

Plato's *Phaedrus* and the power of Eros

“Whither are you going, my dear Phaedrus, and from whence came you?” With these words Plato opens a dialogue which might be called his manifesto of philosophy: it draws the reader in to a consideration of the fundamental questions of human life, touching upon all the primary teachings of the Platonic tradition, and showing how intimately bound love and truth are in the philosophic life of the soul. This love is a desiring form of love – the kind ruled over by Eros, and Socrates has much to say about the inspiration which comes from him:

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" . . . many then are the beautiful works arising from divine mania, . . . So that we ought not to be afraid of mania; nor should any reason disturb us, which endeavours to evince that we ought to prefer a prudent friend to one who is divinely agitated: for he who asserts this, ought likewise to show, in order to gain the victory, that love was not sent from the Gods for the utility of the lover and his beloved. But, on the contrary, it must now be shown by us that a mania of this kind was sent by the Gods, for the purpose of producing the greatest felicity. The demonstration, indeed, will be to the unworthy incredible, but to the wise, an object of belief. It is necessary, therefore, in the first place, that, beholding the passions and operations of the divine and human soul, we should understand the truth concerning the nature of each."

This praise of mania has been prompted by what has come before in the dialogue which up until this point has been dominated by a recital of a speech of Lysias (which presented the idea that no-one should have sex with someone who is in love with them because the insanity of love injures the beloved) and a long speech of Socrates where he is invited to match and better Lysias' arguments. Having made his speech to the applause of Phaedrus, Socrates is about to depart the scene when he is prompted by his inner voice to stay and recant his criticism of Eros and the effects of his mania or inspiration.

He begins his recantation (which is known as his Palinode¹) by defining the soul as that which is self-motive, and from the implications of this, Socrates says that that which is truly self-motive must also be immortal. Having established (at least as far as he is concerned) the immortality of the soul, the rest of this speech considers the great journey that something which is immortal and spans many terrestrial lives could take. He offers us a mythic image in which the soul is depicted as a winged chariot, drawn by two horses of differing characters and guided by a charioteer which, he says, is our "principal part." The whole assembly – charioteer, horses, winged chariot – in its initial phase rides in a procession across the heavens, following the Gods who also ride in chariots; but while the chariot of the Gods are evenly balanced and are able to negotiate the heavens with ease, this is not the case with our souls because "one of the horses is good and beautiful, and is composed from things of this kind; but the other is of a contrary nature, and is composed of contrary qualities: and on this account our course is necessarily difficult and hard." The failure to control the horses means that the soul suffers damage to its wings, and Socrates comments:

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"Every soul takes care of everything which is inanimate, and revolves about the whole of heaven, becoming situated at different times in different forms. While it is perfect, indeed, and winged, its course is sublime, and it governs the universe. But the soul whose

¹ A palinode (from palin = back, and ode = a poem or song) is the technical name of a poem which reverses the affirmations of an earlier one.

wings suffer a defluxion verges downward, till something solid terminates its descent; whence it receives a terrene body, as its destined receptacle, which appears to move itself through the power of the soul: and the whole is called an animal composed from soul and body, and is surnamed a mortal animal."

This is the beginning of the soul's experiences in a physical body, which are therefore a mixture of the immaterial and the material – the one side being derived from the soul's essential and immortal nature, the other from the material and mortal receptacle. But the procession through the heavens give it two particularly noticeable experiences which it carries with it into the terrestrial life, albeit in an almost forgotten form, so that we are only partially conscious of the impulses springing from those submerged memories. So what are the two experiences? Let's go back to the *Phaedrus*, and hear how Socrates describes the procession:

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"Likewise Zeus, the mighty leader in the heavens, driving his winged chariot, begins the divine procession, adorning and disposing all things with providential care. The army of Gods and daemons,² distributed into eleven parts, follows his course; but Hestia alone remains in the habitation of the Gods.³ But each of the other Gods belonging to the twelve, presides over the office committed to his charge. There are many, therefore, and blessed spectacles and processions within the heavens, to which the genus of the blessed Gods is converted as each accomplishes the proper employment of his nature. But *will* and *power* are the perpetual attendants of their processions: for envy is far distant from the divine choir of Gods.

But when they proceed to the banquet, and the enjoyment of delicious food, they sublimely ascend in their progression to the sub-celestial arch. And, indeed, the vehicles of the Gods being properly adapted to the guiding reins, and equally balanced, proceed with an easy motion: but the vehicles of other natures are attended in their progressions with difficulty and labour. For the horse, participating of depravity, becomes heavy; and when he has not been properly disciplined by the charioteers, verges and gravitates to the earth. And in this case labour, and an extreme contest, are proposed to the soul. But those who are denominated immortals, when they arrive at the summit, proceeding beyond the heights of heaven, stand on its back: and while they are established in this eminence, the circumference carries them round, and they behold what the region beyond the heavens contains.

But the supercelestial place has not yet been celebrated by any of our poets, nor will it ever be praised according to its dignity and worth. It subsists, however, in the following manner; for we should dare to affirm the truth, especially when speaking concerning the truth: without colour, without figure, and without contact, subsisting as true essence, it is

² According to the Platonic tradition, daemons are souls who act as intermediaries between the Gods and mortal creatures – they guide the manifested world in order to ensure that the will of the Gods is carried into the material and temporal world. Some daemons act as personal guides, and every human soul is accompanied through its terrestrial life by its guardian daemon – it was Socrates' daemon who was his "inner voice" which prompted him to stay and recant his earlier argument against Eros. The concept of tutelary daemon was transferred to Christianity in an abbreviated form and renamed a "guardian angel". The difference between a daemonic soul and a human soul is that the view that the daemon gets in the procession across the heavens is a clearer one, and so it does not forget the ideas which it sees there, whereas the human soul only gets a glimpse, and is therefore liable to forget and fall into ignorance. As a consequence of this view, Platonism has no room for "fallen angels" or essentially evil daemons as they are portrayed in latter monotheistic theologies.

³ Traditionally and symbolically there we said to be twelve Olympic Gods, and Hestia (in Latin, Vesta) is the Goddess of the Hearth – the one who stays beside the fire which represents the stable centre of all being: the name Hestia has its roots in the Indo-European word from which we get *is* – *est* – *este* – *essence* and many others which indicate the abiding nature at the heart of each thing. Thus Hestia remains unmoving while the other Gods of the twelve process through the heavens.

perceived by contemplative intellect alone, the governor of the soul; about which essence, the genus of true knowledge, resides. As the intelligence, therefore, of divinity revolves with intellect and pure knowledge, so likewise the intelligence of every soul, when it receives a condition accommodated to its nature, perceiving *true being* for a time, it becomes enamoured with it, and contemplating truth, is nourished and filled with joy, till the circumference by a circular revolution brings it back again to its pristine situation. But in this circuit it beholds *justice herself*, it beholds *temperance*, and *knowledge herself*: not that with which generation is present, nor in which one thing has a particular local residence in another,⁴ and to which we give the *call* being; but that which *is* knowledge in *true being*. And, besides this, contemplating and banqueting on other true beings in the same manner, again entering within the heavens, it returns to its proper home. But, when it returns, the charioteer, stopping his horses at the manger, presents them with ambrosia, and together with it, nectar for drink. And this is the life of the Gods.

But, with respect to other souls, such as follow divinity in the best manner, and become similar to its nature, raise the head of the charioteer into the supercelestial place; where he is borne along with the circumference; but is disturbed by the course of the horses, and scarcely obtains the vision of perfect realities. But other souls at one time raise, and at another time depress, the head of the charioteer: and, through the violence of the horses, they partly see indeed, and are partly destitute of vision. . . And here, indeed, many become lame through the fault of the charioteers, many break many of their wings, and all of them, involved in mighty labour, depart destitute of the perception of reality; but after their departure they use a food composed from *opinion*; through which there is a great endeavour to behold where the *plain of truth* is situated. For, from a *meadow* of this kind, that which is best in the soul receives its proper nourishment; and from this the nature of the wing is healed, by which the soul is enabled to ascend."

A careful reading of this curious word picture shows that the soul has two experiences in this procession through the realms of eternity: the first is of the Gods within whose train they are being led; the second is of *real being* – or to it more familiar terms, of pure ideas or forms. While its relatively easy to understand what Plato is trying to indicate by the vision of pure ideas – those forms which according to Platonic metaphysics are the producers and shapers of material reality, and which underlie all human attempts at knowledge – the question of the Gods is more difficult to understand. For the Platonic tradition the Gods are not mythological creations, nor a superstitious remnant from pre-philosophy times, but rather the powers that begin the separation of the originating First Principle which transcends all things and all qualities. They are the primal unities that first emerge from the Unity of Unities – it is the reality of a multiplicity of unities which allows all things which follow in the metaphysical scheme to be individuals: the idea that each soul follows in a particular train of a particular God or Goddess means that our deepest nature is coloured by the character of that deity. It is this colouring which tempers our experience of Eros – the divine power which connects everything in the universe. We will return to this more recondite teaching of the tradition in a moment, but first we'll see what happens when we see reminders of the eternal beauties we saw in the super-celestial vision in the temporal world:

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"For the philosophic memory perpetually adheres as much as possible to those concerns, by an application to which even a God becomes divine. But he who properly uses meditations of this kind, being always initiated in perfect mysteries, alone acquires true perfection. And such a one being separated from human studies and pursuits, and

⁴ What Plato here means is that in this contemplation the soul sees, for example, beauty itself, and not an image of beauty which has taken up residence in a particular body.

adhering to that which is divine, is accused by the multitude as insane, while in the mean time, from being filled with divine enthusiasm, he is concealed from the multitude.

This whole discourse, therefore, which respects the fourth kind of mania, tends to the means by which any one, on perceiving a portion of terrene beauty, from a reminiscence of that which is true, may recover his wings, and, when he has recovered them, may struggle to fly away. But since he cannot accomplish this according to his wish, like a bird looking on high and despising inferior concerns, he is accused as one insanelly affected. This enthusiasm,⁵ therefore, is of all enthusiasms the best, and is composed from the best, both to the possessor and the participant: and he who is under the influence of this mania when he loves beautiful objects, is denominated a *lover*. For, as we have before observed, the soul of every man has from its nature perceived realities, or it could not have entered into the human form.

But to recollect superior natures from objects of sense, is not easy to all men; neither to those who then were engaged but a short time in the contemplation of those divine objects; nor to those who descending hither have been unfortunate; nor to such as, turning to injustice from certain associations, have become oblivious of the sacred mysteries which they once beheld. And hence but a few remain whose memory is sufficient for this exalted purpose. But these, when they behold any similitude of supernal forms, they are astonished, and as it were rapt above themselves: and at the same time they are ignorant what this passion may be, because they are not endued with a sufficient perception. Indeed, we behold no splendour in similitudes which are here, of justice, temperance, and whatever else is precious in the soul; but very few are able, and even to these it is difficult, through certain dark instruments, to perceive from these images the genus of that which is represented. But we then saw splendid beauty, when we obtained together with that happy choir [of Gods and their followers], this blessed vision and contemplation. And we indeed beheld it together with Zeus,⁶ but others in conjunction with some other God; at the same time being initiated in those mysteries which it is lawful to call the most blessed of all mysteries. And these divine orgies⁷ were celebrated by us while we were perfect, and free from those evils which awaited us in a succeeding period of time. We likewise were initiated in, and became spectators of, entire, simple, quietly stable, and blessed visions, resident in a pure light; being ourselves pure, and liberated from this surrounding vestment, which we denominate body, and to which we are now bound, like an oyster to its shell.

With these speculations, therefore, we should gratify our memory; for the sake of which, and through a desire of those realities which we once beheld, I have given such an extent to my discourse. But beauty, as we have said, shone upon us during our progressions with the Gods; but on our arrival hither we possessed the power of perceiving it, shining most perspicuously, through the clearest of our senses."

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Socrates claims that erotic love is actually beneficial to both lover and beloved because what each is doing is sensing the presence of their particular presiding God or Goddess in the other, and that when such love is given proper expression, what is actually happening is that they are attempting to draw from the depth of the mortal being that which is divine and immortal. Socrates explains this in this extract:

⁵ The word enthusiasm is used in its original sense – "being filled by deity."

⁶ Both Socrates and Phaedrus have claimed a lineage from the legendary heroes of Greek antiquity, who were themselves the grandchildren of Zeus.

⁷ Again the word is used in its original sense – an orgy in the ancient world was a celebration of the presence of a God or Goddess in the soul of worshippers, who were thus moved to inspired activities.

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"And thus every one honours the God, round whom he harmoniously revolves, and imitates his life as much as possible, and as long as he remains free from corruption: and after this manner he lives here his first generation, and associates with, and conducts himself towards, his beloved and others. Everyone, therefore, chooses the love of beauty after his own fashion, and, as if he considered it with respect to himself a God, he fabricates and adorns it like a statue, and as that which is the object of his adoration and sacrifice. Such, therefore, [for example] as are the followers of Zeus seek after a soul belonging to this God for the object of their affection. Hence, they consider whether he is naturally philosophic, and adapted to command [the particular characteristic of Zeus]; and when they find their beloved with such dispositions, they endeavour by all possible means to render him completely such.

If, therefore, they have not already endeavoured to obtain what they desire, then, through the incitements of love, they anxiously strive for its possession; learning by what means it may be acquired; and investigating by themselves how to discover the nature of their proper deity, they at length find it, through being compelled to look with vehemence towards their presiding God. But when they become connected with him through memory, and are agitated by a divine influence, they receive from him manners and pursuits, as far it is possible for man to participate of divinity. And as they consider the object of their love as the cause of all this, their love becomes still more vehement. If, too, they draw their afflatus from Zeus, then, like the female priestesses of Bacchus, they pour their enthusiasm into the soul of their beloved, and by this means become as much as possible most similar to their ruling God. But such as follow Hera seek after a royal soul; which when they have discovered, they act in every respect towards it in a manner similar to the attendant on Zeus. But the followers of Apollo, and of each of the other Gods, imitating their several deities, seek after a beloved object who is naturally affected like themselves. This when they have obtained, both by imitation, persuasion, and elegant manners, they endeavour by all means to lead their beloved to the pursuits and idea of their peculiar God; not, indeed, by employing envy and illiberal malevolence towards the objects of their affection, but by endeavouring to conduct them to a perfect similitude to the God whom they particularly adore.

The willing desire, therefore, and end of true lovers, if they obtain the object of their pursuit, is such as I have described: and thus they become illustrious and blessed, through the inspiration of love towards the beloved, when the beloved object is once obtained."

The speech concludes with Socrates saying that if those who are inspired by Eros gain control of the horses which should be responsive to the reigns of the pure reason of the charioteer they will return to their starry home, in which they will again look upon the true beauties which are there. He says,

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"If now the better elements of the mind, which lead to a well ordered life and to philosophy, prevail, they live a life of happiness and harmony here on earth, self controlled and orderly, holding in subjection that which causes evil in the soul and giving freedom to that which makes for virtue; and when this life is ended they are light and winged, for they have conquered in one of the truly Olympic contests. Neither human wisdom nor divine inspiration can confer upon man any greater blessing than this."