

The human journey in a universe of beauty.

What is a human being?

To understand the nature of anything there are some basic questions which should be explored:

What are its causes? What is its history? What drives its activities? What potential does it possess? What is its ultimate goal?

So the opening line of Plato's *Phaedrus*, "Where are you going, my dear Phaedrus, and from whence came you?" is a strong hint that the dialogue is going to offer the reader a chance to examine some fundamental issues of selfhood. And so it turns out: its sixty or so pages not only present us with the widest possible frame in which to view our human nature and experience, but it is packed with extraordinary subtle insights. Its combination of broad brush strokes and fine detail act as a manifesto for Plato's radical vision of the human nature and its destiny. A careful reading of the dialogue reveals an almost unending range of philosophic discussion points – Hermeas, for example, wrote a four-hundred page commentary on it. Tonight we only have time to look at some of the most obvious and challenging elements of Plato's view of the human self and its experiences.

1 The self a "psyche"

For Plato the self is psyche – an immaterial animating principle which, in the case of human beings, expresses itself through a life lived with reason. This reason, at its most sublime, reaches upward into intuitive and spiritual understanding; at the same time it deals, as best it can, with the demands of the material world and the body in which it has taken up residence. An exact description of the soul, says Socrates, would be difficult and lengthy, so he uses an image to convey its general nature:

1

"To give a perfect description of its nature, would indeed be the employment of narration every way prolix and divine; but to describe a certain similitude of this idea is the business of a human and shorter discourse. Let it then be similar to the kindred power of a winged chariot and charioteer. All the horses and chariots of the Gods are indeed good, and composed from things good; but those of other natures are mixed. And, in the first place, our principal part governs the reins of its two-yoked car. In the next place, 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."

246a

b

The soul, then, is marked by a power which can direct itself (the charioteer), and yet includes elements which are likely to test that power of intelligent direction (the horses of mixed character):

2

"But we must endeavour to explain why it is called in a certain respect a mortal and immortal animal. 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 damage 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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2 The vision of beauty and its effect on the self.

For Plato, our soul originates from above – it is not something that emerges from matter, but rather it descends into a material body with its essential nature already mapped out, so to speak. It comes into the world with a whole set of ideas embedded in its depths – although these are more or less latent, and need to be drawn out by our own efforts as we respond to life’s experiences. But where do those ideas come from, and what is their nature?

3 “But let us now declare the cause through which the wings were cast aside, and fell from the soul. 246d
 And this is of the following kind: There is a natural power in the wings of the soul, to raise that
 which is weighty on high, where the genus of the Gods resides. But of everything subsisting about e
 body, the soul most participates of that which is divine. But that which is divine is beautiful, wise,
 and good, and whatever can be asserted of a similar kind. And with these indeed the *winged nature*
 of the soul is especially nourished and increased: but it departs from its integrity, and perishes,
 through that which is evil and base, and from contraries of a similar kind. 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,¹ distributed into 247a
 eleven parts, follows his course; but Hestia alone remains in the habitation of the Gods. 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. . .
 And, indeed, the vehicles of the Gods being properly adapted to the guiding reins, and equally b
 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.”

Thus, in highly symbolic and imaginative language, Plato presents us with the outline of our great trial – a pull between two states, celestial and earthly, and a struggle between potentially conflicting elements of the self. But if we started out on our journey in celestial regions, what kind of experience was this? Socrates continues:

4 “But those who are denominated immortals, when they arrive at the summit, proceeding beyond
 the extremity 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 c
 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 alone is perceived by
 contemplative intellect, the governor of the soul; about which essence, the genus of true
 knowledge, resides. As the dianoëtic [or reasoning] power, therefore, of divinity revolves with
 intellect and immaculate knowledge, so likewise the dianoëtic power of every soul, when it receives d
 a condition accommodated to its nature, perceiving true being for a time, it becomes enamoured

¹ The procession of the Gods is envisaged as drawing along all kinds of souls in their train: in Platonic philosophy daemons are a particular kind of soul, superior to human souls, and which distribute the gifts of the Gods to the manifested universe. They are not the demons of Christianity and are all essentially good, without exception.

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, and which we 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.”

This primary experience – the joy of contemplating the beauty of eternal *real being*, and the sparking of love by that vision – is, says Socrates, the key to understanding our underlying impulse in all areas of life, and at all levels of reality. It is what defines the human soul:

5 “Indeed it is necessary to understand human, denominated according to species, as a being proceeding from the information of many senses to a perception contracted into one by the reasoning power. But this is a recollection of what our soul formerly saw with divinity, when in a perfect condition of being; and when she looked down on what we now consider as realities, and was supernally elevated to the contemplation of that which is true.” 249c

The whole of human life can be seen as an attempt to recover the vision of real being – the vision which was glimpsed in the celestial region. For Plato the life of philosophy is consciously centred on that recovery, and love that the celestial beauty inspires is the greatest of all the powers that aid the soul to regrow the wings which she shed when in the procession of the Gods across the celestial region:

6 “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 adhering to that which is divine, is accused by the multitude as insane, while in the meantime, from being filled with divine enthusiasm, he is concealed from the multitude. d

This whole discourse, therefore, which respects the fourth kind of fury² [or inspiration], 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.”

In our ordinary terrestrial state we continually come across reminders of the beauties of the eternal regions – whether in the form of another person, in art, in science, in beautiful actions, in nature or wherever – but these similitudes of the highest beauties are often mistakenly considered to be the whole of reality, and the path that Plato lays before us is to embrace these similitudes as manifestations of those beauties which are approached by “contemplative intellect” – the inner eye opened by true philosophic endeavour:

7 “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 250a

² Earlier in the dialogue, Socrates has named three other “furies” or inspirations which contribute to human life – prophetic (which delivers inspired truth), teletic (which delivers inspired insights into our relationship with the rest of reality) and the musical (i.e. of the Muses, which inspire both art and science).

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, this blessed vision and contemplation. And we indeed beheld it together with Zeus,³ 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 orgies⁴ were celebrated by us while we were perfect, and free from those hardships 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.”

³ Socrates in talking to Phaedrus – both of whom have associations with Zeus; the idea being that every soul has a particular God or Goddess who lead them through that original procession in the celestial regions, and therefore each soul is coloured, so to speak, by that association.

⁴ *Divine orgies* – the word *orgy* has undergone some profound change in meaning: originally it meant the elevated state into which a person might go when filled with the inspiration of a God or Goddess, leaving behind ordinary rationality, and become super-rational.