

Self and Soul in Plato's *Phaedo*

Plato's theory of soul in the *Phaedo* incorporates not one but four distinct notions: (1) the 'universal rational soul' or 'ideal self' identified with pure theoretical and practical reason; (2) the 'particular existent soul' or 'real self' identified with one's current, fallen state of humanity; and (3) the 'particular self-active soul' identified with the philosophical self consciously striving to bring about the purification of (2) and its transformation into (1). The dynamic potentiality for (1) is a constitutive feature of (2), as is an additional soul, the (4) 'particular life-soul' and dynamic potentiality, related not to wisdom or intelligence (*phronesis*), but procreation and the other motions of life (*zoe*), present in each human or living body, which arguably only exists in such a body. Thus 'human soul' for Plato is essentially related to the possibility of 'divine soul,' which is itself related to the hypothetical existence of Forms and the erotic intentionality of soul for eternal life and eternal rational being, but this transformation cannot be brought about fully in the human state, and often human souls fail to know themselves (and other selves) as 'souls', i.e. as aspirationally fully rational, virtuous and one. The realization that a propensity for such self-blindness is a condition of human being is part of the self-knowledge belonging to (3).

"You yourself (*Autos*), Phaedo—were you there on that day when he took the drug in the prison, or did you hear of it from another?" The *Phaedo* begins with the Greek word for 'self' applied to its eponymous narrator Phaedo and ends with the death of a self—the man Socrates—concerning whom, however, we are enjoined to believe he does not die, but lives on, even as his *logos* lives on. In this essay, I will try to sketch the basic concepts of self and soul, as they are developed in Plato's *Phaedo*. In the first section, I will introduce the four concepts and discuss their relation to one another. In the second section, I will sketch the relation of these ideas to an overall interpretation of the *Phaedo*, and to the theories of self-knowledge and moral agency developed in it.

I

My first thesis is that 'soul' in the *Phaedo* is articulated chiefly through four concepts: (1) the concept of the 'immortal soul' who is to escape the cycles of mortal existence and dwell with the gods; (2) the concept of the 'corporeal soul' who exists in a particular body in this world and who has become in some manner 'material' or 'worldly' himself; (3) the concept of the 'philosophical soul' who stands in the unique relation of 'self-relation' both as 'self-knower' and as 'self-actor' insofar as he (she) strives to transform *herself* from the cognitively and volitionally fallen state of (2) into the cognitively and volitionally perfected

state of (3), even though she realizes (a) it is not possible to attain this in this life, i.e. she realizes that from the perspective of this life, (1) does not exist except as intentional goal (*telos*) and (b) that she, in whatever state of being (2) she is when she dies, will also perish. Her self-knowledge is at once knowledge of herself as mortal and of herself as striving to be trans-mortal, the very striving for which she experiences as possibly ‘immortalizing.’¹ In addition to these three, Plato also introduces (4) a concept of soul as ‘life-force’ which considers it as power and propensity to procreation and life, rather than to reason and wisdom. This concept of soul seems entirely bound up with material or corporeal existence, as it is expressed not only through the human species, but also through animals and even plants.

First, then, where are these concepts found in the *Phaedo*?

(1) The concept of ‘immortal soul’ is perhaps the most familiar from the *Phaedo*. Socrates first introduces it in the Prologue, after he has suggested embodied human beings are in a kind of prison, without self-ownership, because they are possessions of the gods (62b). He goes on to proclaim his faith in the hope that he might eventually join the gods in the world to come (63bc), a state he identifies with the soul being “separate” from the body (64c), the soul being “purified” and “freed” from the bonds of the body (67d), a state in which the soul may “grasp the truth” and “have pure knowledge” of the Forms themselves through reason alone (65c-66e), a state in which the soul is also volitionally liberated from the “wants, desires, fears, illusions” that come through the body and in general from being lovers of wealth or honor (66c, 68c). It is this concept of the soul that Socrates apparently seeks to prove exists or is not impossible, in the central Logos section of the dialogue (70a-107b). This concept of soul might be regarded as an ‘ideal self’ or ‘perfectly rational self’, except insofar as it would not seem to partake of individuality when fully achieved, i.e. if a perfectly purified ‘Socrates-soul’ were to be brought about in this life, ‘he’

would presumably be no different from the perfectly purified ‘Phaedo-soul,’ except insofar as each existed in a different body and was associated with a different history. *Qua* pure reason, Socrates-soul and Phaedo-soul would be the same (universal reason), even if enacted and experienced out of different bodies, but the concept of ‘self’, as normally understood, is not merely corporeally but historically, morally and intellectually individuated. (Just as *qua* innate human power and propensity, Socrates-rationality and Phaedo-rationality would be the same, absent a theory of rationally different human natural kinds and their belonging to different types.)

- (2) The concept of the ‘corporeal soul’ is the second familiar notion of soul found in the *Phaedo*. Socrates also introduces this concept in the Prologue, where he explains our current human condition of being filled with “wants, desires, fears, illusions,” adding later to the motives that drive us in this state not only the lusts for pleasure and wealth but also for honor (68c). This concept of soul is then further developed in the Logos segment, especially in the mythological discussion of reincarnation following the third argument (80b-82c). There we learn that the corporeal intellectual and volitional soul of each man is not merely causally influenced by the fact of his ‘imprisonment’ in a body, but by the *choices* he has made in his life to pursue the goods of pleasure and wealth and honor rather than wisdom, and as a result his soul has itself become “permeated with the physical” which is “ingrained in it” (81c), i.e. his soul *itself* has “become corporeal” (83d). This ‘corporeal soul’ is evidently the actual self or embodied person, who experiences himself (herself) as a single being temporally in relation to both his past experiences/actions and socially in contrast and comparison to other persons (as does Phaedo at the onset of the dialogue), and whose identity is in considerable part a function of his own self-determination. For the ‘corporeal soul,’ fearful of pain, loss of money or honor, above all of death (77e), is ‘fallen,’ prone to volitional enslavement by (i) gluttony, violence, drunkenness or by (ii)

injustice, tyranny and plunder or by (iii) living according to merely social convention (82a-b), together with intellectual confinement by conceptions of the world and human life deriving from immersion in such pleasures and pains (83ae); he lacks philosophy or reason to free, guard and guide him. Lost in this state, the ‘corporeal soul’ is blind to his own real nature and to his potential super-nature; and yet, having himself constructed or co-constructed the cognitive and volitional ‘prison’ within which he lives, he uncritically regards his *psyche* or ‘ego’ of mind, character, and personality as his own.² The ‘corporeal soul’ as presented in the *Phaedo*, then, has two aspects or dimensions: (1) it is associated in its secondary meaning with ‘human nature’ as motivated by physical and social desire, potentially independent of rational guidance, the full picture of ‘human nature’ including not only appetitive and social desires, but also rationality and rational desires; (2) it is identified in its primary meaning with the ‘given’ self, the ‘I’ or embodied person existing in the human world whose mental outlook and character has come about as a result in part of the choices he has made, and who understands himself as ‘oneself’ or ‘one person’ through that history, his relations to others, and in the structure of values and beliefs he has formed—though he may well at the same time be regarded as something *less* than ‘one’ person by Socrates, insofar as he lacks a clear and unifying conception of the human world in which he acts and brings a less than ‘cleansed’ and unifying hierarchy of values to his choices.³

(3) The third concept of soul we find in the *Phaedo* is that of the ‘self-caring’ or ‘self-nurturing soul’ which Socrates assigns to the philosopher.⁴ This is also introduced in the Prologue, when he introduces the idea of philosophers and ‘lovers of learning’ as those who practice ‘purification’ and ‘dying and death’ (64ab, 67cd), i.e. who consciously, deliberately seek to “free the soul from association with the body as much as possible” (65a), both in their cognitive and in their moral life, and in this way are constantly in ‘spiritual training’ (*askesis*, 67d), purging away illusory

desires, emotions and even illusory moral values and beliefs (69b). Neither the ‘immortal soul’ nor the ‘corporeal soul’ stand in this relation of ‘guardianship’ or ‘responsibility’ *to their own existing self*; the immortal soul because it has transcended its mortal, worldly and fallen nature, the corporeal soul because it exists as ‘given’ by nature, nurture and personal choice, and because it does not act to better and care for its soul, but for wealth, glory, pleasure, or in compliance with conventional social values (82b). Philosophers and ‘lovers of learning,’ however, “care for their soul” (82c); the philosopher acts consciously not only to change the world, but to change himself, and alone is aware of the cognitively and volitionally fallen state of his soul, and seeks to guard against and overcome it—realizing the challenge is not to overcome his ‘body’ but to overcome ‘himself’ and his too-easily uncritical relation to thought and action (82e-83e). In fact, it is this cognitive and volitional self-relation—this relation of critical self-knowledge and self-actualization toward one’s ‘given’ self and world—which, even more than his cognitive relation to the Forms or his volitional relation to worldly goods and other persons, characterizes the philosopher, though both of those relations are ingredient in the primary relation of ‘self-care.’ And it is this relation which constitutes the chief unifying or integrating (as it were, integrity-forming) action of the philosophical soul, who in giving his mind and body, knowledge and values, for the sake of wisdom, seeks to create of himself one constant rational and purposive being, proof against being ‘blown hither and thither’ by violent fears and desires (66be, 77d, 80c) or by false opinions and conceptions (65c, 68c, 69b, 74b, 79c, 83ce), remaining constant in his alertness to his endangered, conditional place within the world—a world that has become illuminated for him by (a) his understanding of the Forms, the relation of virtue and wisdom, and his own and others’ ideal ‘immortal souls,’ on the one hand, and by (b) his critical awareness of

the physical and conventional moral world and the ‘fallen’ souls in it, possibly including himself, on the other (68a-69d, 75ad, 84ab, 85cd, 99d-100a f.).

- (4) Last and I dare say for Plato least, but not unimportant for that, the fourth concept of soul is that suggested chiefly in the first proof (70c-72e, cf. esp. 70d), which then returns for reconsideration in Cebes’ argument that the soul might stand to the body in the relation of a *psyche*-weaver to his many *soma*-cloaks (87b-88b; cf. also *Symp.* 207de) and in Socrates’ intellectual history, theory and argument to rebut that challenge (96a-99e, esp. 96b1-2, 100a-107b, esp. 105ce). In contrast to the previous concepts of soul, this is not a concept of a human ‘self’, but of ‘individuated life-form,’ and of the ‘self-motion’ within that life-form, which is expressed not only in the locomotion of animals in the world to feed and reproduce themselves, but internally in plant and animal metabolic functioning and growth according to their species-kind. In this sense, there is a ‘life-soul’ belonging to each human body, no less than life-souls belonging to other plant and animal bodies, but this life-soul is different in nature from the other concepts of soul Plato presents in the *Phaedo*, because this is a purely biological-morphological or organic and not a moral and metaphysical anthropological concept.⁵ What is perhaps most interesting about this concept of the soul is the way in which it is brought in at the end of the *Phaedo*, when Socrates introduces his ‘sophisticated’ theory of Forms, which includes not only (i) Forms, (ii) properties or forms-in-particulars and (iii) physical particulars, but (iv) what I’ll call ‘natures’ (103b-107b). Without the fourth kind of being, material things would be constituted as bundles of merely contingently related properties, but with the fourth kind, things can be conceived of as having both contingent and necessary, essence-determining properties. As a result of this innovation, human, animal and plant ‘souls’ as well as firey and snowy and other ‘elements’ help to define a substantive-ontological structure in the natural/material world, albeit one that, since it is

articulated purely on the biological level, does not clarify all of the powers that belong to the different kinds, e.g. ‘human nature’ as found in a given human body. In fact, because the focus in the final argument is purely on the vital nature of human being, the only powers that are associated with ‘*psyche*’ in the sense of ‘life-force’ are those which preserve the individual human body and those which, together with others, preserve the living human species: the argument of the *Phaedo* abandons, at the end, the very theme which was most important in leading Socrates and his companions to conceiving of the human soul as partaking of the divine—the power of reason and the aspiration to wisdom.⁶ The final proof of the immortality of the human soul, just like the first, applies no less to carrots and crocodiles, than it does to Socrates and his companions.

II

My second thesis is that Plato’s entire metaphysic and argument in the *Phaedo* may be re-cast in something analogous to a Kantian ‘transcendental idealist’ picture of the world, in which we have to distinguish sharply on epistemic grounds between what we can ‘know’ of moral reality and what we cannot know but may ‘hope for’, and in which we have to be careful to parse out those elements in the picture that are ‘rational’ (*logos*) in nature from those that are ‘mythical’ and merely possible (*mythos*), but which nonetheless are not merely accidental beliefs, but fit together with the rational in the wholistic, ‘musical’ and mytho-poetic picture Socrates is drawing for his companions. The rational part of his account includes the idea of a rational, moral agent, whose capacity for free and responsible action is bounded by his unexamined beliefs and desires, by his capacity and willingness to critically examine those beliefs and by his capacity and willingness, if necessary, to exercise self-control and act against his desires.⁷ It presupposes the possibility of a world in which persons and their relations to one another are informed by something analogous to *apriori*

universal laws that order nature and by *apriori* moral laws that govern those persons' own ideal relations (but unlike Kant, the ethical and metaphysical laws/Forms that structure rational anthropological life enclose the mathematical and scientific laws/Forms that structure biological nature and the cosmos). This 'critical' understanding of the Platonic theories of soul/body and reality/appearance in the *Phaedo* presupposes Plato's awareness that each of the four proofs fails to establish the immortality of the soul, but also the evident success of (a) Socrates' knowledge- and ethics-based counter-arguments to Simmias' reductive, epiphenomenalist conception of the soul, and of (b) the counter-proposal to Cebes' too-limited, organicist notion of the human soul, presented by Socrates in his intellectual autobiography, particularly his characterization of the morally responsible and dialectically inquisitive person (esp. 98c-99e). The 'argument' of the *Phaedo* reflects on the ideas of soul adumbrated above, but its defense of them is limited; the proofs for the existence of the 'immortal soul' all fail, as Socrates is well aware, but the conceptualization of the human soul or person as a potentially rational and self-caring moral agent does not.⁸

On this interpretation, the *Phaedo* teaches that the human self must be understood in a multitude of relations and dimensions, including on the one hand, (a) the theoretical relation of human language and thought to 'a priori' Forms of understanding and meaning, particularly Forms relating to truth, goodness, and beauty, which order and give meaning to the entire sweep of human cognition and affectivity, but which may not be comprehensible in their 'pure' being, and (b) on the other hand, the practical relation of human beings to one another in a variety of desiderative and volitional contexts, including those that involve cooperation or competition for worldly goods and the avoidance of worldly harms, but the central feature of distinctively human life consists on Plato's view, as I have argued, in (c) one's relationship of responsibility to and for one's own moral/volitional and intellectual/cognitive self, in critical relation both to its continuously 'fallen' or corrupted state—which might require discovering error or overcoming unwilled desires—and in teleological aspiration to the ideal, virtuous and wise self the philosopher seeks to be. The human soul

conceives of and relates itself to an ‘immortal’ ideality, as part of its being-in-the-world—this project is developed in terms of erotic rational intentionality toward ‘the Ideal’ or ‘the Beautiful’ in Socrates’ speech in the *Symposium*—but the human soul *qua* self-caring self exists only in *this* world, only as incarnate, only as imbued not only with the instincts of its bodily human nature, but also with the instincts, developments and corruptions of its own historical social and personal formation. To be a ‘human soul,’ therefore, is precisely *not* to be immortal, but to sustain knowledge of your mortality, finitude and vulnerability, both to the destructive forces in the human and natural world and to the destructive capacities within oneself, i.e. to practice an awareness of death and of dying.⁹ To be a ‘human soul,’ as it is articulated in the *Phaedo*, is to stand before one’s own death not in a state of religious certitude that it is something determinate you will ‘escape’ but in a state of philosophical liminality, recognizing it as an unimaginable possible ‘nothing’ but at the same time unavoidable ‘unself’ and ‘unknown’—one which you, as a self-caring being, cannot rationally believe *you* will survive, despite the fact that, precisely as self-caring, you aspire to and hope for a ‘higher’ and more perfect way of being, and possess the belief that it would be right (‘fitting’) for reality to be constructed in such a way as to reward those seeking it with that possible fulfillment, even as it would be right for reality to be constructed in such a way as to punish, until they see the point, those who turn away from the moments of intellectual and interpersonal illumination that suggest their way of life is inadequate to the invisible reality attested to in myth (esp. the eschatological myths of the dialogue, e.g. 107c-115a) and philosophical existence (the closing death scene and dramatic action that has gone before).

This last point, that the Socratic, philosophical self cultivates an awareness and reflection on its own unique individuality and its own inevitable existential death, underscores what might be called the “monadic” theme in Plato’s theorizing on the self in the *Phaedo*. But in closing let me also give notice to another important feature of the Socratic-Platonic conception of the self in the *Phaedo* and in every other Platonic dialogue, namely the fact that the Socratic self and Socratic self-care is not monologic, but dialogic

in nature. Just as Socrates conceives of thinking as the ‘two-in-one’ of speech made to oneself in the *Theaetetus* (and hence as inevitably linguistic, not simply noetic; cf. 189e and 7th *Letter*, 342e-343a f.), so Socrates conceives of thinking even more fundamentally as the ‘two-together’ of mutual dialogue and inquiry, for, as he says to Phaedo in the middle passage (89b f.), when the ship of inquiry is threatening to go down in the storm of doubt and intellectual fear evoked by Simmias’ and Cebes’ nihilizing arguments, the *logos*, the philosophical conversation, is not a singular private effort, but a mutual public endeavor and reciprocal interpersonal relation, and there is an essential connectivity between philology and philanthropy—philosophy—just as there is between misology and misanthropy—*amathia*, vice. Philosophy, the love of wisdom, is never merely a quest for self-purification, but a quest with companions for mutual understanding, deliverance, friendship, and truth.¹⁰ Philosophy that was merely self-care would not be philosophy at all.

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NOTES

1. Cf. also *Symposium* 212b, *Theaetetus* 176b and the discussion of “becoming like God” in Annas, *Platonic Ethics Old and New*, esp. 52-71.
2. For example the figure of the future tyrant Critias in Plato’s *Charmides*, 162c and the contrast between his self-assertive conception of self-knowledge as knowing oneself to be a master and knower (163c, 164d f.) and Socrates’ self-restrained understanding of it as “knowing what one knows and does not know” (165bc, 167a; cf. also *Apology of Socrates* 21a-23b; *Gorgias* 508e-509a). Perhaps an even better, if more complex example is Alcibiades as presented in another dialogue that thematizes these issues, *Alcibiades I* (cf. esp. 116e, 127d, 132c-133d), and in his speech in the *Symposium*, esp. 215c-216c.
3. On personal unity and intellectual consistency, cf. esp. *Gorgias* 458ab; on Socratic dialogue, personal integrity and moral consistency, cf. *Laches* 187e-189b, also *Crito* 46b, *Symp.* 216ab.
4. Cf. esp. *Apology of Socrates*, 30ab: “*epimeleia tes psyches*,” also *Alcibiades I* 128a f. For the concept, see Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, esp. chapters 3, 5.
5. This type of purely organic, morphological ‘human soul’ can exist ‘separate’ from what we think of as a genuinely human soul and person, e.g. it is ‘at work’ in someone who is in a persistent vegetative state.
6. See Klein, *A Commentary on Plato’s Meno*, 143-48.
7. See *Charmides* 155d f.
8. Cf. individual-linear vs. species-circular immortality in #1: 70d, 71e, 72b; two concepts of “lost” and alternative to pre-existence in #2: 75de, 76b and d; “or nearly so” in #3 at 80b; alternative of “being destroyed” as with snow in #4, 103d; overall assessments at 85c, 107b.
9. On the philosophical cultivation of the consciousness of death, cf. Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 93-101.
10. On Socratic dialogue as personal and interpersonal, cf. *Laches* 187e-188a; Gadamer, *Plato’s Dialectical Ethics*, 51-65; Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 89-93; Scott, *Plato’s Socrates as Educator*, 98-117.

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