

Socrates as the Philosophic Theseus

with extracts from the *Phaedo*

Socrates is portrayed in the dialogues of Plato as the model hero-sage philosopher – exhorting youths to become philosophers; standing firm against the sophists who misused their cleverness for unworthy purposes and who promoted false opinions; and guiding those who showed themselves willing along the neglected paths of wisdom. In the *Phaedo* – the dialogue in which Socrates argues for the immortality of the soul, and in which he willingly drinks the executioner's cup of hemlock – the role of this philosophic hero is constantly linked to the mythic hero Theseus and especially to his quest to defeat the half-man, half-bull Minotaur in the labyrinth of Minos in Crete. The speakers of the dialogue are Echeocrates and Phaedo, the former asking Phaedo about the conversation and actions which took place in Socrates' cell on the day of his death. He first asks why it was that Socrates spent so many days awaiting his execution, and Phaedo replies that the winds delayed the return of a certain ship to Athens -

58b "This is the ship, as the Athenians say, in which Theseus formerly carried the twice seven young children to Crete, and preserved both them and himself. The Athenians, therefore, as it is reported, then vowed to Apollo, that if the children were preserved, they would lead every year a sacred spectacle to Delos; which, from that time, they regularly send every year to the God. As soon, therefore, as the preparations for the sacred spectacle commence, the law orders that the city shall be purified, and that no one shall be put to death by a public decree till the ship has arrived at Delos, and again returned to Athens. But this sometimes takes a long time in accomplishing, when the winds impede their passage; but the festival itself commences when the priest of Apollo has crowned the stern of the ship. Now this, as I told you, took place on the day preceding the trial; and on this account that length of time happened to Socrates in prison between his sentence and his death."

We need, then to go back to this mythic quest, to see why Plato introduces it here:

King Minos ruled the island kingdom of Crete with great honour and power. It was his custom to make an annual sacrifice of the best bull of his fine herd of cattle to Poseidon, God of the surrounding ocean. It seems that one year he found no animal worthy of the God, and so prayed to Zeus that he should be sent one which would be a fitting sacrifice; the prayer was answered and a wonderful bull appeared on the shores of the island. Being the gift of divinity, the beast far outshone the lesser cattle of the king's herd, and this caused Minos to hesitate - surely, he said to himself, the bull should be mated with the cows he owned in order to increase the stock of his herd. So it was that the proper sacrifice was not made, and the king incurred the wrath of the Gods, who had so benevolently smiled upon him until his apostasy.

Swift justice was visited upon the king through the instrument of his queen, Parsiphae, to whom the Gods sent madness in the form of an preternatural desire for the bull itself. Amongst the servants of the king was an exiled Athenian, Daidalos (who was to lose his son Icarus in their famed attempt to flee the island on wings of feathers and wax); it was to this most skilled of artisans that Parsiphae turned in order to consummate her passion for the bull. She prevailed upon him to make a lifelike wooden image of a cow into which the maddened queen climbed so that she could mate with the wonderful bull. From this coupling was born a half-man, half-bull creature, the Minotaur, who was called Asterion – *starry*.

Terrible was the monster and terrible was its appetite: Daidalos was ordered to create a nursery appropriate for such a creature and so he built the labyrinth under the palace of Minos. To this subterranean lair was brought an annual tribute of seven youths and seven maidens from Athens - victims offered on the dark altar of the shamed house of Minos.

When Theseus arrived at Athens from Troezen where he had been brought up in secret (his mother having been made pregnant by the visiting king of Athens, Aegeus) he volunteered to accompany the sacrificial fourteen in order to kill the monster and save them. He sailed to Crete and was welcomed with a banquet in the palace of Minos – and in the course of this feast became the object of the love of Ariadne, daughter of Minos and half sister of the Minotaur, who gave him a golden thread which would allow him to retrace his steps in the labyrinth, should he succeed in overcoming the monster. Tying the thread to the doorpost of the labyrinth Theseus enters the dark maze with confidence.

Meeting in deadly combat at the deep centre of the labyrinth, the hero put to death the Minotaur, followed the golden thread out of the maze, and made his escape from Minos, taking with him Ariadne whom he abandoned on the tiny island of Naxos, preferring instead Aigle. Ariadne was taken as wife to Dionysus. As a final twist the return of Theseus was marred by a forgetfulness which caused the death of his father, for an arrangement had been made that if Theseus survived his quest the ship which brought him back would sail under white sails instead of its normal black; but Theseus left the black sails up, and his father threw himself from his watching place of the cliffs above the sea, which thus claimed for Poseidon a fitting victim for the long-postponed sacrifice of Minos.

Now the *Phaedo* revolves around the question of the soul's relation to the body, and the doubts concerning its immortality. The problem for the soul, as far as the Platonic tradition is concerned, is the identification of the self with the material body and the resulting fear of death – so an important step for the philosopher to take is to clarify the thinking about what is called the separability of the soul from the body. In just the same way as the philosopher must be able to identify the Beautiful itself as something with a separate and viable existence from things which possess the quality of beauty, or the Just itself from instances of justice in the material world, so he or she must be able to recognize him- or herself as something

which still possesses a viable being after the death of the body, and as being more than the sum of the natural impulses which drive mortal existence. In other words we must deal with the illusions which press in upon the soul when it connects with nature and with materiality. The problem is explored in the dialogue, as Socrates asks about two conditions – the first, eternal truths ("real being" or "essence itself"), the second, temporal manifestations in the physical world:

Socrates: Whether is *essence itself* that which is always the same, or does it subsist differently at different times? And does *the equal itself, the beautiful itself*, and everything which truly is, ever receive any kind of mutation? Or does not everything which always truly *is*, and has a uniform subsistence, essentially abide the same, and never in any respect receive any mutation?

Cebes: It is necessary, Socrates that it should subsist according to the same.

Socrates: But what shall we say concerning many beautiful things, such as men, horses, garments, or other things of this kind, which are either equal or beautiful; and of all such as are synonymous to these? Do these also subsist according to the same, or rather are they not entirely contrary to those, so that they neither subsist similarly according to the same, either with respect to themselves or to one another, or, in one word, in any manner whatever?

Cebes: These never subsist in a similar condition.

Socrates: These, therefore, may be touched, may be seen and perceived by the other senses; but those natures which always subsist according to the same, cannot be perceived by any other means than the reason. But things of this kind are invisible, and cannot be seen. Are you willing, therefore, that we should establish two kinds of beings, the one visible, and the other invisible?

Cebes: Let us establish them.

Socrates: And that the invisible subsists always according to the same, but the visible never according to the same.

Cebes: And this also we will establish.

Socrates: Come then, is there anything else belonging to us, than on the one hand body, and on the other soul?

Cebes: Nothing else.

Socrates: To which kind, therefore, shall we say the body is more similar and allied?

Cebes: It is obvious to everyone, that it is allied to the visible kind.

Socrates: But what shall we say of the soul?

Cebes: . . . That it cannot be seen.

Socrates: The soul, therefore, is more similar to the invisible kind than the body, but the body is more similar to the visible.

Cebes: It is perfectly necessary it should be so, Socrates.

Socrates: And have we not also formerly asserted this, that the soul, when it employs the body in the perception of anything, either through sight, or hearing, or some other sense (for to perceive through sense is to perceive through body), then, indeed, it is drawn by the body to things which never subsist according to the same, wanders and is agitated, and becomes giddy like one intoxicated, through passing into contact with things of this kind?

Cebes: Entirely so.

Socrates: But when it perceives anything, itself subsisting by itself, then it departs to that which is pure, eternal, and immortal, and which possesses a sameness of subsistence: and, as being allied to such a nature, it perpetually becomes united with it, when it subsists alone by itself, and as often as it is lawful for it to obtain such a conjunction: and then, too, it rests from its wanderings, and perpetually subsists similarly according to the same, about such natures, as passing into contact with them; and this state of the soul is called wisdom.

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The soul's association with body is, of course, a necessary part of the great scheme of the universe – and in the *Timaeus*, Plato says that without soul associating with body, the manifest universe would lack beauty and order. Nevertheless, when the soul confuses itself with its body and the passions which arise from it, then – as we have seen – its perceptions are distorted and we become giddy and agitated. And here the image of the labyrinth with its dark twistings and turnings is a suitable metaphor for the soul in this state. Nothing is straightforward in this world as we try to negotiate the paths of life and death: as Socrates says, "but it appears to me that the path is neither simple nor one. For there would be no occasion of leaders, nor could any one ever wander from the right road, if there was but one way. But now it appears to have many divisions and dubious turnings: and this I conjecture from our holy and legal rites." What can save us from being lost forever in the labyrinth? Only a golden thread which is incorruptible and securely tied to that realm which is always the same – the thread of intellect.

But the dark and twisting labyrinth is only one half of the danger for Theseus, just as the confusion and instability of the darkness of material existence is only one half of our difficulties which arise from the soul's embodiment. As we are all too well aware, the demands of the body and the embodied life are not simply passive – they come with active power: the appetites arouse impulses which can overwhelm (at least for a while) the soul's own aspirations towards the best kind of life and introduce a greed that leads to injustice. And the fear of the death of the body (if that is deemed to be all that we are rather than a mere garment in which the soul is clothed for a time), leads to a paralysis of thought and, very often, destructive and unjust actions. This is the minotaur – an animal nature linked to the human nature which consumes lives, gnawing at the foundations of the palace of the ruling king who has allowed disorder to distort the divine law.

As Socrates leads his fellow philosophers (and we should note there were 14 named companions) through the path which is at once both rational and initiatory, he begins to unfold arguments to prove the soul is not dissipated on departing the body – that it is not "torn apart by the winds" that might be blowing at that moment. Cebes replies:

"O Socrates, to persuade us of the contrary, as if we were afraid, or rather as if we were not afraid; though, perhaps, there is some boy among us, by whom circumstances of this kind may be dreaded: him, therefore, we should endeavour to persuade not to be terrified at death, as if it was some dreadful spectre."

So here Plato hints at the mission of Theseus which saved the youths and maidens from their own terror – a terror Socrates removes by an affirmation of the self as an immortal immaterial essence which is not subject to the fate of the body. He will show that life resides as an essential quality of the soul, and, in truth, the body only lives because the soul allows it a share in that quality whilst it is present with it. Since the training of a philosopher is always to find the living and always-existing idea that endows any material existence with its form, he or she is continually exploring the viability of the immaterial and immutable real being removed from its material and changeable image. As Socrates says:

"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? . . . 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?"

This discovery of the soul as something which has a continuity beyond the body does not, of course, mean a cessation of our labours – but rather it introduces the pursuit of true excellence. And the excellence of a thinking creature such as the Platonic tradition holds us to be, is not the mere enjoyment of physical pleasure and well-being but rather *wisdom itself*. While we confuse the body with soul and the soul with body, we will always have something which is not-self mixed with the self. Again, Socrates puts it well:

"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."

Socrates is clearly far advanced in these mysteries and able to see what he is and what he is not: he is about to be released from his body and from his prison cell at one and the same time. In mythical stories the hero overcomes his destructive enemy – but the ancient world always sees this victory not as a removal of the enemy but as a re-ordering of powers. The hero subsumes his defeated opponent into himself and takes on his power to use in its true and just manner. (Thus, for example, Athena who with Perseus defeated the Gorgon, is often pictured as having the Gorgon's head as her breast-plate; or Heracles who killed the ravaging Nemian Lion is depicted as wearing his invulnerable hide.) Socrates' moment of triumph over the fear of death – the point at which he accepts the hemlock cup – is described in Phaedo's report of it to Echechrates so:

"And at the same time he [the executioner] extended the cup to Socrates. But Socrates received it from him and indeed, Echechrates, with great cheerfulness; neither trembling, nor suffering any alteration for the worse in his colour or countenance: but, as he was accustomed to do, *beholding the man with a bull like aspect*. What say you (says he) respecting this potion? Is it lawful to make a libation of it, or not? - We only bruise (says he), Socrates, as much as we think sufficient for the purpose. - I understand you (says he): but it is certainly both lawful and proper to pray to the Gods, that my departure from hence thither may be attended with prosperous fortune; which I entreat them to grant may be the case. And at the same time ending his discourse, he drank the poison with exceeding facility and alacrity."

You will see, then, that the bull nature has not been expelled from Socrates, but is now an integral part of him – however he has it under his command, and it holds no terror for him. The hero has won over the bull, and now has only to follow the golden thread and retrace his descending path back up to the light. Theseus will take Aigle to be his bride (her name means "Light") and will claim his inheritance of kingship when the royal sacrifice is hurled into the sea.