Plato's Phaedo

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1. Introduction

A. Scene: The dialogue is told by memory by Phaedo to Echecrates. Socrates is in jail, after his trial, talking with friends, awaiting death.

B. Characters: Phaedo, Echecrates, Socrates, Simmias, Cebes, Crito

C. Structure:

57a-63a: Introduction
- 57a-59c: Phaedo's feelings; the characters are introduced
- 59c-60b: setting the scene
- 60b-61b: Socrates the poet
- 61b-63a: Introduction to the study of death

63b-69e: The new trial: defense of the thesis that philosophy is a preparation for death
- 64c-67e: death as purification via the strict separation of soul from body
- 67e-69e: the excellences of the philosopher

69e-84b: The discussion of the immortality of the soul
- 70e-72a: opposites
  - 72a-72e: circles and lines
- 72e-77a: soul as pre-existing: recollection and the Ideas
  - 74a-75c: The Equal itself
- 77a-84b: soul as surviving: charming away the fear of death
  - 78c-79a: soul as simple or composite
  - 79a-80b: soul as visible or invisible (and as ruler of body)
  - 80b-84b: reincarnation

84b-107a: Socrates' swan song
- 85e-88b: the objections of Simmias and Cebes
- 88c-89d: Interlude with Phaedo and Echecrates
- 89d-90e: Socrates warns of the danger of misology
- 90e-91c: Socrates' interest in convincing his interlocutors
- 92a-95a: the answer to Simmias: harmony

95a-107a: the answer to Cebes
96a-100c: the second voyage
96a-97c: Socrates' early physical investigations
97c-99c: Anaxagoras and explanantion by nous
99d-100c: avoiding soul-blindness
100c-107a: the hypothesis of the ideas
105c-107a: opposites
107a-b: The concessions of Simmias and Cebes
107b-115a: Socrates tells of the earth
114d: the preceding was another charm against fear of death
116b: dismissal of the women and children
115b-118a: Socrates and Crito: the farewell

D. Dramatic Context: We must concentrate when we read the *Phaedo* on the interaction between Socrates and Simmias / Cebes. This is not a treatise on the soul, but a dialogue in which Socrates addresses himself to the needs and wishes of his interlocutors. The stories he tells (61e) are directed to these two, and to the others present. Twice S will advise his interlocutors to find charms to charm away the fear of death (77e & 114d). Can we not read the entire dialogue in this light? That is, that the stories S tells here are his gift to his friends, beautiful charms that will calm their fears of death and make up for their evident lack of philosophical attunement? That S admits his own interest in convincing them (91e) only makes this seem less than ever like a sober, "rational," "disinterested," "objective," and so on treatise.

2. The New Trial [63B-69E]:
Let's look first at the dialogue as a new trial (63b). Socrates has spent a rather long time in jail after the trial described in the Apology, in which he was condemned to death by the "men of Athens." Now he is here in company with devoted, if dogmatic friends, whom he addresses as "judges" (63e). What statement must he defend? That the philosopher must be willing to die readily. How can he be so calm? We remember the "Socratic ignorance" displayed in the Apology. Socrates will never say flat out that he knows what awaits him in death. He never makes knowledge-claims, we might say, but he tells stories. He does not insist (63c) but he "expects."

3. Death as the separation of soul and body: [64C-67E]
Here S is drawing out the beliefs of Simmias. Again we must remind ourselves that this is not any sort of "Platonic doctrine" although many through the years have thought it so. The consequences of a strict separation of soul and body in death is that death is seen as a sort of purification of the soul from its imprisonment in the impure body. We know this cannot be Socrates' own thoughts on the matter, but merely his elucidation of Simmias, when we recall 62b where S says that the idea we are in some sort of [bodily] prison is a "lofty doctrine of the mysteries that is moreover not easy to understand," in other words, that it is twaddle only Pythagorean buffoons would believe. S gets Simmias to explain the Pythagorean notions on pleasure, knowledge and the famous "Ideas." We need not concern ourselves with them, except to note that S never affirms them in the flat way that Simmias agrees to. Later, in the "second voyage" we will read how S relates to the ideas as hypotheses, as assumptions.

4. The Immortality of the Soul: 69e-84b
Cebes intervenes here and demands that S quiet the fears of "many men" and explain to him how the soul can exist after death. S now embarks on a long discussion with Cebes, which is divided into three parts, the discussion of opposites (70e-72e), the discussion of the soul as pre-existing birth (72e-77a) and the soul as surviving death (77a-84b). The important thing for us to concentrate on is the explicit way in which these discussions are designed to quiet the fears of the many. As S has already claimed, and is demonstrating by his

performance in the dialogue, the philosopher is calm in the face of death, due to the attitude of "Socratic ignorance."

5. The second voyage: 96a-107a

A. The Causes of Generation and Destruction. Cebes demands a complete investigation of the causes of genesis and destruction. Socrates will tell his experiences here: when he was young, he was wondrously lustful about knowledge of nature (cf. philosopher's body ane *eros* in *Republic).* But he convinced himself he had no nature for this kind of investigation. But then he came across writings of Anaxagoras, who claims mind (nous) is arranger of all and cause of what is best (the final cause), so we should study nous as the best. But Socrates becomes disappointed when he sees Anaxagoras mentioning other causes than nous (Anaxagoras conlated material and efficient causes w/ final). For instance, the true cause of Socrates being in jail is that the Athenians thought it best that he be there; it would be absurd to focus on Socrates' body (the material cause of his being there) as a true cause in this case. Socrates demands that we distinguish the cause and the pre-conditions, and then claims that it is "the good" which holds everything together.

B. The Good (*Republic*). What is "the good" (*to agathon*)? The *Phaedo* does not tell us. But at *Republic* 507d, Glaucon asks to hear more about the Good. Socrates demurs and offers him two images instead. Before we get into the details of those images, I'll brave a charge of *hubris*, rushing in where sober philosophers fear to tread, and try to define the Good for you. For Plato, the Good is the **meta-principle of systematic function enabled by proper part/whole relations.** For example, let's take two biological principles: 1) plants turn CO2 into O2; 2) animals turn O2 into CO2. Each principle explains a certain region of things.

The Good is a meta-principle: it doesn't explain things, but explains how principles explain things. More precisely, the Good explains how principles fit together, how they explain parts of a whole that when properly arranged allows a systematic functioning. In our example, it is the Good, the proper part/whole relation, that explains the fit of the two principles of plant and animal respiration, so that this "co-operation" of plants and animals in trading oxygen and carbon dioxide allows the eco-system to funtion.

Now at each level of investigation there is a part/whole relation: animals and plants are parts of the whole of the natural system. The Good addresses the whole of all sub-wholes, the ultimate level of systematic function. Each principle is in a sense a partial story, an answer to the question: what good is it? This is called a **teleological** question, asking about the *telos* or final, complete state of perfection of a thing, the state it is in when it is helping its larger whole function. Asking "what good is something?" means "how does it help the system work, what larger whole does this part fit into?" The Good, the proper function of the whole of all wholes, is then the meta-principle that allows all the sub-answers of teleological investigation to explain parts of the world.

C. Images of the Good (*Republic*). You can see why Socrates didn't want to lay all that on poor Glaucon! Instead, he gives two images. The first is the analogy of the sun and the Good. As the sun is to light and the eye and the thing seen, so is the Good to truth & being and intelligence and the thing known. This analogy, deep in lots of E. Med. cultures (e.g., Egypt), lies behind our saying "I see what you're talking about," when we could also have said "I understand you." It's also why comic strips represent "insight" (itself a metaphor in this nexus) by a lightbulb. And so on ...

Notice here the way the sun is the largely invisible source of light. We can only catch glimpses of the sun, risking blindness if we look too long. Nevertheless, the sun allows not only our sight, but also the "generation, increase and nurture" of living things, even though it is not the very process of generation and increase (509b). In other words, the sun is the **condition** of living things. Realizing this is using the sun as a **principle** to explain living things.

Similarly, the Good is the largely invisible source of understanding. It is the meta-principle that is the condition of partial explanatory principles. Since we are ourselves only parts of the whole system, we can only catch

glimpses of the Good, but we must assume it is there in order for our sub-explanations, our partial stories explaining parts of the world, to work. In other words, we must **assume** the world makes sense in a systematic unity in order: 1) for us to bother to investigate parts; 2) to provide the systematic horizon that guarantees the convergence of all our stories as stories about one world, about a uni-verse which will ultimately explain and justify our political systems.

All this is strange enough, but Socrates really gets a rise out of Glaucon when he tells him at 509b that "the Good is not being but superior to and beyond being in dignity and power." This **transcendence** or beyondness of being by the Good corresponds to the sun's being the condition of generation, but not generation itself. The Good then is the condition of being, but it itself is not a thing. What does this mean? Being for the Greeks means being limited, finding its place in the system, so that it shows itself as it truly is, at one with itself, in a singular look. So the Good is the guarantee of individual things having being, that is, being limited and stable. But since it guarantees being by assigning places in the system, it is not a being, it has no place in the system, nor is it even the system itself. Rather, it is the proper functioning of the system. Another way to say this: the Good is neither a part, nor even the whole, but the proper part/whole relation.

Now since we can only see or know stable existing things, things whose stability and knowability are guaranteed by the Good, we can only catch glimpses of the Good itself. We can only know it through its effects, the partial understandings of the system of which we are capable. Thus Socrates could only offer images of the Good to Glaucon. This image-offerings, these supplements, only fire Glaucon up more. So Socrates offers another image, that of the **divided line**.

D. Avoiding Soul-blindness (*Phaedo*). We won't go into that part of the *Republic*. Let's return to the *Phaedo*. At 99, Socrates now tells of his own procedure: wishing to avoid the blindness of those who look at the sun, he looks instead at its image in water. This is itself an image of his philosophical method: instead of looking at things (ta onta) in themselves with his eyes, he looks at their truth in logos. But, he warns, be careful with this image (looking at images as image of using logos rather than senses), for using logos to investigate things is no more imagistic than looking at them in ergon (in action: that is, interacting with them, experimenting with them). This is vitally important: there are images in everyday interaction with things, in our primary looking at and dealing with things. The philosopher is the one who knows that even the everyday is imagistic (the cave story), that recognizes the social/historical constitution of everyday "reality." Rather than risk the soul-blindness of unexamined everyday life, the philosopher recognizes the inescapable mediation of perception by culture, as Socrates makes clear next.

Socrates' procedure is to make hypotheses about which logos seems to be strongest and to assume what agrees with this logos to be the truth and to assume that what disagrees with it is not true. This is amazing stuff: Socrates puts what seems to agree with his hypothesis at the very heart of his seeing the truth. His only defense against a solipsistic madness is his political action of soliciting the logos of everyone else. As long as he remains undefeated in argument, he can claim to be doing as best as he can. He then gets Cebes to agree to his hypothesis (!) of the Good, in order to prove the immortality of the soul.

E. A Democratic Socrates? The whole passage has profound implications for the political basis of the Platonic investigation of nature. A mechanistic science would miss the mediation of its perceptions; only a teleology, a synthetic discourse of the whole, would be able to put its assumptions into language and allow them to be open to public discussion. Here we see as well Socratic wisdom/ignorance. Recognizing the necessity of logos and hypothesis, Socrates puts himself in an infinite process of self-critique through exposure to others; his positions can be nothing other than temporary and fallible, and the best positions are those arrived at through widest possible exposure to others. Here we see the bizarre sight of a democratic Socrates: the more a polis allowed as many as possible to achieve their natures (cf. the meritocracy of the *Republic*: neither gender nor class can be barriers to merit) the more sure the philosophers would be that they were on the right track.