

Porphyry and the philosophic death

One of the central themes of Platonic philosophy is the idea of a non-physical soul giving life to the body it occupies, but being separable from it. In the case of humans this soul is marked by its ability to both reason and choose to live virtuously. Plato and the philosophers that followed, thought this self-motivity allowed for a certain independence of soul from body (though not body from soul), and therefore a lived perfection based on knowledge and virtue and not the body.

The *Phaedo* is one of Plato's most dramatic dialogues, and deals with Socrates' final hours before his execution. It is often accused of being the most dualistic of his work, calling on a fleeing from the physical body and political life. He talks about philosophy as a study of "how to die and be dead". This can be read in many different ways: a complete denouncement of the body and its pleasures, a turning away from an outward or political life, or as a change in consciousness towards a view of the human self as an immortal soul and whatever that entails. The whole dialogue, with its dialectical exploration of proofs of the immortality of the soul, and its depiction of a body dying, can be seen as an initiation and purification, in itself. Let's read some extracts of what Socrates said in his second apology/defence of the philosophic life (the first being in his trial and the subject of the *Apology*) and his choice not to escape his sentence:

The *Phaedo* (64a3-69e5)

"Those who are conversant with philosophy in a proper manner, seem to have concealed from others that the whole of their study is nothing else than how to die and be dead."

Do you think that death is anything?

Entirely so.

Is it anything else than a liberation of soul from body? and is not this to die, for the body to be liberated from the soul, and to subsist apart by itself? and likewise for the soul to be liberated from the body, and to be essentially separate? Is death anything else but this?

It is no other (says Simmias).

Consider then, excellent man, whether the same things appear to you as to me; for from hence I think we shall understand better the subjects of our investigation. Does it appear to you that the philosopher is a man who is anxiously concerned about things which are called pleasures, such as meats and drinks?

In the smallest degree, Socrates (says Simmias).

But what, is he sedulously employed in venereal concerns?

By no means.

Or does such a man appear to you to esteem other particulars which regard the observance of the body, such as the acquisition of excellent garments and sandals, and other

ornaments of the body? whether does he appear to you to esteem or despise such particulars, employing them only so far as an abundant necessity requires?

A true philosopher (says Simmias) appears to me to be one who will despise everything of this kind.

Does it, therefore, appear to you (says Socrates), that the whole employment of such a one will not consist in things which regard the body, but in separating himself from the body as much as possible, and in converting himself to his soul?

It does appear so to me.

Is it not, therefore, first of all evident, in things of this kind, that a philosopher, in a manner far surpassing other men, separates his soul in the highest degree from communion with the body?

It appears so.

And to *the many*, O Simmias, it appears that he who accounts nothing of this kind pleasant, and who does not partake of them, is not worthy to live; but that he nearly approaches to death who is not concerned about the pleasures which subsist through the body.

You entirely speak the truth.

But what with respect to the acquisition of wisdom? Is the body an impediment or not, if any one associates it in the investigation of wisdom? What I mean is this: Have sight and hearing in men any truth? or is the case such as the poets perpetually sing, that

We nothing accurate or see or hear?

.....

Will not he, therefore, accomplish this in the most pure manner, who in the highest degree betakes himself to each through his dianoëtic [or reasoning] power, neither employing sight in conjunction with the dianoëtic activity, nor attracting any other sense, together with his reasoning; but who, exercising a dianoëtic activity by itself sincere, at the same time endeavours to hunt after everything which has true being¹ subsisting by itself separate and pure; and who in the most eminent degree is liberated from the eyes and ears, and in short from the whole body, as disturbing the soul, and not suffering it to acquire truth and wisdom by its conjunction? Will not such a man, Simmias, procure for himself real being, if this can ever be asserted of any one?

You speak the truth, Socrates (says Simmias), in a transcendent manner.

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And then, as it appears, we shall obtain the object of our desire, and of which we profess ourselves lovers, *viz.* wisdom, when we are dead, as our discourse evinces; but by no means while we are alive: for, if we can know nothing purely in conjunction with the body, one of these two consequences must ensue, either that we can never possess knowledge, or that we must obtain it after death; for then the soul will subsist apart by itself, separate from the body, but never before this takes place; and while we live in the body, as it appears, we shall approach in the nearest manner possible to knowledge, if in

¹ For the Platonic tradition the eternal truths of the higher world have *true being*: this contrasts with things of the temporal world of materiality because all material things are in a state of *becoming to be*.

the most eminent degree we have no association with the body, nor any communication with it (except what the greatest necessity requires), nor are filled with its nature, but purify ourselves from its defiling connection, till Divinity itself dissolves our bonds.

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But does not purification consist in this, as we formerly asserted in our discourse: I mean, in separating the soul from the body in the most eminent degree, and in accustoming it to call together and collect itself essentially on all sides from the body, and to dwell as much as possible, both now and hereafter, alone by itself, becoming by this means liberated from the body as from detaining bonds?

Entirely so (said Simmias).

Is not death called a release and separation of the soul from body?

Perfectly so (says he).

But those alone who philosophize rightly, as we have said, always and especially providentially attend to the release of the soul: and this is the meditation of philosophers, a release and separation of the soul from the body; or do you not think so?

.....

But, O blessed Simmias, this is by no means the right road to virtue, to change pleasures for pleasures, pains for pains, fear for fear, and the greater for the lesser, like pieces of money: but that alone is the proper coin, I mean wisdom, for which all these ought to be changed. And indeed, for the sake of this, and with this everything must in reality be bought and sold, both fortitude and temperance, justice, and, in one word, true virtue, which subsists with wisdom, whether pleasures and pains, and everything else of this kind, are present or absent: but if these are separated from wisdom, and changed from one another, such virtue does not merit to be called even a shadowy description, but is in reality servile, and possesses nothing salutary and true. But that which is in reality true virtue is a purification from everything of this kind; and temperance and justice, fortitude, and prudence itself, are each of them a certain purification. And those who instituted the mysteries for us appear to have been by no means contemptible persons, but to have really signified formerly, in an obscure manner, *that whoever descended into Hades uninitiated, and without being a partaker of the mysteries, should be plunged into mire; but that whoever arrived there, purified and initiated, should dwell with the Gods*. For, as it is said by those who write about the mysteries,

The thyrsus-bearers numerous are seen,
But few the Bacchuses have always been.

These few are, in my opinion, no other than those who philosophize rightly; and that I may be ranked in the number of these, I shall leave nothing unattempted, but exert myself in all possible ways.

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Earlier in the dialogue, Socrates had said that suicide was not what he was going to talk about – choosing to kill the body was, he claimed, forbidden under normal circumstances: "Perhaps, therefore, it is not irrational to assert, that a man ought not to kill himself before Divinity lays him under a certain necessity of doing so, such as I am subject to at present." That divinity should decide "when to release the bonds" is,

perhaps a reference to an idea which comes up in the *Timaeus*: here the Intellectual Creator (the "Demiurge") says that he has produced the truly immaterial rational soul, but that the Gods of the mundane world, should take this and weave the irrational elements around it, binding the soul temporarily to the borrowed matter of the world, which itself is to be returned upon the death of the body.

Porphyry of Tyre was a Platonist philosopher and lived 234-305 C.E. Not much of his work survives but in his 'Auxiliaries to the perception of intelligible natures', we get an insight, through a series of sequential paragraphs into his philosophy. If the separation of the soul from the body (i.e. death) allows us to know or raise ourselves in some manner to experience real being – the beautiful itself, justice itself – this treatise is an examination of the philosophical reasons for how and why this should be done. The first few examine the soul as being separable from body – a key premise for some form of death being desirable. In the next few he articulates the connection between body and soul, drawing at least from the *Phaedo* and the *Timaeus*, and exploring the two types of connection between the two as Socrates talks about in the *Phaedo*:

7. The soul is bound to the body through turning to the corporeal passions;² and again liberated by becoming impassive to the body.

8. That which nature binds, nature also dissolves: and that which the soul binds, the soul likewise dissolves. Nature, indeed, bound the body to the soul; but the soul binds herself to the body. Nature, therefore, liberates the body from the soul; but the soul liberates herself from the body.

9. Hence there is a twofold death; the one, indeed, universally known, in which the body is liberated from the soul; but the other peculiar to philosophers, in which the soul is liberated from the body. Nor does the one entirely follow the other.

....

11. Those things of an incorporeal nature, when descending, are distributed into parts, and multiplied about individuals with a diminution of power; but when they ascend by their energies beyond bodies, they become united, and proceed into a simultaneous subsistence, through exuberance of power.

In this last paragraph we can see an echo of Socrates in the *Phaedo* – the nature of soul and how it directs its energies towards something other than the physical universe. This leads both Socrates and Porphyry to identify cathartic (or purifying) virtue as the mechanism for how the philosopher "dies". For the Platonic tradition, there are three distinct levels of soul virtue, but on each level wisdom (or prudence), fortitude, temperance, and justice must operate. We can think of these as being the virtues of the parts of the tri-partite soul model – reason, anger (thumos), desire – with justice bringing the parts into a whole. The three levels of virtue pertain to the direction of the powers of the soul: directed to the outer world we exercise *political virtue*; 'dying' or separating the soul from the body by directing the powers inward to the soul itself is the exercise of purifactory or *cathartic virtue*; and once separated and directing the powers towards the transcendent world constitutes the theoretic or *contemplative virtues*. Porphyry writes:

² The word *passions* is rooted in the Greek word *pathos* – it indicates something which is passive to something other than itself. So although we often consider someone who is passionate as being very active, in reality there is a sense in which someone who is subject to passion has a diminished agency.

34. There is one kind of virtue pertaining to the political character, and another to the man who tends to contemplation, and who on this account is called theoretic, and is now a beholder (of intellectual and intelligible natures). And there are also other virtues pertaining to intellect,³ so far as it is intellect, and separate from soul. The virtues indeed of the political character, and which consist in the moderation of the passions, are characterized by following and being obedient to the reasoning about that which is becoming in actions. Hence, looking to an harmless converse with neighbours, these virtues are called, from the aggregation of fellowship, political. And here prudence indeed subsists about the reasoning part; fortitude about the irascible part (*thumos*); temperance in the consent and symphony of the epithymetic (desire nature) with the reasoning part; and justice, in each of these performing its proper employment with respect to governing and being governed. But the virtues of him who proceeds to the contemplative life, consist in a departure from terrestrial concerns. Hence, also, they are called purifications, being surveyed in the refraining from corporeal actions, and avoiding sympathies with the body. For these are the virtues of the soul elevating itself to true being. The political virtues therefore adorn the mortal man, and are the forerunners of purifications. For it is necessary that he who is adorned by the cathartic virtues, should abstain from doing anything precedaneously in conjunction with body. Hence, in these purifications, not to opine with body, but to energize alone, gives subsistence to *prudence*; which derives its perfection through energizing intellectually with purity. But not to be similarly passive with the body, constitutes *temperance*. Not to fear a departure from body, as into something void, and non-entity, gives subsistence to *fortitude*. But when reason and intellect are the leaders, and there is no resistance (from the irrational part), *justice* is produced. The disposition therefore, according to the political virtues, is surveyed in the moderation of the passions; having for its end to live as man conformable to nature. But the disposition, according to the theoretic virtues, is beheld in apathy,⁴ the end of which is a similitude to God.

This purification is also mentioned in the *Timeaus* (90b):

"In him, therefore, who vehemently labours to satisfy the cravings of desire and ambition, all the conceptions of his soul must be necessarily mortal; and himself as much as possible must become entirely mortal, since he leaves nothing unaccomplished which tends to increase his perishable part. But it is necessary that he who is sedulously employed in the acquisition of knowledge, who is anxious to acquire the wisdom of truth, and who employs his most vigorous exertions in this one pursuit; - it is perfectly necessary that such a one, if he touches on the truth, should be endued with wisdom about immortal and divine concerns; and that he should participate of immortality, as far as human nature permits, without leaving any part of it behind."

³ We should be careful to avoid mixing up our normal use of the word intellect with the Platonic one. In the Platonic tradition *intellect* is essentially eternal and what other traditions sometimes call *spiritual*: thus something which is actually intellectual is immutable, pure and possessed of great power; when something such as the human soul properly participates in intellect its own character begins to reflect these properties. In Platonic metaphysics *the intelligible* is the contemplative object of intellectual natures, and as such is of an even higher status than intellect: the intelligible is real being.

⁴ The translator is using the word *apathy* here in its original meaning: it indicates a stillness or freedom from being externally moved.

So how can we view purification and separation both as a process and destination and what are the consequences for the political life? How does a purified or separated life work, especially in the context of Plato's theory of reincarnation and the universe being an essentially "good" place? What kind of sympathy with the body is best, what does apathy to the passions mean? Is the soul's ability to know key to its happiness or perfection? What about its connection with life? Two more quotes to finish on, one from Plotinus and two from the Theatetus:

As Plotinus says: "Nevertheless the endeavour is not to be without sin, but to be a God."

Theatetus 177a "If, likewise, we should say that these men, unless they are liberated from their dire conduct, will not, when they die, be received into that place which is pure from evil, but that after death they will always retain the similitude of the life they have lived upon earth, the evil associating with the evil, - "

Theatetus 176a: "But it is impossible, Theodorus, that evils should be destroyed; (for it is necessary that there should be always something contrary to good) nor yet can they be established in the Gods; but they necessarily revolve about a mortal nature, and this place of our abode. On this account we ought to endeavour to fly from hence thither, with the utmost celerity. *But this flight consists in becoming as much as possible similar to divinity. And this similitude is acquired by becoming just and holy, in conjunction with prudence.*"