense, the word *philo-sophy*, from the Greek, *philo – Sophos,* means to care (*philo),* for knowledge (*Sophia*). To the extent the notion, *Sophia,* connotes, like the adjective *saphés* which signifies 'clear,' 'manifest,' 'evident,' the idea of *pháos,* which means, 'light,' philosophy means to care for what manifests itself, viz, what is displayed or disclosed. What is disclosed to man is being, the natural world, in its dual facets as *chaos* and *cosmo*s. The world disclosed to man is not always a friendly and familiar one. Man's encounter with nature is not idyllic. Experience shows that everything is wrapped in an aloe of ambiguity; it can show me an aspect of I am not used to. The night which invites to rest, privacy, etc., is also the reign of darkness, obscurity, threat, etc.

In an attempt to reduce the areas of mystery and uneasiness which cover things man seeks explanation, as a way to re-assure himself. By giving a name to an

LOGOS: AFRICAN JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY AND STUDIES Copy Right: © Author (s)
Volume 8 (2026): 1-14
Available online at https://africanjournalofphilosophy.com/ e-ISSN: 2736-008

event, assigning whatever cause to it, he exorcizes it, prevents it from seeming frightening. The system of explanations (rational, mythological, etc), knowledge as such, is a kind of protective apparatus which permits man to humanize and inhabit the world without much anxiety and fear. Human wisdom, viz, science and the scientific mode of perception of things may have helped to reduce the hostile presence of things, their aggressive and threatening posture, but there remains a vast field of obscurity which requires illumination and articulation.

2. PARS DESTRUENS: PHILOSOPHY AS CRITICAL REFLECTION

An attitude of wonder can be described as the birthplace of philosophical thought. The ancient philosophers wondered about the universe and conceived it as a theatre of divine agents who are, directly or indirectly, involved in the affairs of men. There were however others, like Critias who claimed that "the gods were the invention of an ingenious legislator to prevent men from breaking the laws when not under supervision"[3]. Critias was able to advance such a critical idea among the Greeks because, as the life and witness of Socrates show, in a democratic society philosophy and free speech go hand in hand, viz, that having a critical attitude was perceived and practised as God-sanctioned way to truth and wisdom.

The contents of the message of the gods to Socrates, namely, to adopt a philosophical attitude in life and to help others do the same, say a lot about the wisdom and moral character of the gods. For Socrates the pronouncements of the gods must be in harmony with the first principle of truth, namely, the rationality principle. The attitude of Socrates towards the gods was partly shaped this principle.

A. SOCRATES AND HIS ATTITUDE TO THE GODS

Even in the absence of elaborate theological discussions many ancient cultures shared some beliefs about the supernatural. In Igbo traditional religion, for instance, the gods and other spirits are perceived to be players in the affairs of the human world, though some might be more involved than others. Available writings and documentations show that in many ancient cosmologies (the Greek, the Roman, and in African indigenous cosmologies) there is no separation of the religious from the secular; every human action, every facet of life or nature, has what one may call a religious or supernatural dimension. Among the *Igbo* people, for instance, "worship is in sympathy with nature and human activities[4]." In the Greek world and to the Greek mind the gods, demons, and heroes were important expressions of the divine. Thus, Socrates lived in a society in which the cult and worship of the gods was sanctioned by tradition. But for him questions about the gods, especially as regards their pronouncements, was a philosophical imperative.

LOGOS: AFRICAN JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY AND STUDIES Copy Right: © Author (s)
Volume 8 (2026): 1-14
Available online at https://africanjournalofphilosophy.com/ e-ISSN: 2736-008

a. Who are the gods?

The question: 'who are the gods' was one the basic questions raised by the ancient philosophers. The perception and experience of the cosmos shaped their ideas of the gods. If the cosmos is perceived and experienced as an organic and dynamic being, an array of forces, causes and effects, attention is immediately drawn to a higher reality, a supernatural realm, quite beyond the immediate reach of humans. Thus, the plethora of causes and effects leaves much space for the existence of *one* or *many* gods.

Prodicus, known to be an expert in celestial phenomena, wrote that "the things that nourish us and benefit us were the first to be considered as gods and honoured as such."[5] And elsewhere he remarked that "the ancients considered as gods the sun and moon, rivers, springs and in general all the things that assist our life, on account of the help they give, just as the Egyptians deify the Nile"[6]. Views like these, viz, that all the things which benefit or sustain life are gods were, however, contested on the grounds that, (a) the ancients could not have been so naïve to ascribe divinity to things subject to change and decay, and (b) that if one allows that divinity can be ascribed to passing things, men, especially philosophers, are gods, and even animals and inanimate utensils, on the ground that all of them are beneficial to us[7].

Besides the conception of the gods as 'uncreated, supernatural forces', some were believed to exist by *nomo*s (traditions), an idea which promoted atheism and agnosticism. The utterance of Protagoras that he could not say whether the gods exist or not, as well as the words of Euripide's Hecuba in her plea for mercy, to the effect that if, "the gods have power, and so has *nomos*, which is master of the gods because it is by *nomos* that we believe in them and live according to the standards of right and wrong"[8], provide ample evidence of a general critical attitude to the gods.

After his discussion of the origin of gods as being "created and visible", viz, as realities of human experience, Socrates admits that there are other gods whose origin is not given in experience: "To know or tell the origin of the other divinities is beyond us, and we must accept the traditions of the men of old time who affirm themselves to be the offspring of the gods – that is what they say – and they must surely have known their ancestors"[9], viz, the genealogy of the gods is a tradition to be received and set forth.

The ancient Greeks subdivided the higher living beings, endowed with *logos* (reason, intelligence) into two categories: the immortals and the blessed (the gods), and mortals and unhappy (men). For some ancient philosophers and poets of Greek extraction happiness (human fulfilment) seemed more like a divine prerogative than a human right such that its attainment depended more on the benevolence of the gods than on human efforts. This is evident in the name assigned by the Greeks to happiness: *eudaimonia* is indeed the condition of someone who possesses a good (*eu*)

LOGOS: AFRICAN JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY AND STUDIES Copy Right: © Author (s)
Volume 8 (2026): 1-14
Available online at https://africanjournalofphilosophy.com/ e-ISSN: 2736-008

demon (*daimôn*). Demons or principalities are not exactly gods, but intermediate beings, between the gods and men and the Greeks believed that every individual is assisted by a demon (personal *Chi*, in Igbo cosmology), who can either be good or bad: a good demon means to a good life, and a bad demon entails an unhappy life. In line with this conception human fulfilment (happiness) means to have a good demon, and again having a good or bad demon depends on lot (what is commonly referred to as *akala aka* in Igbo cosmology). Besides the involvement of the gods, happiness was also believed to be depend on lot, or personal fortune.

Hence human fulfilment (happiness) depends, not only on fortune, but also on the gods. According to a popular belief, a man without fault before the gods, viz, obedient to their wills, has more chances of being happy than one who rebels against their ordinances. But the experience that the innocent is often confronted with misfortune, for no fault of his, was equally diffused among the ancient Greeks. This is the basis of the tragic pessimism expressed in the ancient tragic displays. According to Martha Nussman, the Greek dramatic displays express a tragic vision of life in which man is exposed to a continuous risk in such a way that happiness and human fulfilment depend on fortune[10], and not merely on human powers. Thus, it has been argued that man's awareness of his nakedness, of being exposed to tragic dimension of nature can be said to be at the origin of both philosophy and theology as responses to the questions of life.

Hence philosophy becomes, in a sense, a response to this tragic vision of life. Socrates, Plato, the Stoics, and others, were all involved in the effort to insulate, remove, save human destiny from the tragic turn of events, to re-align it to the powers of man, but with the assistance of the gods.

b. Prayer as *Logos* addressed to the gods

There was no systematic set of doctrines about the gods in ancient Greece. An individual was considered pious based on "the correct observance of ancestral tradition, which consisted in timely performance of prayers and sacrifices"[11] Protagoras, a champion of the democratic virtue of justice, divided speech (*logos*) into four basic kinds: request (or prayer), question, answer, command. Aristotle refers to this division of *logos* in the *Poetics* (145615b) where he records that Protagoras criticized Homer for saying 'sing of the wrath, Goddess' because it seemed to be a command when what was wanted as a prayer.[12]

Hence prayer is the act of religion through which one addresses words of supplication to higher beings. It is central in the relationship with the divine beings. It is essentially "an expression of goodwill and a sensible manifestation of a desire for communion"[13] with a divine being or spiritual power. At the prompting of Socrates Timaeus admits as follows: "All men, Socrates, who have any degree of right feeling, at the beginning of every enterprise, whether small or great, always call

LOGOS: AFRICAN JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY AND STUDIES Copy Right: © Author (s)
Volume 8 (2026): 1-14
Available online at https://africanjournalofphilosophy.com/ e-ISSN: 2736-008

upon God. And we, too, who are going to discourse of the nature of the universe, how created or how existing without creation, if we be not altogether out of our wits, must invoke the aid of Gods and Goddesses and pray that our words may be acceptable to them and consistent with themselves. Let this, then, be our invocation of the Gods, to which I add an exhortation of myself to speak in such manner as will be most intelligible to you, and will most accord with my intent."[14]

c. The practice of religion and adherence to the rationality principle

Socrates practiced the religion of his city and prayed to the gods. Why then was he condemned for impiety? The response to this question lies in the fact that Socrates did not insulate his practice of religion from the 'rationality principle'. Plato presents Socrates as someone who was guided by both rationality and religious principles in his relations with the gods. Some available texts do indicate that Socrates understood his religious commitments to be integral of his philosophical mission of moral examination and rectitude[15]. Strictly-speaking, Socrates' reputation as a philosopher is anchored on rationality principle, his adherence to the highest standards of rationality in all matters of beliefs and practices, which requires him not to believe anything that does not pass the test of rationality. This is clearly attested to in one the dialogues: "…I am and always have been one of those natures who must be guided by reason, whatever the reason may be which upon reflection appears to me to the best"[16].

But for Socrates *ratio* (reason) is also *logos* (discourse, word), a quality which man shares with the gods. The broader sense of the word *logos* is reflected in the Greek verb *légein*, 'to spread' out, 'to gather' together, to 'assemble'. *Logos* is therefore the initial grasp of things whereby they remain in their expository status, and so exposed, become available, given to human experience. This original sense of *logos* is close to its sense derived from *légein,* to say, where the one who 'speaks' is not man, but the things themselves which, by being exposed, announce how they are offered or are presented to human experience. Heraclitus would often say with reference to *logos*: 'Listen not to me [as a person] but to what I say' Not listening to me, but to logos is what I say'.

Logos "is not just a personal statement… but a considered and objective account of the nature of things"[17] which means that, for Socrates, philosophy

LOGOS: AFRICAN JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY AND STUDIES Copy Right: © Author (s)
Volume 8 (2026): 1-14
Available online at https://africanjournalofphilosophy.com/ e-ISSN: 2736-008

requires one to care for what manifests itself, viz, what is displayed or disclosed to man's rational perception as well as what is disclosed extra-rationally.

Consequently, Socrates the inherited traditional religious beliefs as well the rationality principle do have an explanatory value. Thus, for the purposes of establishing the new enterprise of philosophy as required by the gods he adopted the religious beliefs and practices, but only to the extent they did not compromise his personal and philosophically-based convictions.

3. PARS CONSTRUENS: PHILOSOPHY AND ATTAINMENT OF THE GOOD

Socrates identifies the good of man with philosophy which in its literally definition means 'love of wisdom' (*philia*, love, and *Sophia*, wisdom). The pursuit of wisdom is possible for the soul through the deployment of reason which is the essence of the soul. That man is essentially a rational animal is manifest in one of the affirmations of Socrates: "no man voluntarily pursues evil, or that which he thinks to be evil. To prefer evil to good is not in human nature; and when a man is compelled to choose one of two evils, no one will choose the greater when he may have the less"[18]. The affirmation that reason is the essence of man, that his unique virtue is knowledge, or wisdom, and that the only vice to be avoided is ignorance leads Socrates to the difficult conclusion that there is only one force in man, a thesis which amounts to saying that there is neither conflict in man , nor between body and soul, nor among the various parts of the soul.

In his philosophic life and activity Socrates was not only guided by his well-known *rationality principle*; he was also in touch with other sources, like the *gods* and *daimonion*. As he puts it: "…this duty (philosophizing) has been imposed upon me by God; and has been signified to me by oracles, visions, and in every way in which the will of the divine power was ever intimated to any one"[19]. For the philosopher of our interest, Socrates, the goal of philosophic activity is the care of one's soul. To achieve this one must commune with the divinities. Herein lies the significance of prayer as a medium of communication with the supernatural.

Socrates was aware of being haunted by a divinity, a kind of voice which forbids but never commands him to do anything which he wants to do[20]. He cites Divine authority to legitimize his philosophical engagement. Thus, the awareness of being on a Divine mission remains one of the basic principles that guided his philosophical career. He understands himself to be an agent of the god Apollo, with the mandate to philosophize by examining himself and others. As he puts it: "If now, when, as I conceive and imagine, God orders me to fulfil the philosopher's mission of searching myself and other men."[21]

LOGOS: AFRICAN JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY AND STUDIES Copy Right: © Author (s)
Volume 8 (2026): 1-14
Available online at https://africanjournalofphilosophy.com/ e-ISSN: 2736-008

A. THE HIGH-POINTS AND ANALYSIS OF THE SOCRATIC PRAYER

There is in the Socratic prayer to the gods an awareness that man is a *being-in-the world*, an incarnate being who exists by virtue of the material and formal principles. The presence of these two principles explains why there is in man "the play-off between the human qualities known to the Greeks as *mētis* and *hubris*[22]." *Mētis* can be described as intelligence and common sense or cunning and guile. *Hubris,* on the other hand, refers to excessive pride and self-confidence. In essence they are opposite traits, so that what is required is a measured balance, a possession of both in right proportion to avoid failure in life. *Nemesis* is the punishment meted out to those who display excessive defiance of the gods, which is often due to imbalance of the above-mentioned qualities.

The prayer of Socrates in *Phaedrus* is of particular interest for philosophy on the grounds that it seeks to achieve what is regarded as the highest good – inner beauty, harmony between the needs of the body and the aspirations of the soul. Thus, Socrates prays as follows: "Beloved Pan, and all ye other gods who haunt this place, give me beauty in the inward soul; and may the outward and inward man be at one. May I have such a quantity of gold as a temperate man and he only can bear and carry.

Anything more? The prayer, I think, is enough for me.

Phaedrus: "Ask the same for me, for friends should have all things in common."

Pan was a god of fertility in ancient Greek mythology, a symbol of the created and visible universe very close in meaning to *cosmos* and *hólon*. Grammatically, *pân*, is used to designate the *entire*, the *totality*. In the course of time the term *pân*, totality, became associated with pantheistic thought, and used to refer to the untamed, natural world.

a. The Care of the Soul as the primary good

One of the highlights of the prayer is the need for *inner beauty*, beauty of the soul, considered as genuine reality. Goodness and Beauty are one and the same thing. Hence a beauty soul is equally a good soul. The soul, a divine entity, and a part, as it were, of Beauty, is the author of bodily beauty. Thus, other beauties, those of action or of behaviour, come from the imprint of the soul upon them. The soul renders beautiful, to the fullness to the fullness of their capacity all things it touches or controls. The good and beauty of the soul consists in it becoming godlike because from the divinity all beauty emanates and informs all the constituents of reality. The Good is transcendental; it pervades all things, in the sense that it makes them knowable and desirable.

LOGOS: AFRICAN JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY AND STUDIES Copy Right: © Author (s)
Volume 8 (2026): 1-14
Available online at https://africanjournalofphilosophy.com/ e-ISSN: 2736-008

The emphasis on the interior beauty is not aimed at excluding the external aspects of beauty. As a matter of fact, beauty is visual. Yet in word patterns and in music (cadences and rhythms are beautiful) it addresses itself to other senses as well. What is being underlined is that true beauty is internal; it is the beauty of the soul which consists in the harmony between the needs of the body and the aspirations of the spirit. Interior beauty is, however, not yet actualized in man; it remains a *domus,* a house to be constructed, using the available resources and endowments of nature. What human experience reveals is that in man an interior division remains active; a conflict evident in the fact that his sensibility (the passions which inhabit man) is not always under the control of his intelligence and will. This is where virtue (discipline) enters the scene and assumes a certain importance. Virtue has, strictly speaking a central role to play. By the word virtue [literally, strength, capacity, or force] is intended a certain excellence or perfection of potential.

The views of Socrates on the centrality of virtue in the development of character finds continuity in later philosophers like Plato and Aristotle. Aristotle categorizes virtues and sciences as dispositions; like knowledge virtue has an enduring character[23]; it is a stable disposition acquired for the performance of good acts. For Cicero virtue is to the soul what health and beauty are to a body[24].

Certain dispositions, such as virtues, are beautiful in themselves: Dedicated living, life of achievements, intellectual pursuits, character training, are beautiful to those who arise above the realm of the senses; to such individuals, the virtues are beautiful. Other qualities, like the bodily forms, are not themselves beautiful but are so in function of the totality which the soul represents.

Socrates would not confuse virtue as a disposition, an inner strength with sentiment. As a disposition virtue is transformative; it is the cause of effective goodness, viz, the source of external actions. Aristotle affirms that virtue renders its possessor good and his activity good[25]. Augustine[26] , known for his famous dictum: 'love God and do whatever you wish', adds that no one should doubt that virtue makes the soul perfect. Virtue may not always replace the light of a physical beauty, but it remains the contagious warmth which brings comfort and without which the greatest charm remains a cold and incommunicable light.

Interior beauty is achieved through a quiet mastery of oneself, through a progressive self-awareness and taking charge of one's sensitivity. This has been discovered to be the role of virtue. For the fearful, threatened and wounded man, etc., virtue plays a therapeutic role. It has, in a true sense, a curative function. Its role is to lead to happiness and provide for man along the way, in the journey of life[27]. In Greek, the same word for 'the good and the beautiful' are closely-connected. Ethics and aesthetics go hand in hand, even if virtue is supposed to have a disciplinary character. A balanced person in whom everything exists in harmony glows with interior freedom. Now, it is the proper function of beauty to glow and to seduce.

LOGOS: AFRICAN JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY AND STUDIES Copy Right: © Author (s)
Volume 8 (2026): 1-14
Available online at https://africanjournalofphilosophy.com/ e-ISSN: 2736-008

And this charm is not restricted to the interior of the soul. The body and the whole being of man is inhabited by this virtuous light which radiates in the face and in the attitude: this is the dawn of the acquired health of the soul. Virtue is desirable, because it renders the subject beautiful.

b. Reconciliation of the inner and outer man – Life as a synthesis

In the dialogue, *Phaedrus*, Socrates makes a request to the gods for harmony between what is within and what is outside of man. The things that are inside a man are generally referred to as the 'values of the soul', and those that are outside a man, viz, the external things, are the material goods. This is about the unity of the bodily and the spiritual needs of man, between the material goods and the spiritual goods or values. Socrates does not manifest a distaste for temporal goods; what he insists on is a subordination of the temporal goods to the eternal ones.

If there is one thing which modern medicine has taught us, it is the discovery that man is a totality, a discovery which shows how health entails an equilibrium of the healthy functioning of the different organs. In the like manner, psychological health must be this internal unity, respectful of the diversity of the senses, of needs.

There is no gainsaying that the Socratic mind-set contrasts with what is obtainable and witnessed in many cultures where material pursuit and ostentatious display of wealth have gained an upper hand over moral and civic values. In some cultures, it matters little who someone is; all that matters is what one possesses. One may find it difficult to understand that a man who is able to build a mansion does not know what it means to pause and take a holiday

B. HUMAN WISDOM – AT THE THRESHOLD OF DIVINE WISDOM

The final request of Socrates is for the gift of gold. This is, of course, a metaphor for wisdom, precisely, divine wisdom (*phronesis*). Convinced that nothing is comparable to wisdom he adopts the metaphor of gold to highlight the wealth discoverable in its acquisition and possession. What follows is the introduction and the discussion of what characterizes human wisdom, viz, the philosophic values, values which Socrates himself put into practices as one can see in the *dialogues*.

a. The centrality of philosophic virtues - Modesty and Temperance

The term 'temperance' is central for the understanding of the request to possess wisdom. Temperance implies auto-dominion: moderation based on rationality. It is at this point that the sense of the request becomes clearer. The philosopher, a derivative from, *philos* – lover of *Sophia,* wisdom, understands that he does not

LOGOS: AFRICAN JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY AND STUDIES Copy Right: © Author (s)
Volume 8 (2026): 1-14
Available online at https://africanjournalofphilosophy.com/ e-ISSN: 2736-008

possess 'all the gold of wisdom', because wisdom in its *totality* belongs to God alone. Hence the philosopher asks to possess the maximum quantity, as much quantity, of gold as a temperate man and only he can bear and carry.

The principle of limit, or moderation, the essence of human wisdom, is manifest in the literal meaning of a philosopher (*philos – Sophia*), a lover of wisdom, who seeks the beautiful, the good and the true. Though not deprived of wisdom, the philosopher is ever in search for more of it, but without the assumption that he can arrive at a complete possession of wisdom. As regards the virtue of temperance, K. Gaiser writes that the temperate man is someone who understands the human limits; by knowing himself he achieves the wisdom attainable by man. He who knows that divine wisdom is all-encompassing, that human wisdom is not perfect tries to attain only what is possible of the inexhaustible divine wisdom[28].

The cultivation of the virtue of temperance can be an arduous task: it involves *katharsis,* a progressive method of detachment from the senses, adopted and practised by the Pythagoreans. In Plato, *katharsis* (purification), a key requirement for philosophy, is a long exercise of ascetism to liberate oneself from the chains of the flesh. For Plotinus purification was a constant theme. He affirmed the old wisdom saying, viz, that "temperance, courage, every virtue - even prudence itself – are purifications"[29]. Temperance means to abstain from the pleasures of the body, to reject them as unclean and unworthy of the soul. Speaking with one of his friends about the requirements of self-restraint and self-mastery Socrates says: "And philosophers tell us, Callicles, that communion and friendship and orderliness and temperance and justice bind heaven and earth and gods and men, and this universe is therefore called cosmos or order, not disorder or misrule, my friend[30]."

"Everyone sees that love is a desire, and we know also that non-lovers desire the beautiful and good. Now in what way is the lover to be distinguished from the non-lover? Let us note that in every one of us there are two guiding and ruling principles which lead us whither they will; one is the natural desire of pleasure, the other is an acquired opinion which aspires after the best; and these two are sometimes in harmony and then again at war, and sometimes the one, sometimes the other conquers. When opinion by the help of reason leads us to the best, the conquering principle is called temperance…. But when desire, which is devoid of reason, rules in us and drags us to pleasure, that power of misrule is called excess"[31]. Having as its function to regulate the sensible appetite, temperance enables an individual to exercise restraint, to be moderate in all the pleasures of the senses. It is the virtue which allows the individual to enjoy sensible pleasure in a liberating manner.

About moderation Aristotle would cite a certain Phaleas of Chalcedon as being the first to teach that the citizens of the "legislator ought not to aim at the equalization of properties, but at moderation in their amount"[32]. According to Phaleas crime could be managed if there is an equitable distribution of material

LOGOS: AFRICAN JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY AND STUDIES Copy Right: © Author (s)
Volume 8 (2026): 1-14
Available online at https://africanjournalofphilosophy.com/ e-ISSN: 2736-008

goods, but Aristotle would argue that the greatest crimes are caused, not by necessity or deprivation, but by excess:" it is not possessions but the desires of mankind which required to be equalized, and this is impossible, unless a sufficient education is provided by the laws"[33]. It was hotly debated among the early philosophers whether virtue could be taught.

According to Socrates, if virtue could be taught it must be a form of knowledge. …..in Meno 87c

Hence, he was convinced that temperance, the measured use of material good, is what gives man a true interior freedom insofar as mastery (which is neither an under-estimation nor over-estimation) of impulses is a capacity which is not spontaneous in man[34].

There are, however, texts which show that when it comes to making moral choices temperance seems merely to be one of the cards at hand. The request to the gods for assistance by Socrates shows that there are situations in life when rational power does not provide all the answers. Faced with the prospect of killing her own children, Medea cries (Medea 1078 ff): 'I understand the evil I am prompted to commit, but my passions are stronger than my counsel, passion which is the cause of man's greatest crimes'[35]

The axiom and wish of Héros Cornélien which says: "over my passions, let my will prevail," remains a utopia, an ideal towards which one can only aspire to. This means that the interior struggles of man are never perfectly harmonized as Socrates would wish. There are reasons for the above assertion. A well-known Italian proverb: "bacco, tabacco e venere mandano l'uomo in cenere," (which translates as: the pleasures of wine, smoke, and sex lead to ruins) is call for sobriety, and a reminder that an 'overindulgence in the pleasures of drinking, smoking and sexual pleasures can reduce a man to ashes, that is, bringing a man to ruin, destruction, or death.'

If man is not always cautious and prudent as he ought to, one needs to look further than a particular situation in which he betrays his ultimate good.

b. Man as a dynamic, but fragile being

The dynamism in man (seen in the phenomenon of self-transcendence) by which he tries to fulfil himself is not fully explained on the basis of his rational powers alone. According to Aristotle man is, first and foremost, a symbolic being. This is manifest in his characterization of man a being of language. Aristotle underlines *logos,* which translates as 'word,' 'discourse', 'thought', 'reason', as what constitutes

LOGOS: AFRICAN JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY AND STUDIES Copy Right: © Author (s)
Volume 8 (2026): 1-14
Available online at https://africanjournalofphilosophy.com/ e-ISSN: 2736-008

the fundamental difference of man. Aristotle writes as follows in his classic, the *Politics:*

> Nature, as we often say, makes nothing in vain, and man is the only animal who has the gift of speech. And whereas mere voice is but an indication of pleasure or pain, and is therefore found in other animals…. the power of speech is intended to set forth the expedient and the inexpedient, and therefore likewise the just and the unjust. And it is a characteristic of man that he alone has any sense of good or evil, of just and unjust, and the like, and the association of living beings who have this sense makes a family and a state[36]

It is usual to characterize man as *homo sapiens* (a thinking human), but Aristotle thinks that man is first and foremost *homo loquens* (speaking human). The definition of man as a *rational animal,* based on the translation of *logos* with *ratio* is considered inappropriate and reductive since the concept of *logos* is richer in meaning than the concept of reason. Hence the specific essence of man is his being endowed with the world, with language. Based on the premise that language has a symbolic function, and insofar as the words are symbols of 'affections of the soul', namely, of psychic impressions', which are images of things[37], man can be described as a symbolic animal; he is a *being-in-the-world,* a being in dialogue with nature (*pan).*

For the ancient Greek thinkers, the cosmos is an organic and dynamic being, an array of forces, causes and effects. Hence in their cosmic-theological thinking there is no domination of the world by one God or force. As cosmos the world was neither the creation of one God nor the work of man. The world was perceived as perennial, without beginning or end; it was by itself – *tó theîon kaì hólon,* divine and undivided, because it lacks nothing. To understand himself, man cannot understand himself as measure and the world as subject to his dominion, but assumed the cosmos to be the measure insofar as it is *hólon* and *theîon,* divine and undivided. Heraclitus would often say: "Not listening to me, but to logos is wise to recognize that all is one"[38].

In an essay titled, *what is Man*, W. Pannenberg underlines auto-transcendence as one of the fundamental characteristics of man, a reference to his dynamism and his unlimited aperture to the world. It is, however, obvious that man's rational powers do not fully address the problem of auto-transcendence. Man, and other living things are open and continue to yearn for a plus, a surplus of being, viz, fruition, growth, etc. This does not mean that man is less perfect; on the contrary, he is richer. He is not viewed as a potential being, but as a being with potency, promise and hope. Furthermore, and unlike the lower animals determined by their instincts, man is born undetermined; but this undetermined nature of man whose other name is fragility, requires education, education in virtue.

A famous poet, Ovid, observes as follows: "I see what is better and I approve it, but I follow what is worse"; "It is in our nature to want what is good and to aspire towards it and it is a fact that, we hardly succeed in attaining it through unaided

LOGOS: AFRICAN JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY AND STUDIES Copy Right: © Author (s)
Volume 8 (2026): 1-14
Available online at https://africanjournalofphilosophy.com/ e-ISSN: 2736-008

forces; proof of a profound problem and of a reversal of human economy, in such a way that living according to our nature is supernatural and that destiny is truly inhuman"[39].

C. CRITICAL EVALUATION

The interior struggles of man are never perfectly harmonized as Socrates would wish. Man remains a fragile being, but this does not mean an abandonment of efforts to face and overcome human predicaments.

Regarding psychic life, man seems to be closer to the plant than the animal: The psychic growth of the animal stops with the attainment of adult age. The plant never stops growing. The same is the case with virtue; it never stops growing. A man is not truly an adult until he accepts within him the areas of resistance and obscurity which he neither totally recognizes nor dominates. About the virtue of temperance Antiphon argues that: "He who has neither felt the desire for, nor come in contact with, what is foul and evil (fr. 59) is not temperate, for there is nothing that he has had to overcome in order to show himself well-behaved"[40]. It follows that maturity is only attained through the acceptance of one's vulnerabilities, and failures which one should never believe to have mastered for good. Thus, one avoids the thinking that leads to ignore human weaknesses and failures. One also avoids the thinking that presents an image of oneself that is devoid of all fragility.

The dynamism witnessed both in nature and in man does often manifest itself in what the Greeks call *hubris*, or disproportion, a constant theme in the Greek tragic displays. For Aristotle the tragic elements domiciled in nature remain forces to contend with. Hence the term, *hubris*, a warning against 'excess, invites to the virtue of prudence.

If one adopts the 'man the measure' principle, for instance, belief in the supernatural beings may be side-lined, and one believes that the gods (extra-rational principle) exist for some and not for others. Protagoras claimed that he could not prove whether the gods exist or not[41]. Surrounded by those who discountenanced the existence of the gods, Socrates did not exclude the extra-rational principle, namely, the supernatural, from his philosophical activity. He adopted and followed the religious cult and practices according to the ancestral traditions (*nomos*).

A. Camus rightly notes that the chorus of the ancient tragedies was intended to inculcate prudence on the audience. Hence the constant theme of the tragic displays is the 'limit which one is not supposed to cross.'

"*Quo vadis, humanítas*" – Where are you headed, humanity? a Papal document recently released, warns against the trends towards trans-humanism and post-humanism, tragic examples of the degeneration of man. The modern complex of artificial intelligence, social media, and digital spiritualism are areas where disproportion risks dehumanizing the human person. There is the fear that *AI* risks replacing all computational and operational aspects of human intelligence, and warning that its rapid development, sometimes proceeds "without the prudence born of the wise recognition that good always involves an appropriate limit and

LOGOS: AFRICAN JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY AND STUDIES Copy Right: © Author (s)
Volume 8 (2026): 1-14
Available online at https://africanjournalofphilosophy.com/ e-ISSN: 2736-008

proportion", virtues that characterize human wisdom and enshrined in the classic understanding of philosophic virtue.

4. CONCLUSION

The analysis of the prayer of Socrates reveals certain elements which are of interest, both in the philosophical and theological domains. The instinct to pray underlines the conviction that human experiences are transcendental insofar as they disclose and involve dimensions one cannot explain rationally. Again, apart from the use of rationality principle, the plea to the gods highlights the fact that the attainment of the good is not only the function of *ratio,* viz, human efforts, to the exclusion and deployment of other principles. What experience teaches is that the initiative and efforts of man towards self-fulfilment are often subject to frustration and denial.

But on a happy note, the belief that the soul, equipped and purified by the philosophic virtues of self-restraint and moderation, is capable of governing the cravings of the body, falls within the frame-work of what one might term 'Socratic optimism'. The plea of the prayer addressed to the gods, in the language native to man and understandable to the gods points to an adoption of the *rational* and *extra-rational* principles in the philosophic activity of Socrates. If prayer is categorized as '*logos*' addressed to the gods, and following the Aristotelian definition of man as animal endowed with this capacity, one can conclude with Aristotle that this capacity for *logos (*word, discourse, thought, reason) is the essence of man since, more than any other quality, it unites man with the gods, the central plea of Socrates to the gods. This explains Aristotle's prioritization of man as a being endowed with *logos* (speech) over the emphasis on man as a rational being. In other words, the description of man as a being capable of *logos* does not entail a denial that he is a rational being, it simply squares up with the belief that human fulfilment and attainment is not solely the function of the soul's rational powers.

Finally, Socrates' request for beauty in the inward soul, and for integrity of life, highlights the human spirit as the essence of *homo sapiens*. This spirit whose function is to perpetuate the existence of humanity is viewed as being "inseparable from the body as the mind is inseparable from the brain"[42]. A French physiologist Claude Bernard says that every multicellular animal, such as man, is endowed with two environments, the *milieu extérieur* (external environment), and the *milieu intérieur*, the internal one, formed by the fluids which hydrate the cells within the body[43]. The view of Socrates to the effect that the soul governs the body to guarantee beauty in the inward soul is in line with the plea of the prayer to the gods for harmony between the internal and external worlds. But this plea for harmony establishes not only the priority of the 'internal life' over the 'external life', but also the independence of *milieu intérieur* over the external surrounding. As one reads in

LOGOS: AFRICAN JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY AND STUDIES Copy Right: © Author (s)
Volume 8 (2026): 1-14
Available online at https://africanjournalofphilosophy.com/ e-ISSN: 2736-008

Phaedo: "When the soul and the body are united, then nature orders the soul to rule and govern, and the body to obey and serve"[44].

Endnotes

[1] Plato, *Apology,* 29d
[2] *Ibid,* 38 a.
[3] W. K. C Guthrie, *The Sophists,* 23.
[4] F. A. Arinze, *Sacrifice in Igbo Religion,* 42.
[5] W. K. C Guthrie, *The Sophists,* 238.
[6] Cf. Guthrie, *Ibid.* p. 238
[7] Cf. Guthrie, *Ibid.* p. 239.
[8] Guthrie, 23.
[9] Timaeus, 40b
[10] "il treatro Greco esprime una visione tragica della vita, in cui l'uomo è esposto a continui rischi e la felicità dipende sostanzialmente dalla fortuna," cited in Galimberti*, Ibid*, 248.
[11] M. L. Macpherran,"Socratic Religion", in D. R. Morrison (ed), *Socrates,* 112
[12] W. K. C Guthrie, *The Sophists,* 220.
[13] F. A. Arinze, *Sacrifice in Igbo Religion,* 44.
[14] Plato, Timaeus, 27b
[15] M. L. Macpherran, "Socratic Religion," *Ibid*. 111
[16] *Plato's Dialogues* (Crito, 46b4 – 6).
[17] J. V. Luce, An Introduction to Greek Philosophy, Thames and Hudson, London, 1992, 42.
[18] Plato, *Protagoras,* 358 c-d
[19] B. Jowett (transl.) *The Dialogues of Plato*, Apology, [33], Encyclopaedia Britanica, Inc. Chicago.
[20] *Ibid,* [31]
[21] Dialogues of Plato, *Apology,* 28e4 – 29 a2
[22] Homer, The Odyssey, vi.
[23] Complete Works of Aristotle, Cat. [6.8b29]
[24] *De Tusculanis Quaestionibus,* 4 [13], cf. T. McDermott, Thomas Aquinas, *Selected Philosophical Writings,* Oxford, Oxford Univ. Press, 393.
[25] "We must, however, not only describe it as a state, but also say what sort of state it is. We may remark, then, that every excellence both brings into good condition the thing of which it is the excellence and makes the work of that thing be done well". Cf. Complete Works of Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, 2 [6. 1106a15].
[26] *De Moribus Ecclesiae,* cf. T. McDermott, *Ibid,* 395.
[27] "Or nous avons vu que c'est là le rôle de la virtu. La vertu joue donc, au sein de notre humanité blessée, un rôle thérapeutique. Elle a, en un sens très propre, une function curative. Elle ne fait pas que pour nous conduire au bonheur et nous munir pour la route." P. Ide, *Construire sa personalité,* Librairie Arthème Fayard, Paris, 1991, p. 23.
[28] "Il filosofo…desidera l'avvicinamento alla 'sapienza' divina nella maggior misura possible. Il temperante che conosce i limiti umani, proprio mediante la conoscenza di sé medesimo parviene alla 'sapienza' raggiungibile dall'uomo al più altro grado". K. Gaiser, *L'oro della Sapienza. Sulla preghieira del filosofo a conclusione del 'Fedro'.* Cf. G. Reale, *Saggezza antica,* Milano, Edizione CDE spa, 246.
[29] Elmer O' Brien, *The Essential Plotinus,* Mentor Books, New York, 1962, 39
[30] Plato, Georgias, 508.
[31] Cf Dialogues of Plato, Phaedrus, 120
[32] Aristotle, *Politics,* 1066b26ff.
[33] *Ibid*. *Politics,* 1066b29ff.
[34] "En effect la temperance est par excellence ce qui donne à l'homme une vraie liberté intérieure, tant la maîtrise (qui n'est ni devaluation ni surévaluation) des pulsions n'est pas une capacité qui nous est spontanée" Cf. Pascal Ide, *Construire sa personalité,* p. 249.
[35] Cf. Guthrie, 258.
[36] *Ibid*, 1253 a, 9 – 18.

LOGOS: AFRICAN JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY AND STUDIES Copy Right: © Author (s)
Volume 8 (2026): 1-14
Available online at https://africanjournalofphilosophy.com/ e-ISSN: 2736-008

[37] "…il linguagio ha una funzione simbolica, in quanto le parole sono simboli delle affezioni dell'anima, cioè dei contenuti psichici, i quali a loro volta sono immagini delle cose, l'uomo potrebbe essere definito come animale simbolico". Cf. E. Berti, *In principio era la meraviglia,* Roma, Editori Laterza, 2012, 151.
[38] U. Galimberti, *Parole Nomadi,* 125
[39] "Je vois ce qui est meilleur et je l'approuve, mais je suis ce qui est pire" (*Metamorphosis*, L. 7). "C'est notre nature de vouloir le bien et d'y tendre et c'est un fait que nous n'y réussissons point par nos seules forces; prevue d'un trouble profonde et d'un renversement de l'économie humaine, en sorte que vivre selon notre nature est surnaturel et que la destinée est vraiment inhumaine (6). Cf. P. Ide, *Construire sa personalité,* 19.
[40] Cf. Guthrie, *Ibid.* 23
[41] *Ibid.* 23
[42] S. B. Nuland, *The Wisdom of the Body*, Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., New York, 1997, xxiii
[43] *Ibid.* 31
[44] Plato's Dialogue, *Phaedo,* 79d – 80a