

FROM THE *PHAEDO*
THE MYTH OF THE TRUE EARTH

The *Phaedo* is a dialogue which weaves together traditional myths (such as the story of Theseus and the Minotaur), Orphic cultic myths (concerning the dismemberment of Dionysus), pure dialectic reason and philosophical myths (our subject for tonight). The drama takes place across one day from dawn to dusk and in one place – the condemned cell of Socrates – its theme is the immortality of the human soul. It is this soul, says Socrates in the *Phaedrus*, that takes different forms at different times in its journeying of descent and ascent: one of our problems is our limited view of the world in which our trials take place – here is Socrates attempting to expand the view of his friends who have followed his philosophical exploration of the nature of the soul.

109a SOCRATES: I am persuaded, therefore, in the first place, that if the earth is in the middle of the heavens, and is of a spherical figure, it has no occasion of air, nor of any other such-like necessity, to prevent it from falling: but that the perfect similitude of the heavens to themselves, and the equilibrium of the earth, are sufficient causes of its support. For that which is equally inclined, when placed in the middle of a similar nature, cannot tend more or less to one part than another; but, subsisting on all sides similarly affected, it will remain free from all inclination. This is the first thing of which I am persuaded.

CEBES: And very properly so.

b SOCRATES: But yet further, that the earth is prodigiously great; that we who dwell in places extending from Phasis to the pillars of Hercules,¹ inhabit only a certain small portion of it, about the Mediterranean sea, like ants or frogs about a marsh; and that there are many others elsewhere, who dwell in many suchlike places. For I am persuaded, that there are everywhere about the earth many hollow places of all-various forms and magnitudes; into which there is a confluence of water, mists, and air: but that the earth itself, which is of a pure nature, is situated in the pure heavens, in which the stars are contained, and which most of those who are
c accustomed to speak about such particulars denominate aether.

But the places which we inhabit are nothing more than the dregs of this pure earth, or cavities into which its dregs continually flow. We are ignorant, therefore, that we dwell in the cavities of this earth, and imagine that we inhabit its upper parts. Just as if someone dwelling in the middle bottom of the sea, should think that he resided on
d its surface, and, beholding the sun and the other stars through the water, should imagine that the sea is the heavens; but through sloth and stupidity having never ascended to the top of the sea, nor emerged from its deeps into this region, has never

¹ The river Phasis runs into the eastern end of the Black Sea, while the pillars of Hercules are the straits of Gibraltar.

perceived how much purer and more beautiful it is than the place which he inhabits, nor has received this information from any other who has beheld this place of our abode. In the very same manner are we affected: for, dwelling in a certain hollow of the earth, we think that we reside on its surface; and we call the air heaven, as if the stars passed through this, as through the heavens themselves. And this likewise, in the same manner as in the above instance, happens to us through our stupidity and sloth, which render us incapable of ascending to the summit of the air. For, otherwise, if anyone could arrive at its summit, or, becoming winged, could fly thither, he would be seen emerging from hence; and just as fishes, emerging hither from the sea, perceive what our region contains, in the same manner would he behold the several particulars belonging to the summit of the earth.

110a And besides this, if his nature was sufficient for such an elevated survey, he would know that the heavens which he there beheld were the true heavens, and that he perceived the true light and the true earth. For this earth which we inhabit, the stones which it contains, and the whole region of our abode, are all corrupted and gnawed, just as things in the sea are corroded by the salt: for nothing worthy of estimation grows in the sea, nor does it contain any thing perfect; but caverns and sand, and immense quantities of mud and filth, are found in it wherever there is earth. Nor are its contents to be by any means compared with the beauty of the various particulars in our place of abode. But those upper regions of the earth will appear to be yet far more excellent than these which we inhabit. For, if it is proper to tell you a beautiful fable, it is well worth hearing, Simmias, what kind of places those are on the upper earth, situated under the heavens.

c It is reported then, my friend, in the first place, that this earth, if any one surveys it from on high, appears like globes covered with twelve skins, various, and distinguished with colours; a pattern of which are the colours found among us, and which our painters use. But there the whole earth is composed from materials of this kind, and such as are much more splendid and pure than our region contains: for they are partly indeed purple, and endued with a wonderful beauty; partly of a golden colour; and partly more white than plaster or snow; and are composed from other colours in a similar manner, and those more in number and more beautiful than any d we have ever beheld. For the hollow parts of this pure earth, being filled with water and air, exhibit a certain species of colour, shining among the variety of other colours in such a manner, that one particular various form of the earth continually presents itself to the view. Hence, whatever grows in this earth grows analogous to its nature, such as trees, and flowers, and fruits: and again, its mountains and stones possess a similar perfection and transparency, and are rendered beautiful through various e colours; of which the stones so much honoured by us in this place of our abode are but small parts, such as sardin-stones, jaspers, and emeralds, and all of this kind.

But there nothing subsists which is not of such a nature as I have described; and there are other things far more beautiful than even these. But the reason of this is because the stones there are pure, and not consumed and corrupted, like ours, through rottenness and salt, from a conflux of various particulars, which in our places of abode

111a cause filthiness and disease to the stones and earth, animals and plants, which are found among us. But this pure earth is adorned with all these, and with gold and silver, and other things of a similar nature: for all these are naturally apparent, since they are both numerous and large, and are diffused everywhere throughout the earth; so that to behold it is the spectacle of blessed spectators. This earth too contains many other animals and men, some of whom inhabit its middle parts; others dwell about the air, as we do about the sea; and others reside in islands which the air flows round, and which are situated not far from the continent.

b And in one word, what water and the sea are to us, that air is to them: but what air is to us, that aether is to the inhabitants of this pure earth. But the seasons there are endowed with such an excellent temperament, that the inhabitants are never molested with disease, and live for a much longer time than those who dwell in our regions; and they surpass us in sight, hearing, and prudence, and everything of this kind, as much as air excels water in purity - and aether, air. And besides this, they have groves c and temples of the Gods, in which the Gods dwell in reality; and likewise oracles and divinations, and sensible perceptions of the Gods, and such-like associations with them. The sun too, and moon, and stars, are seen by them such as they really are; and in every other respect their felicity is of a correspondent nature.

d And in this manner indeed the whole earth naturally subsists, and the parts which are situated about it. But it contains about the whole of its ambit many places in its hollows; some of which are deeper and extended than the region which we inhabit: but others are deeper, indeed, but yet have a less chasm than the places of our abode; and there are certain parts which are less deep, but broader than ours. But all these are in many places perforated into one another under the earth, according to narrower and broader avenues, and have passages of communication through which a great quantity of water flows into the different hollows of the earth, as into bowls; and besides this, there are huge ever-flowing rivers under the earth, and of hot and cold waters; likewise a great quantity of fire, mighty rivers of fire, and many of moist mire, e some of which are purer, and others more muddy; as in Sicily there are rivers of mud, which flow before a stream of fire, which is itself a flaming torrent. And from these the several places are filled, into which each flows at particular times. But all these are moved upwards and downwards, oscillations situated in the earth. These oscillations are as follows: is one of the chasms of the earth; and this the greatest, and bored right through the whole earth. And of this Homer thus speaks:

Far, very far, where under earth is found
A gulf, of every depth, the most profound:

112a which he elsewhere and many other poets denominate Tartarus. For into this chasm there is a conflux of all rivers, from which they again flow upwards. But each derives b its quality from the earth through which it flows.

{{here Socrates describes a complex system of rivers flowing upwards and downwards through subterranean water-courses, akin to the rushing in and out of our breathing. He continues:}}

113a The other rivers, indeed, are many, great, and various: but among this abundance there are certain streams, four in number, of which the greatest, and which circularly flows round the earth the outermost of all, is called the Ocean. But that which flows opposite, and in a contrary direction to this, is Acheron; which, flowing through other solitary places, and under the earth, devolves its waters into the Acherusian marsh, into which many souls of the dead pass; and abiding there for certain destined spaces of time, some of which are more and others less extended, they are again sent into the generations of animals. The third river of these hurls itself forth in the middle, and near its source falls into a mighty place, burning with abundance of fire, and produces a lake greater than our sea, and hot with water and mud. But it proceeds from hence in a circle, turbulent and miry, and, surrounding the earth, arrives both elsewhere and at the extremities of the Acherusian marsh, with the water of which it does not become mingled; but, often revolving itself under the earth, flows into the more downward parts of Tartarus. And this is the river which they still denominate Pyriphlegethon; the streams of which send forth dissevered rivers to various parts of the earth. But the fourth river, which is opposite to this, first falls as it is said into a place dreadful and wild, and wholly tinged with an azure colour, which they denominate Styx: and the influxive streams of this river form the Stygian marsh. But falling into this, and receiving vehement powers in its water, it hides itself under the earth, and, rolling round, proceeds contrary to Pyriphlegethon, and meets with it in the Acherusian marsh, in a contrary direction. Nor is the water of this river mingled with any thing, but, revolving in a circle, it hurls itself into Tartarus, in a course opposite to Pyriphlegethon. But its name, according to the poets, is Cocytus.

d These being thus naturally constituted, when the dead arrive at that place into which the daemon leads each,² in the first place they are judged, as well those who have lived in a becoming manner, and piously, and justly, as those who have not. And those who appear to have passed a middle kind of life, proceeding to Acheron, and ascending the vehicles prepared for them, arrive in these at the Acherusian lake, and dwell there; till being purified, and having suffered punishment for any injuries they may have committed, they are enlarged; and each receives the reward of his beneficence, according to his deserts.

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But those who appear to be incurable, through the magnitude of their offences, because they have perpetrated either many and great sacrileges, or many unjust slaughters, and such as are contrary to law, or other things of this kind - these, a destiny adapted to their guilt hurls into Tartarus, from which they will *never* be

² In the myth of Er, in the *Republic*, Socrates describes how each soul chooses a life according to its own wisdom and disposition; and having chosen it is given a daemon – a kind of guardian angel – who attempts to lead the soul through its self-chosen life: its last task in this cycle is to lead the soul to its judgement in order to complete the circle it has been allotted.

discharged.³ But those who are found to have committed curable, but yet mighty crimes, such as those who have been guilty through anger of any violence against their father or mother, and have lived the remainder of their lives penitent for the offence, or who have become homicides in any other similar manner; with respect to these, it is necessary that they should fall into Tartarus: but after they have fallen, and have dwelt there for a year, the waves hurl them out of Tartarus; and the homicides indeed into Cocytus, but the violators of fathers and mothers into Pyriphlegethon. But when, being borne along by these rivers, they arrive at the Acherusian marsh, they here bellow and invoke one part those whom they have slaughtered, and another part those whom they have injured. But, invoking these, they suppliantly entreat that they would suffer them to enter into the lake, and forgive them. And if they persuade them to do this, they depart, and find an end to their maladies: but if they are unable to accomplish this, they are carried back again into Tartarus, and from thence again into the rivers. And they do not cease from suffering this, till they have persuaded those they have injured to forgiveness. For this punishment was ordained them by the judges.

But those who shall appear to have lived most excellently, with respect to piety - these are they, who, being liberated and dismissed from these places in the earth, as from the abodes of a prison, shall arrive at the pure habitation on high, and dwell on the aetherial earth. And among these, those who are sufficiently purified by philosophy shall live without bodies, through the whole of the succeeding time, and shall arrive at habitations yet more beautiful than these, which it is neither easy to describe, nor is the present time sufficient for such an undertaking.

But for the sake of these particulars which we have related, we should undertake every thing, Simmias, that we may participate of virtue and prudence in the present life. For the reward is beautiful, and the hope mighty. To affirm, indeed, that these things subsist exactly as I have described them, is not the province of a man endued with intellect. But to assert that either these or certain particulars of this kind take place, with respect to our souls and their habitations - since our soul appears to be immortal - this is, I think, both becoming, and deserves to be hazarded by him who believes in its reality. For the danger is beautiful; and it is necessary to allure ourselves

³ Many of the ancient commentators of the Platonic tradition point out that Plato has two cycles in mind when talking about the path of the soul: one cycle is the movement from choice of life, through the living of it, thence to the judgement of it, and finally to the reaping of its rewards – for good or ill – after which another round of choice, life, judgement and reward begins. But the other cycle is a much greater one – in the Phaedrus it is said symbolically to consist of ten lesser cycles in all. This greater period (again symbolically said to be of a 10,000 year duration), say the ancient commentators, is the "forever" which is required in order to purge the effects of the truly monstrous crimes of the worst tyrants. Nothing, says Proclus, is created in vain by God or by Nature, and therefore an immortal soul is ultimately curable of even the worst forms of wickedness. See the next paragraph where those who have been purified through philosophy shall live for "the whole of the succeeding time" without bodies – meaning for the whole of the rest of the great period.

with things of this kind, as with enchantments: and, on this account, I produced the fable which you have just now heard me relate.

115a^e But, for the sake of these, it is proper that the man should be confident about his soul, who in the present life bidding farewell to those pleasures which regard the body and its ornaments, as things foreign from his nature, has earnestly applied himself to disciplines, as things of far greater consequence; and who having adorned his soul not with a foreign but its own proper ornament, *viz.* with temperance and justice, fortitude, liberty and truth, expects a migration to Hades, as one who is ready to depart whenever he shall be called upon by Fate. You, therefore, Simmias and Cebes, and the rest who are here assembled, will each depart in some period of time posterior to the present; but

Me now calling, Fate demands:

(as some tragic poet would say) and it is almost time that I should betake myself to the bath. For it appears to me better to wash myself before I drink the poison, and not to trouble the women with washing my dead body.

Translated by Thomas Taylor with minor amendments.