

## The journey of the Soul in Platonic philosophy

What kind of creatures are we? What goal should we strive towards? What is the good of a human being? These are fundamental questions that everyone answers in their own fashion: even if they haven't consciously framed those questions, nevertheless each one has responded in the most genuine way by living the life that he or she does.

A viewpoint one can adopt is the basic materialist version of ourselves: that we are a complex physical organism generated at a certain point in time, we have a number of years in which we experience life amongst all the other organisms we are surrounded by – preferably taking as much pleasure as circumstances allow, and avoiding as much pain as possible – and then we cease to be. The whole cycle taking anything between a brief minute to something not much over 100 years. There are, of course, a wide set of variations on this theme, some of which acknowledge value in issues of cultural experience and morality, setting the individual within a community so that the more selfish hedonistic drive of the basic materialistic theme is softened to a greater or lesser extent.

For thinkers in the Platonic tradition this viewpoint is hopelessly inadequate as an understanding of the self and its purposes: it does not address the nature of a creature which is able to embrace immaterial and unchanging realities - a nature which is self-motive, acting on its understanding of those immaterial ideas. For Plato and his companions in philosophy, we are essentially rational souls temporarily housed in physical body – in other words the self is a soul (or "psyche" in Greek). The presence of our kind of soul in the body lends that body life and the appearance of self-motivity (appearance, because in reality the body has no self-motivity – this derives from its relation to the soul). It also brings with it the power to reason – to link immaterial ideas together in true relationships, and to understand physical things and events in terms of metaphysical laws. The fact that human beings don't always act rationally should not obscure its essential nature: there is a rule that one should not judge the nature of a thing by its failings but by its successes: the power of the human body to run at 10 to 15 miles an hour should not be judged on the performance of a man with broken legs.

So what is soul, and what can we say about its experiences? Here are a few extracts from Plato and his commentators which will allow us to explore the tradition's answer to this:

### The construction of the soul, taken from the *Timaeus*

#### a) A distinction is made between immaterial reality and materiality:

"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. . . ." (27d)

#### b) The Creator (the "Demiurge") forms the soul:

"From an essence indivisible, and always subsisting according to sameness of being, and from a nature divisible about bodies, he mingled from both a third form of essence, having a middle subsistence between the two. And again, between that which is impartible and that which is divisible about bodies, he placed the nature of *same* and *different*. And taking these, now they are three, he mingled them all into one idea." (35a)

c) The task set before souls as they descend into bodies:

"And having thus composed the universe, he distributed souls equal in number to the stars, inserting each in each: and causing them to ascend as into a vehicle, he pointed out to them the nature of the universe, and announced to them the laws of fate; showing them that the first generation orderly distributed to all was one, lest any particular soul should be allotted a less portion of generation than another. . . And as souls are from necessity engrafted in bodies, and as something accedes to and something departs from such bodies, he declared to them that, in the first place, one connate sense produced by violent passions was necessary to all; and, in the second place, love mingled with pleasure and grief. That after these, fear and anger were necessary, with whatever else is either consequent to these, or naturally discordant from a contrary nature. That such souls as subdue these would live justly, but such as are vanquished by them unjustly." (41d)

**The great cycle of the soul, taken from the Phaedrus**

*Socrates here describes the original state of the soul – like a winged chariot flying through the heavens following a procession of the Gods in which pure eternal truths are glimpsed. To give an exact description of the soul, he says, would be beyond him but to approximate he can say . . .*

- 246a Let it then be similar to the united power of a winged chariot and charioteer. All the horses and chariots of the Gods are indeed good, and composed from things good; but  
 b 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. But we must endeavour to explain why it is called in a certain respect a mortal and  
 c immortal animal. Every soul takes care of everything which is inanimate, and revolves



d The summit on the "back of heaven"

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 becomes damaged 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. . . But let us

- now declare the cause through which the wings were cast aside, and fell from the soul. 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  
 e everything subsisting about 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  
 247b base, and from contraries of a similar kind. . . . 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  
 c in this case labour, and an extreme contest, are proposed to the soul. But those who are called 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

d contains: . . . without colour, without figure, and without contact, subsisting as true  
 essence, it is approached by contemplative intellect, the governor of the soul; about  
 which essence, the genus of true knowledge, resides. As the dianoëtic<sup>1</sup> power, therefore,  
 of divinity revolves with intellect and immaculate science, so likewise the dianoëtic power  
 of every soul, when it receives a condition accommodated to its nature, perceiving *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  
 e 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 to which we give the name of beings; 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  
 248a home. . . . 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 lower, the head of the charioteer: and, through the violence of  
 the horses, they partly see indeed, and are partly destitute of vision. And again, other  
 b souls follow, all of them yearning for the vision of this superior place: but from being  
 unable to accomplish this design, they are carried round in a merged condition, spurning  
 against and rushing on each other, through a contention of precedency in their course.  
 Hence the tumult, contest, and perspiration, are extreme. 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 feed on *opinion*; through which there is a great endeavour to  
 c behold where the *plain of truth* is situated. For, from a *meadow* of this kind, that which is  
 best in the soul receives its best nutriment; and from this the nature of the wing is  
 nourished, by which the soul is enabled to ascend. And this is the law of Adrastia [the  
 Goddess of Destiny], that whatever soul attending on divinity has beheld anything of  
 reality shall be free from damage, till another period takes place: and that if she is always  
 able to accomplish this, she shall be perpetually free from the incursions of evil. But if,  
 through an impotency of accomplishing this end, she has not perceived reality, and from  
 some misfortune, and being filled with oblivion and depravity, she becomes heavy and  
 drowsy, breaks her wings, and falls again on the earth,<sup>2</sup> then this law prevents her in her  
 d first generation from being implanted in some brutal nature, but commands the soul  
 which has seen the most, to inform the body of a philosopher, or of one desirous of  
 beauty; of a musician, or of one devoted to love.

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*Here Socrates also lists eight other kinds of life which the soul might live in her first incarnation of this great cycle – moving down through a series which is terminated by the lowest kind of life, that of a tyrant. But wherever the initial emplacement in this spectrum a soul begins, its long term progress depends upon the soul's own endeavours. He continues:*

249a Now in all these states, whoever lives justly obtains a better lot, and whoever lives unjustly, a worse. For each soul returns to the place whence it came in ten thousand

<sup>1</sup> *Dianoetic*: The Greek word *dianoia* literally means "knowing through" or "knowing across" – we might understand it in us as a reasoning power that is connected to the eternal truths of intellect and intuition. Intellect in the Platonic writings primarily refers to the purest state of knowing – a condition in which each "real being" or intelligible object is known as a complete whole, and all its implicit parts are simultaneous present to the knower.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Taylor notes here (following Plotinus), "the general cause of the soul's descent, is her neglecting, as it were, the universal form of the world, diligently contemplating a certain portion of it only, and ardently desiring a partial mode of subsistence; imagination and her vegetable power strongly alluring her to such a condition of being."

b years; for it does not regain its wings before that time has elapsed, except the soul of him who has been a guileless philosopher or a philosophical lover; these, when for three successive periods of a thousand years they have chosen such a life, after the third period of a thousand years become winged in the three thousandth year and go their way; but the rest, when they have finished their first life, receive judgment, and after the judgment some go to the places of correction under the earth and pay their penalty, while the others, made light and raised up into a heavenly place by justice, live in a manner worthy of the life they led in human form. But in the thousandth year both come to draw lots and choose their second life, each choosing whatever it wishes. Then a human soul may pass into the life of a beast,<sup>3</sup> and a soul which was once human, may pass again from a beast into a man. For the soul which has never seen the truth can never pass into human form. For a human being must understand a general conception formed by collecting into a unity by means of reason the many perceptions of the senses; and this is a recollection of those things which our soul once beheld, when it journeyed with God and, lifting its vision above the things which we now say exist, rose up into real being.

*We see, then that Plato calls the great cycle "a journey of ten thousand years" – while the span of a single cycle (from choosing an earthly life, living it, being judged according to how it is lived, receiving due reward, and back to the choice of the next life) is symbolically described as "one thousand years." This smaller cycle is discussed in the last book of the Republic: a story is told of a soldier, Er, who seemed to die in battle, but being placed together with other fallen comrades on a pyre, revived, and told of his experiences. He saw all those who had truly perished being judged and rewarded or punished accordingly; that after a while he travelled to a meadow where each about-to-incarnate soul present was offered a range of lives which it could live in the coming years. Before the throne of Ananke (Necessity) and her three daughters, the Fates, a prophet advises them*

"Souls that live for a day, now is the beginning of another cycle of mortal generation where birth is the beacon of death. No divinity shall cast lots for you, but you shall choose your own deity [i.e. guardian daemon or, in Christian terms, angel]. Let him to whom falls the first lot first select a life to which he shall cleave of necessity. But virtue has no master over her, and each shall have more or less of her as he honours her or does her despite. The blame is his who chooses: God is blameless."

*Each soul picks a life, and as Er reports, "it was a strange, pitiful, and ridiculous spectacle, as the choice was determined for the most part by the habits of their former lives." After this, the choice was ratified by the Fates, and then journeying across the Plain of Lethe ("oblivion") and drinking from its river, the soul is born into another Earthly life. Socrates ends by saying that, if we take note of all this,*

. . . we shall safely cross the River of Lethe, and keep our soul unspotted from the world. But if we are guided by me we shall believe that the soul is immortal and capable of enduring all extremes of good and evil, and so we shall hold ever to the upward way and pursue justice with wisdom always and ever, that we may be dear to ourselves and to the gods both during our sojourn here and when we receive our reward, as the victors in the games go about to gather in theirs. And thus both here and in that journey of a thousand years, whereof I have told you, we shall fare well.

*The key, according to this teaching, is to bring all that we see here into a wider understanding, in a recollection of the what we saw in our pristine state, and this by living a life which manifests those luminous ideas which are marked as beautiful in the celestial regions, and as just in the earthly realm.*

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<sup>3</sup> We might note that Plato says here that the soul will pass into the *life* of a beast, rather than the body: the ancient commentators on this passage took this to mean that the circumstances of the subsequent life and the character of the personality would be similar to those of particular animals.