

Phaedo extracts and comments

Phaedo: What! did you not hear the manner in which he was tried?

Echecrates: Yes: a certain person related this to us; and we wondered, as his sentence was passed so long ago, that he should not die till a considerable time after. What then, Phaedo, was the reason of this?

Phaedo: A certain fortune happened to him, Echecrates: for, the day before his trial, the stern of that ship was crowned which the Athenians send every year to Delos.

Echecrates: But what is the meaning of this?

Phaedo: 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.

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If this was the only mention of the Theseus/Minotaur myth we might be tempted to let it pass, but it is worth noting that Theseus saved fourteen youths from their dreadful fate – they were known as the “twice seven” – and near the beginning of the dialogue Phaedo (who is relating the drama of the last day of Socrates to Echecrates) names the companions who were with him on that last day – there were fourteen of them.

A large part of the dialogue centres on five linked proofs of the soul’s immortality: after two of them had been outlined by Socrates, his two closest companions are not convinced. In another reference to these fourteen, when noticing, he says,

Socrates: But you and Simmias appear to me still more earnestly to discuss this assertion in a very pleasant manner, and to be afraid like boys, lest on the soul’s departure from the body the winds should tear it in pieces, and widely disperse it, especially if anyone should die during a stormy blast, and not when the heavens are serene.

Cebes: Endeavour, 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.

Socrates: But it is necessary to charm him every day till he becomes well.

Cebes: But from whence, O Socrates, can a man acquire skill in such enchantment, since you are about to leave us?

Socrates: Greece, Cebes, is very spacious, in some part of which good men may be found: and there are many barbarous nations, all which must be wandered over, inquiring after an enchanter of this kind, without sparing either riches or labour, as there is nothing for which wealth can be more seasonably bestowed. But it is necessary that you should inquire among

yourselves; for perhaps you will not easily find anyone who is more able to accomplish this than yourselves.

(This perhaps hints at the idea that the Platonic path is not a blind following of some teacher, but is a self-discovered one).

The dialogue goes on, and finally, when the words are almost done with, it is time for Socrates to drink the fatal hemlock, as decreed by the Athenian court. The jailor proffers the cup to him and these are the words of the narrator,

Phaedo: But Socrates received it from him - and indeed, Echecrates, 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.

In ancient times the hero who overcame their opponent was deemed not, in reality, to have destroyed them but to have subsumed them into their own nature: thus Socrates is shown to have taken the image of the half-bull, half-man into himself, and integrated it into himself – as calm courage.

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After all his companions gather in his little cell, there is some discussion regarding the conflict between welcoming death and the prohibition of suicide, during which Socrates alludes to an Orphic mystery teaching – “For the discourse which is delivered about these particulars, in the arcana of the mysteries, *that we are placed as in a certain prison secured by a guard, and that it is not proper for any one to free himself from this confinement, and make his escape*, appears to me to be an assertion of great moment, and not easy to be understood.” This will not be the last time explicit reference is made to initiatory matters. The conversation moves on and Socrates, when asked to explain why it is that he is so unperturbed by the prospect of death, replies:

Socrates: 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. If this then is true, it would certainly be absurd, that those who have made this alone their study through the whole of life, should when it arrives be afflicted at a circumstance upon which they have before bestowed all their attention and labour.

Simmias: By Zeus, Socrates, you cause me to laugh, though I am very far from desiring to do so at present: for I think that the multitude, if they heard this, would consider it as well said respecting philosophers; and that men of the present day would perfectly agree with you, that philosophers should in reality desire death, and that they are by no means ignorant that men of this description deserve to suffer death.

Socrates: And indeed, Simmias, they would speak the truth, except in asserting that they are not ignorant of it: for both the manner in which true philosophers desire to die, and how they are worthy of death, is concealed from them. But let us bid farewell to such as these (says he), and discourse among ourselves: and to begin, Do you think that death is anything?

Simmias: Entirely so.

Socrates: 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?

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This double definition of death – the release of the soul from the body, and the release of the body from the soul – is vital, and much commented upon by later Platonists. The Platonic view is that the soul descends from its place touching eternity (and its pure light) into the embodied state taking on the material body, dark and winding. In the ordinary course of human life the soul moves through a long round of incarnations, during which successive bodies are taken and discarded – but the spiritual discipline of true philosophy means that both processes become more and more voluntary. Porphyry, for example, says “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. 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.”

The soul while unable to free itself from concerns of the body is distracted and fails to see the eternal ideas which sit behind the manifested world- or indeed about what our experience of consciousness and perception might say about the nature of our self. Socrates points out the need for philosophical attention:

Socrates: But what shall we say, Simmias, about such things as the following? Do we say that the *just itself* is something or nothing?

Simmias: By Zeus, we say it is something. –

Socrates: And do we not also say, that the *beautiful* and the *good* are each of them something?

Simmias: How is it possible we should not?

Socrates: But did you ever at any time behold any one of these with your eyes?

Simmias: By no means.

Socrates: But did you ever touch upon these with any other corporeal sense? (but I speak concerning all of them; as for instance, about magnitude, health, strength, and, in one word, about the essence of all the rest, and which each truly possesses.) Is then the most true nature of these perceived through the ministry of the body? or rather shall we not say, that whoever among us prepares himself to think dianoëtically¹ in the most eminent and accurate manner about each particular object of his speculation, such a one will accede the nearest possible to the knowledge of each?

Simmias: Entirely so.

Socrates: Will not he, therefore, accomplish this in the most pure manner, who in the highest degree betakes himself to each through his dianoëtic power, neither employing sight in conjunction with the dianoëtic energy, nor attracting any other sense, together with his reasoning; but who, exercising a dianoëtic energy by itself sincere, at the same time endeavours to hunt after everything which has true being 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?

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¹ *Dianoetic* means *thinking across* or *through* – a rational process moving from one thought to another. In the *Phaedrus* Socrates says of human beings that we are “a being proceeding from the information of many senses to a perception contracted into one by the reasoning power.”

We need to be clear that Plato is not dismissing the body, or material manifestation, in the way that later religions and philosophies do – he does, after all, in the *Republic* go to some lengths to explore how a just society and a just individual should work in the material world, and places the soul as an important element in the ordering and beautifying of the manifested cosmos in his *Timaeus*. What he’s talking about here in the *Phaedo*, is a transformation of consciousness, rising from the scattered consciousness of those souls whose thoughts are simply concerned with the surface materiality of the mundane life: an upward movement towards a consciousness of the *living whole* – the cosmos as itself a *happy god*, as he puts it in the *Timaeus*. At heart, this dialogue is exploring the philosophical death, of which Porphyry speaks- the later Platonists saw this as a purificatory and transformative dialogue. It continues:

Socrates: 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?

Simmias: Entirely so.

Socrates: Is not death called a solution and separation of the soul from body? –

Simmias: Perfectly so.

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

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The way in which the philosopher cultivates the philosophic death, also has an effect on how he or she regards physical death and the flourishing of the self – looking on death with fortitude and temperance and, in short, exercising those virtues which are so central to a life well lived. Socrates now considers virtues and the part they play in philosophy:

Socrates: Does not then, O Simmias, that which is called fortitude eminently belong to such as are thus disposed?

Simmias: Entirely so.

Socrates: Does not temperance also, which even the multitude thus denominate as a virtue, through which we are not agitated by desires, but regard them with moderation and contempt; does it not, I say, belong to those only who despise the body in the most eminent degree, and live in the exercise of philosophy?

Simmias: It is necessary.

Socrates: For, if you are willing to consider the fortitude and temperance of others, they will appear to you to be absurdities.

Simmias: But how, Socrates?

Socrates: You know that all others look upon death as the greatest of evils.

Simmias: In the highest degree so.

Socrates: Those who are bold, therefore, among these, sustain death when they do sustain it, through the dread of greater evils.

Simmias: They do so.

Socrates: All men, therefore, except philosophers, are bold through fearing and dread, though it is absurd that any one should be bold through fear or cowardice.

Simmias: Entirely so.

Socrates: But what, are not the moderate among these affected in the same manner? and are they not temperate by a certain intemperance? Though this is in a certain respect impossible, yet a passion similar to this happens to them with respect to this foolish temperance: for, fearing to be deprived of other pleasures which at the same time they desire, they abstain from others, by others being vanquished. And though they call intemperance a subjection to pleasures; yet at the same time it happens to them, that, being vanquished by certain pleasures, they rule over others; and this is similar to what I just now said, that after a certain manner they become temperate through intemperance.

Simmias: It seems so, indeed.

Socrates: But, O blessed Simmias, this is by no means the right road to virtue,² 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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This is Plato's most explicit reference to the Orphic teachings and mystery initiations. The story of how Dionysus was torn apart by the Titans and then brought back into an integral whole by the power of Apollo, Athene and Zeus at play here is itself, a mythic retelling of our own tearing apart by our fall into material consciousness and our subsequent recovery of our true self by following the path of initiatory philosophy – a philosophy very far from that lead-weighted mockery of philosophy which is promoted by modernism, and which deadens the aspiration of those who seek enlightenment.

The next phase of the dialogue requires Socrates to lead his companions through a labyrinth of five arguments on the immortality of the soul – thus freeing them, if they are willing to follow the golden thread, of their fear of death, and the limitations inherent in the view that material

² The word being translated here as 'virtue' is in Greek *arete* – which can also be translated as 'excellence' – this is an important element of Platonism which considers arete as a power which enables the unfolding of anything's highest and most inward nature into full manifestation.

life is all there is for creatures such as ourselves. The arguments are, superficially, five in number – but it is possible to understand them as one, if the pieces can be drawn into an integral whole. They are:

- 1) An argument from opposites – that all manifested things move between opposite conditions: from hot to cold and cold to hot; from stronger to weaker and back to stronger; from life to death and from death to life; from conjoined with other things and then separated, then conjoined again. (We should, therefore, bear in mind Socrates' definition of death)
- 2) An argument from recollection – an explication of a fundamental doctrine of Plato, which states that all learning is reminiscence. See below.
- 3) An argument from similarity – that eternal *real being* is intelligent, stable, indissoluble and divine, while material things (which never *are*, but are always 'becoming to be') is non-intelligent, ever-changing, dissoluble and mortal: and that the soul is most like the former, while the body is most like the latter.
- 4) An argument concerning harmony – this touches upon the Pythagorean view that the soul is a harmony. Socrates only points out that if this is the case, it is not a harmony formed from the material parts of the human mortal organism.
- 5) An argument from essence – that the soul is essentially something that brings life. As such it has life as an intrinsic quality. And an intrinsic quality cannot be separated from the thing itself.

Just to look at an example, here is Socrates discussing his view of recollection – he has introduced the idea of *the equal*:

Socrates: Do we experience anything of this kind respecting the equality in pieces of wood, and other such equals as we have just now spoken of? and do they appear to us to be equal in the same manner as equal itself? and is something or nothing wanting, through which they are less equal than equal itself?

Simmias: There is much wanting.

Socrates: Must we not, therefore, confess, that when any one, on beholding some particular thing, understands that he wishes this which I now perceive to be such as something else is, but that it is deficient, and falls short of its perfection; must we not confess that he who understands this, necessarily had a previous knowledge of that to which he asserts this to be similar, but in a defective degree?

Simmias: It is necessary.

Socrates: What then, do we experience something of this kind or not about equals and equal itself?

Simmias: Perfectly so.

Socrates: It is necessary, therefore, that we must have previously known *equal itself* before that time, in which, from first seeing equal things, we understood that we desired all these to be such as *equal itself*, but that they had a defective subsistence.

Simmias: It is so.

Socrates: But this also we must confess, that we neither understood this, nor are able to understand it, by any other means than either by the sight, or the touch, or some other of the senses. I speak in the same manner about all these.

Simmias: For they are the same, Socrates, with respect to that which your discourse wishes to evince.

Socrates: But indeed, from the senses, it is necessary to understand that all equals in sensible objects aspire after *equal itself*, and are deficient from its perfection. Or how shall we say?

Simmias: In this manner.

Socrates: Before, therefore, we begin to see, or hear, and to perceive other things, it necessarily follows, that we must in a certain respect have received the science of *equal itself*, so as to know what it is, or else we could never refer the equals among sensibles to *equal itself*, and be convinced that all these desire to become such as *equal itself*, but fall short of its perfection.

Simmias: This, Socrates, is necessary, from what has been previously said.

Socrates: But do we not, as soon as we are born, see and hear, and possess the other senses?

Simmias: Entirely so.

Socrates: But we have said it is necessary that prior to these we should have received the science of *equal itself*.

Simmias: Certainly.

Socrates: We must necessarily, therefore, as it appears, have received it before we were born.

Simmias: It appears so.

Socrates: If, therefore, receiving this before we were born, we were born possessing it; we both knew prior to our birth, and as soon as we were born, not only *the equal, the greater, and the lesser*, but everything of this kind: for our discourse at present is not more concerning *the equal* than *the beautiful, the good, the just, and the holy*, and in one word, about everything which we mark with the signature of *that which is*, both in our interrogations when we interrogate, and in our answers when we reply: so that it is necessary we should have received the science of all these before we were born.

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Many of the Platonic teachings were adopted – with suitable variations – by the monotheistic religions and philosophies that become mainstream from late antiquity onwards: the idea of a continuing life after death most obviously. But the Platonic view that the soul has a life *before* birth is very definitely denied by both Christianity and Islam – a departure from Platonism which makes the soul very much more dependent upon a higher power for its perfection rather than as a self-motive essence working its own way towards its realized divine selfhood. The argument from recollection offers a *prima facie* case for the pre-existence of the soul. The Platonic doctrine of reminiscence stands with and links two others – that of forms and that of the immortality of the soul. Not only does Plato’s theoretical view of reality rest upon these three doctrines, but also the practical path of life as a spiritual discipline. Socrates, having explored the five proofs summaries their import in these words:

“But it is just, my friends, to think that if the soul is immortal, it requires our care and attention, not only for the present time, in which we say it lives, but likewise with a view to the whole of time: and it will now appear, that he who neglects it must subject himself to a most dreadful danger. . . . For when the soul arrives at Hades, it will possess nothing but discipline and education, which are said to be of the greatest advantage or detriment to the dead, in the very beginning of their progression thither.”

In keeping with the initiatory character of the dialogue, once the arguments and their summary have been stated, Socrates describe his vision of the “True Earth” which ranges far deeper and higher than the common understanding of the world our soul traverses. In the mysteries the initial stage was called *telete*, purification; the second stage was called *muesis*, ‘a closing of the eyes’; the third stage was called *epopteia* – vision.

Finally the drama of the dialogue ends with the death of Socrates as described by Phaedo:

Then Crito, hearing this, gave the sign to the boy that stood near him. And the boy departing, and having stayed for some time, came, bringing with him the person that was to administer the poison, and who brought it properly prepared in a cup. But Socrates, beholding the man –

It is well, my friend (says he); but what is proper to do with it? for you are knowing in these affairs.

You have nothing else to do (says he), but when you have drunk it to walk about, till a heaviness takes place in your legs; and afterwards lie down: this is the manner in which you should act. And at the same time he extended the cup to Socrates. But Socrates received it from him - and indeed, Echebrates, 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. And thus far, indeed, the greater part of us were tolerably well able to refrain from weeping: but when we saw him drinking, and that he had drunk it, we could no longer restrain our tears. But from me, indeed, notwithstanding the violence which I employed in checking them, they flowed abundantly; so that, covering myself with my mantle, I deplored my misfortune. I did not indeed weep for him, but for my own fortune; considering what an associate I should be deprived of. . . This, Echebrates, was the end of our associate; a man, as it appears to me, the best of those whom we were acquainted with at that time, and, besides this, the most prudent and just.