

Soul as life-bringer, soul as knower

Much of Plato's philosophy rests on the view that the human self is the soul which simultaneously brings life to the body and knowledge to the life that the embodied soul must live. Such a double gift opens us up to wonderful possibilities and also to great tensions. The key to the resolution of the tensions and the embrace of the possibilities is, it seems, the cultivation of arete (or the soul's intrinsic excellences): as Socrates says in his trial, "I also say that virtue is not produced from riches, but riches from virtue, as likewise all other human goods, both privately and publicly." We'll examine passages from various Platonic dialogues and explore the profundities that emerge from this perspective.

Platonic philosophy is a call to all men and women to care for their souls – Socrates, when defending himself against the accusations brought by the Athenian court says this:

“And I think that a greater good never happened to you in the city, than this my obedience to the will of Divinity. For I go about doing nothing else than persuading both the younger and older among you, neither to pay attention to the body, nor to riches, nor anything else prior to the soul; *nor to be so much concerned for anything, as how the soul may subsist in the most excellent condition.* I also say that virtue is not produced from riches, but riches from virtue, as likewise all other human goods, both privately and publicly.”

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Given this clear statement of the Socratic-Platonic project, we might ask ourselves what is the soul? What is its purpose? How should we care for it? What are its virtues?

There is a view that Plato holds a two-world view of reality: that is to say he sees the universe divided into two orders of things – one eternal, intelligible and immutable; the other temporal, sensible and ever-flowing. Everything in the first order is considered to have real being, while things in the second order are viewed as being in a state of coming-to-be. Such a view is, on closer inspection, very much an oversimplification; nevertheless it is a useful starting point for the questions we want to ponder. The “two worlds” are described in the *Timaeus* succinctly:

“In the first place, therefore, as it appears to me, it is necessary to define what that is which is always *real being*, but is without generation; and what that is *which is generated indeed, or consists in a state of becoming to be*, but which never *really is*. The former of these indeed is apprehended by *intelligence* in conjunction with *reason*, since it always subsists according to *same*. But the latter is perceived by *opinion* in conjunction with *irrational sense*; since it subsists in a state of generation and corruption, and never truly is.”

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On mature thought, if we are considering the universe as one whole, the two opposite forms of reality must have some linkage if they are ever to interact and

make one whole. There are, perhaps, three ways in which two opposites can be linked:

There can be an over-arching principle which transcends the characteristics of the two orders. The link is thus superior to both orders.

There can be a third form of reality which embraces in its own distinct way the apparent opposites. Here the link may be considered to be on the same level as the two orders.

There can be some nature which is receptive to both orders: here the link is inferior to the two.

Plato, arguably, has all three forms of linkage: the transcendent is given the title the Good or the One or God (or, if understood correctly, the Gods) – beyond the reach of intellect, reason, opinion and sense perception. The inferior is called, in the *Timaeus* (at 52a and 52d), *Chora* – an infinitely receptive almost non-being (strictly speaking not accessible to reason or the senses). This leaves us to consider the more thinkable middle form of linkage – the one that stands alongside the two orders and which in some way embraces both. This, for the Platonic tradition, is soul.

In the *Timaeus* the soul is described as an intermediary with the specific task of carrying intellect into the sensible world as deemed necessary by the Demiurge (the divine creator of the cosmos):

“In consequence of a reasoning process, therefore, he [the Demiurge] found that among the things naturally visible there was nothing, the whole of which, if void of intelligence, could ever become more beautiful than the whole of that which is endowed with intellect: and at the same time he discovered, that it was impossible for intellect to accede to any [manifested] being, without the intervention of soul. Hence, as the result of this reasoning, placing intellect in soul and soul in body, he fabricated the universe; that thus it might be a work naturally the most beautiful and the best. In this manner, therefore, according to an assimilative reason,¹ it is necessary to call the world an animal, endowed with intellect, and generated through the providence of Divinity.”

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We can see that for the soul to be able to act as an intermediary between the two orders, it must have a range of gnostic powers suitable for interacting with both worlds – thus, the Platonic tradition understands the soul as possessing sense, a lower imagination, opinion, reason and intellect proper.² Furthermore, if we understand the soul as something which can descend into a body and yet retain a connection with the intelligible eternal order, it must carry within itself the forms or ideas which reside in that order. But the soul sometimes centres herself on her higher powers and sometimes on her lower powers – thus Plotinus writes:

“The soul therefore, falling from on high, suffers captivity, is loaded with fetters, and employs the energies of sense; because in this case her intellectual energy is

¹ By “assimilative reason” here Plato means an *approximate human account* of the relationship of soul to body.

² By intellect we should understand a power to think of immaterial realities not in linked parts (which is the power of reason) but as wholes. We might call this intuition.

impeded from the first. She is reported also to be buried, and to be concealed in a cave; but when she converts herself to intelligence, she then breaks her fetters and ascends on high, receiving first of all from reminiscence the ability of contemplating real beings; at the same time possessing something super-eminent and ever abiding in the intelligible world. Souls therefore are necessarily of an amphibious nature, and alternately experience a superior and inferior condition of being; such as are able to enjoy a more intimate converse with intellect abiding for a longer period in the higher world, and such to whom the contrary happens, either through nature or fortune, continuing longer connected with these inferior concerns.”

En IV,
viii. 4

This, in brief, deals with the soul as a knowing creature – an aspect explored at length by the various sages of the tradition. But this is really only half the story of the soul: she is also a bearer of life. In Greek she is called Psyche – literally “breath” – for she has the power to animate the otherwise inanimate. In the eternal world all real being is full of life, but there the life is completely present with itself as dynamic power (and therefore unchanging): the task of the soul is to bring that power into the manifested cosmos where life is a movement from one condition to another. So the soul might, in these terms, be understood as a bringer of motion. In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates begins his main speech (known as his *palinode*) with a summary of this view of the soul:

“Every soul is immortal: for that which is perpetually moved is eternal. But that which moves another and is moved by another, when it has a cessation of motion, has also a cessation of life. Hence that alone which moves itself, because it does not desert itself, never ceases to be moved; but this also is the fountain and principle of motion to other things which are moved. But a principle is unbegotten: for everything which is generated, is necessarily generated from a principle, while the principle itself is incapable of being generated. . . . *Since then it appears that a self-motive nature is immortal, he who asserts that this is the very essence and definition of soul, will have no occasion to blush.* For every body to which motion externally accedes, is inanimate. But that to which motion is inherent from itself, is animated; *as if this was the very nature of soul.*”

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The soul as a self-moved nature is an intermediary between the unmoved, and that which is moved by another (i.e. the material body) – only the presence of a soul of some description can bring about life and motion in a material thing (apart, of course, from the impetus caused by the percussion of one body upon another). A few lines later Socrates goes on with his discourse on the nature of the soul:

“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 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.”

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The dialogue goes into some detail as to why the individual soul suffers the loss of its wings and descends into an association with body, lending its power of movement to the body for the duration of its association. It also suggests that unless it recovers its wings (which would allow it to take flight into the heavens and thus draw closer to the order of eternity), the destiny of the soul is to move round in a cycle from earthly body to earthly body. How is it to restore its winged nature?

To return to the *Timaeus*, here the dialogue suggests it is a question of the kind of life we attempt to live – directing our attention to things material or spiritual:

“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.” 90b

The exercise of our powers directed to the highest produces in us *arete* – virtue or excellence – and in the *Phaedo* Socrates encourages those who are his auditors to go deeply into the mysteries of the philosophical path, which requires us to cultivate true virtue with its profound substratum of wisdom and thus transform ourselves back into our original winged nature:

“...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, 69a

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.”