

Plato, *Phaedo*

(78d-82c)¹

PHIL101

Prof. Oakes

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Section II: What is the Self?

Reading II.1

Plato's *Phaedo* is an important dialogue on the metaphysics of human nature. Among other views, Plato here asserts his belief in the transmigration of the soul (reincarnation). In the midst of that discussion, in the following excerpt, we see Plato distinguishing mind (soul) from body, and drawing conclusions about the longevity of the two. Pay particular attention to the discussion of the immortality of the soul, as this will be our focus.

The dialogue is narrated by Phaedo, who is recounting conversations held by Socrates while in prison awaiting his execution. Cebes is one of Socrates' interlocutors; Socrates speaks first:

"Is that idea or essence, which ... we define as the essence of true existence – whether essence of equality, beauty, or anything else: are these essences, I say, liable at times to some degree of change? or are they each of them always what they are, having the same simple, self-existent and unchanging forms, and not admitting of change at all, or in any way, or at any time?"

"They must be always the same, Socrates," replied Cebes.

"And what would you say of the many beautiful things – whether men or horses or garments or any other things which may be called equal or beautiful – are they all unchanging and the same always, or quite the reverse? May they not rather be described as almost always changing and hardly ever the same either with themselves or with one another?"

"The latter," replied Cebes; "they are always in a state of change."

"And these changing things you can touch and see and perceive with the senses, but the unchanging things you can only perceive with the mind – they are invisible and are not seen?"

"That is very true," he said.

¹ Plato. 2000. *Phaedo*. Benjamin Jowett, trans., with my revisions. The Classical Library: Plato – Phaedo. http://www.classicallibrary.org/plato/dialogues/14_phaedo.htm. (Use unrestricted as per: <http://www.classicallibrary.org/about.htm>. Public Domain, as per: http://oll.libertyfund.org/index.php?option=com_staticxt&staticfile=show.php%3Ftitle=1698&Itemid=28)

“Well, then,” Socrates added, “let us suppose that there are two sorts of existences, one seen, the other unseen.”

“Let us suppose them.”

“The seen is the changing, and the unseen is the unchanging.”

“That may be also supposed.”

“And, further, is not one part of us body, and the rest of us soul?”²

“To be sure.”

“And to which class may we say that the body is more alike and akin?”

“Clearly to the seen: no one can doubt that.”

“And is the soul seen or not seen?”

“Not by man, Socrates.”

“And by ‘seen’ and ‘not seen’ is meant by us that which is or is not visible to the eye of man?”

“Yes, to the eye of man.”

“And what do we say of the soul? is that seen or not seen?”

“Not seen.”

“Unseen then?”

“Yes.”

“Then the soul is more like to the unseen, and the body to the seen?”

“That is most certain, Socrates.”

“And were we not saying previously that the soul when using the body as an instrument of perception, that is to say, when using the sense of sight or hearing or some other sense (for the meaning of perceiving through the body is perceiving through the senses) – were we not saying that the soul too is then dragged by the body into the region of the changeable, and wanders and is confused; the world spins round her, and she is like a drunkard when under their influence?”

“Very true.”

“But when returning into herself she reflects; then she passes into the realm of purity, and eternity, and immortality, and unchangeableness, which are her kindred, and with them she ever lives, when she is by herself and is not let or hindered; then she ceases from her erring ways, and being in communion with the unchanging is unchanging. And this state of the soul is called wisdom?”

² Plato’s term, translated here as ‘soul’, is *psuche*, the direct predecessor of our *psyche*. This term can mean “mind” or “person”. ‘Soul’ is an apt translation, as the mental stuff of a person, the person as distinct from his or her body, but carries for Plato none of the religious connotations that we now associate with the term.

“That is well and truly said, Socrates,” he replied.

“And to which class is the soul more nearly alike and akin, as far as may be inferred from this argument, as well as from the preceding one?”

“I think, Socrates, that, in the opinion of everyone who follows the argument, the soul will be infinitely more like the unchangeable. Even the most stupid person will not deny that.”

“And the body is more like the changing?”

“Yes.”

“Yet once more consider the matter in this light: When the soul and the body are united, then nature orders the soul to rule and govern, and the body to obey and serve. Now which of these two functions is akin to the divine and which to the mortal? Does not the divine appear to you to be that which naturally orders and rules, and the mortal that which is subject and servant?”

“Yes.”

“And which does the soul resemble?”

“The soul resembles the divine and the body the mortal – there can be no doubt of that, Socrates.”

“Then reflect, Cebes: is not the conclusion of the whole matter this? – that the soul is in the very likeness of the divine, and immortal, and intelligible, and uniform, and indissoluble, and unchangeable; and the body is in the very likeness of the human, and mortal, and unintelligible, and multiform, and dissoluble, and changeable. Can this, my dear Cebes, be denied?”

“No, indeed.”

“But if this is true, then is not the body liable to speedy dissolution? and is not the soul almost or altogether indissoluble?”

“Certainly.”

“And do you further observe, that after a man is dead, the body, which is the visible part of man, and has a visible framework, which is called a corpse, and which would naturally be dissolved and decomposed and dissipated, is not dissolved or decomposed at once, but may remain for a good while, if the constitution be sound at the time of death, and the season of the year favorable? For the body when shrunk and embalmed, as is the custom in Egypt, may remain almost entire through infinite ages; and even in decay, still there are some portions, such as the bones and ligaments, which are practically indestructible. You allow that?”

“Yes.”

“And are we to suppose that the soul, which is invisible, in passing to the true Hades, which like her is invisible, and pure, and noble, and on her way to the good and wise God, whither, if God will, my soul is also soon to go – that the soul, I repeat, if this be her nature and origin, is blown away and perishes immediately on quitting the body as the many say? That can never be, dear Simmias and Cebes. The truth rather is that the soul which is pure at departing draws after her no bodily taint, having never voluntarily had connection with the body, which she is ever avoiding, herself gathered into herself (for such abstraction has been the study of her life). And what does this mean but that she has been a true disciple of philosophy and has practiced how to die easily? And is not philosophy the practice for death?”

“Certainly.”

“That soul, I say, herself invisible, departs to the invisible world to the divine and immortal and rational: thither arriving, she lives in bliss and is released from the error and folly of men, their fears and wild passions and all other human ills, and forever dwells, as they say of the initiated, in company with the gods. Is not this true, Cebes?”

“Yes,” said Cebes, “beyond a doubt.”

“But the soul which has been polluted, and is impure at the time of her departure, and is the companion and servant of the body always, and is in love with and fascinated by the body and by the desires and pleasures of the body, until she is led to believe that the truth only exists in a bodily form, which a man may touch and see and taste and use for the purposes of his desires – the soul, I mean, accustomed to hate and fear and avoid the intellectual principle, which to the bodily eye is dark and invisible, and can be attained only by philosophy – do you suppose that such a soul as this will depart pure and unalloyed?”

“That is impossible,” he replied.

“She is engrossed by the corporeal, which the continual association and constant care of the body have made natural to her.”

“Very true.”

“And this, my friend, may be conceived to be that heavy, weighty, earthy element of sight by which such a soul is depressed and dragged down again into the visible world, because she is afraid of the invisible and of the world below – prowling about tombs and sepulchers, in the neighborhood of which, as they tell us, are seen certain ghostly apparitions of souls which have not departed pure, but are cloyed with sight and therefore visible.”

“That is very likely, Socrates.”

“Yes, that is very likely, Cebes; and these must be the souls, not of the good, but of the evil, who are compelled to wander about such places in payment of the penalty of their former evil way of life; and they continue to wander until the desire which haunts them is satisfied and they are imprisoned in another body. And they may be supposed to be fixed in the same natures which they had in their former life.”

“What natures do you mean, Socrates?”

“I mean to say that men who have followed after gluttony, and wantonness, and drunkenness, and have had no thought of avoiding them, would pass into asses and animals of that sort. What do you think?”

“I think that exceedingly probable.”

“And those who have chosen the portion of injustice, and tyranny, and violence, will pass into wolves, or into hawks and kites; whither else can we suppose them to go?”

“Yes,” said Cebes; “that is doubtless the place of natures such as theirs.”

“And there is no difficulty,” Socrates said, “in assigning to all of them places answering to their several natures and propensities?”

“There is not,” Cebes said.

“Even among them some are happier than others; and the happiest both in themselves and their place of abode are those who have practiced the civil and social virtues which are called temperance and justice, and are acquired by habit and attention without philosophy and mind.”

“Why are they the happiest?”

“Because they may be expected to pass into some gentle, social nature which is like their own, such as that of bees or ants, or even back again into the form of man, and just and moderate men spring from them.”

“That is not impossible.”

“But he who is a philosopher or lover of learning, and is entirely pure at departing, is alone permitted to reach the gods. And this is the reason, Simmias and Cebes, why the true votaries of philosophy abstain from all fleshly lusts, and endure and refuse to give themselves up to them – not because they fear poverty or the ruin of their families, like the lovers of money, and the world in general; nor like the lovers of power and honor, because they dread the dishonor or disgrace of evil deeds.”

“No, Socrates, that would not become them,” said Cebes.

Commentary

Plato’s dialogues are among the great achievements in human thought. They are rich, replete with interesting ideas and insights, compelling arguments, and raise many of the deepest philosophical issues. In the above passage, Plato discusses the nature of ideas, the nature of physical things (“bodies”), the immortality of the soul, ghosts, the afterlife, and reincarnation. It is worth noting too the extent to which Plato’s view presages basic elements of Christian thought.

Our present interest is with the nature of the self. We may ask, then, what account of self Plato advances in the above passage. Two claims appear to stand out. The first is that the self (or *soul*; see note 2, above) is *ideal* and the second, asserted as a consequence of the first, is that the self is *immortal*. What do these two propositions mean, exactly?

Our passage begins with a discussion of ideas in general:

“Is that idea or essence, which ... we define as the essence of true existence – whether essence of equality, beauty, or anything else: are these essences, I say, liable at times to some degree of change? or are they each of them always what they are, having the same simple, self-existent and unchanging forms, and not admitting of change at all, or in any way, or at any time?”

Plato here refers to the ideas that he thinks characterize the true essence of things. His examples include beauty and equality (i.e., sharing a given property, such as height or weight), to which we can easily add many others: the ideas of mass and energy, for instance, are ideas that may express the nature of physical things; the ideas of triangularity and sphericity express the shapes that certain things may have. Such ideas, Plato argues, have the following striking feature: they do not change.

You might (as you should) question the proposition that ideas are unchanging. Don’t our ideas of beauty, for example, change over time? Plato might respond by pointing first to a relatively ordinary idea, such as that of the triangle. He might ask, what would it be for the idea of *triangularity* to change? If the idea of a triangle changed, would it perhaps then be the idea of a square? But that would not be to change the idea of triangularity per se; it would simply be to entertain a different idea – i.e., to stop thinking of triangles and start thinking of squares instead. With respect to the idea of beauty, Plato might further respond as follows. Certainly our notions of what counts as beautiful may change. But this amounts not to a change in the idea of beauty itself, but only to a change in those things to which we apply that one, same idea. We may *say*

that ideas of beauty change. But what we mean by that is only that our tastes, the things we think of as beautiful, change.

Whether you accept this line of thought or not, we might suppose Plato to have some reason for thinking that ideas don't change. Let us suppose for now that this is so, that ideas are immutable. Plato contrasts the unchanging "realm" of ideas with that of the "changeable". The changeable are those things that are subject to change, and this category includes "men or horses or garments" and the human body in particular. This is the realm of "sight and sound," as Plato elsewhere characterizes it, the realm of the senses – i.e., the material order of physical objects that is open to human sense perception. This realm, as Cebes acknowledges, is in a continual state of change.

Having established a distinction between these two "realms", the realms of ideas on the one hand and of physical bodies (objects) on the other, Plato then turns his attention to the human soul. "To which class," he asks, is the human soul more "alike and akin"? He responds to this question with two arguments intended to demonstrate that the human soul belongs to the class of ideal things – i.e., the realm of ideas. As an exercise, reconstruct Plato's reasoning, at this point. What reasons does Plato offer for thinking that the soul is an ideal object, rather than a physical one?

Plato's second conclusion concerning the soul is that it is immortal. He again advances two arguments, though in one case the conclusion is not stated explicitly. Having concluded that the soul is ideal, it is but a simple step to the conclusion that it is immortal. For since ideas are unchanging and thus eternal, if the soul is ideal it, too, must be unchanging and eternal. Plato argues more explicitly for this conclusion by arguing for the *divinity* of the soul. Like the divine, the soul is a natural ruler, in this case, the natural ruler of the body. If, then, the soul is like the divine in other respects, then the soul will be "immortal, and intelligible, and uniform, and indissoluble, and unchangeable," while the body is "mortal, and unintelligible, and multiform, and dissoluble, and changeable."

Ask Yourself

Remember to maintain a critical frame of mind, as you do so, and avoid accepting propositions as true for which you lack full evidence.

1. Think about whether you agree with the above conclusions, and why. Is the human "soul" ideal? Is it unchanging and eternal? Why should we think so/not?
2. What are your views of the further remarks that Plato makes, in the above passage, about the transubstantiation (reincarnation) of souls? Do some souls return, after death, to inhabit animals based upon their behavior before death? Why should we think so/not?