

PLATO ON SOUL, BODY, SEX AND GENDER

PLATÃO: SOBRE ALMA, CORPO, SEXO E GÊNERO

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Abstract: If there is one thing that most people think they know about Plato, it is that he had a very jaundiced view of the body, and of its relationship to soul, along with remarkable views about sexual relations, especially between males, and that these views are in some way reflected and summed up in what is now frequently referred to as 'Platonic love'. This paper tries to show that the true situation, on these and on a number of cognate topics, is a lot more complicated, and lot more interesting, than this.

Key-words: Plato, soul, body, gender.

Resumo: Se há algo que a maioria das pessoas pensam que sabem sobre Platão é o fato de que ele tem uma visão tímida do corpo e sobre seu relacionamento com a alma, além de visões marcantes sobre as relações sexuais, especialmente entre homens e que essas visões são, de algum modo, refletidas e resumidas no que agora é freqüentemente conhecido como "amor platônico". Este artigo tenta mostrar que a verdadeira situação neste, e em outros tópicos correlatos, é mais complicada e bem mais interessante.

Palavras-chave: Platão, alma, corpo, gênero.

We can begin with a dialogue which, by the happenstance of having been translated early on into Latin, has had an influence on the West equalled only by one other dialogue, the *Timaeus*, a major part of which was also put into Latin early on. As most will remember, Socrates, just before being compelled to drink the hemlock, is portrayed by Plato as comforting a group of his young friends with a series of arguments that serve as suasions in favour of the view that the human soul is immortal, and destined for an eternity of happiness in the hereafter for those who have lived a virtuous life on earth; so death, either theirs or Socrates', is nothing to be feared.

The arguments we can leave aside; more to our present purpose is the nature of the soul that is supposed to survive, and its relationship to the body. To the consternation of Socrates' principal interlocutors, the latter is described as being something which is at best a nuisance and at worst a

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menace to the living of a good and virtuous life, a corrupting influence which, if not checked, will ruin the *psyche* in much the way a single rotting apple will spread contagion to the whole barrel (66b-67b). Put differently, the current union of soul and body is of its nature unnatural; our natural place is as disembodied, and thus unencumbered, souls elsewhere. To which of course the obvious conclusion is that we should all commit suicide at once. Socrates' earlier assertion that such self-slaughter is illicit had already drawn a puzzled 'Why?' from Cebes (61d), and Socrates, unable to deny that there is force in the argument that he seems to be contradicting himself on the matter, is compelled to fall back on an account of humans as being in a slave-relationship to the gods, and thus no more empowered to run away from their masters than are any other slaves (62a-e). An account which, for any reader who has doubts about Socrates' views on the gods, and for that matter on slavery, is bound to produce some dissatisfaction.

What Socrates actually "means" by "soul" in the *Phaedo* seems clear enough till we start examining the matter in detail. At first glance, he looks like a numerical dualist; the person is the sum total of two substances, soul and body. But this cannot really be what he intended, since he makes it clear that "I am my soul" (see, e.g., 115d ff.); what survives, he says, is the real me, the body having served as some sort of device whereby the soul *ibi bas* is enabled to make contact with the physical world and live a life in it. I say "live a life", because at this point we run into a further complication in Plato's theory; that is, the soul is, it seems, not just a life principle, whereby I, the person, am alive; it is also, apparently, a "substance" that is "itself alive". Leaving a sceptical critic to ask whether there are in fact supposed to be two things that are alive, the person and the person's soul. Though that sceptical critic does not, as it happens, turn out to be either Simmias or Cebes, who either don't see the problem or forgo mentioning it.

A further complication is added by Socrates' clear understanding that our soul is not just our life principle, as most thinking Greeks would have agreed; it is also, it seems, our moral and intellectual principle, whereby we are ethical and rational agents. Leaving our sceptical critic to ask, in a way that Simmias and Cebes again do not, why Socrates assumes without argument that we are dealing with one principle here rather than three. If, that is, he really does assume this; since at least one of the arguments for immortality, at from recollection, seems to leave open the possibility that the real me which survives is simply my intellect. But in the great eschatological "myth" that concludes the dialogue, as in eschatological myths in other dialogues, the soul is – by contrast – portrayed as some sort of *homunculus*, a counter-person, to all

appearances, who is the mirror-image of our previously incarnate selves, emotions, desires, intellect and all, except for the absence this time of physicality. And it is not the only counter-person around. In the main text of the *Phaedo*, the *body* is sometimes treated as though *it too* were a counter-person (though now a purely material one), complete with a recalcitrant will of its own and replete with a range of so-called “physical” desires, specifically those for food and drink and sex, all of which are in some measure or other likely to get in the way of a life of virtue (see, e. g., 66b-67b).

The question of the soul’s putative ontological status is also further complicated by differing descriptions on Socrates’ part of its materiality or immateriality. We must assume that, in the final analysis, he thought that the soul was not just a substance but an immaterial substance, a view that prevails in later dialogues. But he also on one occasion cheerfully describes it in highly physicalist terms, as though it were composed of some sort of very fine fluid (a bit like what in the nineteenth and early twentieth century spiritualists called ectoplasm), such that it can become so tainted and interpenetrated by the physical that after death it can and often does retain the very shape and outline of the body it once inhabited (making it on occasion visible as a ghost) (81c-d).

One could say much more about this topic, but enough has probably been said to make the point that, by the time the end of the *Phaedo* is reached, Socrates may well have “proved” that the soul is immortal, but leave behind him a lot of people asking the question, “Which soul?” An immaterial, but purely rational soul? An immaterial soul that is the counterpart, desires and emotions and all, of the erstwhile human being, but without the materiality? A quasi-material soul that can actually become visible in space-time as a ghost:¹ Socrates offers no answer to these questions; the various views of soul, difficult if not impossible to reconcile as they stand, are simply left without resolution. And the same might be said, equally importantly, about his views on desire. While it is true that, in the *Phaedo*, he does admit that soul has its own appropriate desires (for wisdom and goodness), the over-riding impression that the dialogue leaves us with is nonetheless that “desire” is fundamentally something of *bodily* provenance, that its main manifestations are in the domain of food, drink and sex, and that it is at best a nuisance and at worst a menace to the living of good life.

The bad news is that the *Phaedo*, as I mentioned earlier, was one of the two dialogues that most influenced early Christianity, and its influence lives

¹ I mention these three possibilities, but the list could be extended; Gallop, in his edition, finds seven senses of soul in the *Phaedo*. See DAVID GALLOP, *Plato: Phaedo* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2nd ed. 1988) pp. 88-92, and T. M. ROBINSON, *Plato’s Psychology* (Toronto, Toronto University Press, 2nd ed. 1995), chap. 2.

on. The good news, at any rate as far as our knowledge of Plato's own writing life is concerned, is that he spends much of his later life backing off from some of the extreme positions adopted in the *Phaedo*. Even as early as the *Republic*, which most agree was likely written soon after the *Phaedo*, we find him canvassing the interesting view that human soul in fact consists of three parts, and that there a single source of energy galvanizing all three. If there is tension in us, it is not, it seems between soul and body, as the *Phaedo* insisted, but among the three parts or aspects of soul itself. And the body is no longer to be wished away, such that, as the *Phaedo* wanted it, we should all be trying to live as though we had no body at all (67d-e); on the contrary, the body, and the so-called "desiderative" part of soul that is its psychic analogue, have a respectable role to play in the good life, provided that the energy that galvanizes them towards their proper goals (again described as food, drink and sex) is suitable canalized, like channels sluiced off from a powerful river, and a state of balance, in which reason is always in overall control, obtains.

At a stroke, we have moved into a very different world, one of what I would call 'mitigated' psycho-physical dualism, and something easily recognizable to anyone who has read Freud. And this will be the view that forms the basis of Plato's thinking on the matter for many subsequent dialogues. Perhaps the most perfect statement of it is to be found in the *Timaeus*, where a truly good life is described in terms of balance within the three parts of the soul and balance between body and soul (87b-d), a view which rapidly found its way into western thought as the doctrine of *mens sana in corpore sano*.

We are now in a position, I think, to look a little more carefully at one in particular of the three forms of non-rational desire that Plato keeps talking about, and that is the desire for sex. As we have seen, it is a desire, like that for food and drink, which Plato, from the *Republic* on, has learned to accommodate within the virtuous life.

But what manner of sex? To early western readers of *Phaedo*, who were unlikely to have read any other of his works except at most the first half of the *Timaeus*, it must have been presumed to be *hetero*-sexuality that Socrates/Plato had in mind. But of course a glance at the *Symposium*, *Republic* and *Phaedrus* soon changes this impression. Here we move into a world where, while heterosexual desire, suitably controlled of course by reason, still plays a part in the virtuous life, it clearly cannot be compared to that higher plane of sexual desire which is homosexual desire. (And I should add here, "male"

homosexual desire; on lesbian desire, and its putative virtue or otherwise, Plato is strikingly silent).

To many who read dialogues like the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus* without too much attention to detail, Plato is here simply propounding a doctrine of thinly disguised homosexuality, and in this merely following, with a few flourishes emphasizing virtue, the practices of the homosexual circles in which he moved. But this is too easy a conclusion to reach, and in the final analysis quite wrong. What probably can be said is that Plato never ceased to react to any form of the drive toward sex, whether *hetero-* or *homo-*, with a *frisson* of aristocratic disgust till the day he died. It was at best, in either of its forms, something to be ‘accommodated’ within a virtuous life.² Of the two the evidence of the *Phaedrus* suggests that he thought that in the eyes of the gods the homosexual form was the more noble, so much so that (male) homosexual lovers will attain the second highest place in heaven (256d-e) after the most perfect persons of all, philosophers (now all of them male; this is no longer the *Republic*), who lived a life in which their love for other males had operated purely and solely at a transcendental level, any intercourse binding them being that purely intellectual intercourse which is dialectic.

So far, we have talked about the soul as though it were something neutral for Plato, gender presumably coming along with incarnation. But this could be mistaken. First of all, the eschatological myths, and indeed the attempts at proof of immortality in the *Phaedo*, have as their clear intent the portrayal of individual survival, gender and all; even if particular proofs of immortality in the *Phaedo* at best prove that we survive as part of some great cosmic consciousness, this was clearly not what Socrates set out to prove to anxious friends around his death-couch. But more importantly, and much less well known, is some evidence buried away in the latter part of the *Timaeus* that seems to me well worth a glance.

Here Plato canvasses the extraordinary idea that at the beginning of time the Demiurge created all human souls as equal. And apparently also as “males”souls! These male souls were then incarnated as men, but men without sexual organs; let us call them ‘psychological males’. They then died off differentially, and were duly rewarded or punished in a life beyond the grave for the quality of the life they had lived on earth. At the end of this period of reward or punishment those who had lived a good life in the previous

² Heterosexuality he seems to have thought of strictly in terms of its necessity for reproduction, if *Tim.* 90e ff. is to be our guide. See the comments of F. M. CORNFORD (*Plato's Cosmology* [London: Routledge]) *ad loc.*

earth-existence returned to earth as men; those who had lived a morally bad life came back as women (!), and those who had lived a life characterized by stupidity of some sort came back as various animals. The men and women were at this stage of things finally given sexual organs, and procreation of the human race as we now understand it began. (For the whole account see 42b-d and 90e-92c).

Whatever commitment Plato may or may not have had to the detail of this bizarre-sounding theory we will never know, but one thing at least seems me at any rate to emerge from it with some clarity, and that is that Plato believed that the “naturally” best state of the human soul is that of the adult, rational, and good “male” soul. Which, if it really is what Plato thought, offers us a reason why he might have couched his entire discussion of sexuality in the *Phaedrus* and *Symposium* in terms of males and the relationship between males: the return of the most virtuous among them to the highest and second highest place in heaven is a reflection of how the Demiurge set up the universe in the beginning with the male soul at the apex of things.

As I need hardly point out, this question of whether there is a distinction between the male and female mind, and if there is, whether it is important and in what way, has in recent years become a hot-button topic in academe and in some measure in the general press. Is Plato’s contribution to this debate the view I have just been discussing, i. e., that the female soul is a male soul undergoing punishment? Commentators on the *Timaeus* are so upset by the possibility that it “might” be that they either (like Cornford, *ad loc.*) write off the passage as ‘mythological’ or simply pass by it without comment. But this seems to me much too easy. The I:*Timaeus* account is couched in terms of likelihood, not “un-likelihood” (29d), and in a later dialogue, the *Laws*, where there is no suggestion of myth to cloud the issue, Plato makes it clear exactly where he stands, and where he stands has not changed an iota. If I may quote from a passage in which the Athenian is discussing the throwing away of his weapons by a soldier:

Now what shall we call a fitting punishment for a coward who throws away weapons so formidable for his defence? A human judge cannot indeed avert the transformation which is said to have been wrought by Caeneus of Thessaly; he, we are told, had been a woman, but a god changed him into a man. Were the reverse process, transformation from man to woman, possible, that, in a way, would be of all penalties the properest for the man who has flung his shield away (944d).

In a word, the most perfect punishment for cowardice on the part of a man would, on the hypothesis of re-incarnation, be re-incarnation as a woman. Why? Because, claims Plato, cowardice in particular (*Rep.* 469d7) and

“immorality” [*kakía*] in general [*Tim.* 42c2]) are things to which the female soul is particularly prone. So any male soul which manifests them is manifesting itself as being to that degree “female”, and hence deserving of that peculiar punishment which is compulsory incarnation in the body of a female.

If this is right, we are left with the disagreeable conclusion that, despite the apparent progress of the *Republic*, where some females at any rate were reckoned to be just as good as some males in the running of a just society, Plato with the passage of time makes it clear that for him the female soul is of its nature lower on the ethical ladder than the male.³

However, to look for any length of time at the later views of Plato on the putative proneness to immorality of the female soul has always seemed to me totally distressing, and I am happy to leave them behind to look in a little more detail at the question of “Platonic love” and the male soul. As we have seen already *en passant*, Plato makes it clear in a famous passage of the *Phaedrus* that the highest form of love is, for him, a teacher-pupil love between the souls of two virtuous and intelligent males. Physical consummation of this love is at best something tolerated, and a guarantee that in the after-life the souls in question will achieve at most the second-highest degree of happiness. But it is happiness, and it is the second-highest degree of happiness; we are dealing with what is deemed to be state of virtue here, not one of viciousness. Which might well convince some readers of the *Phaedrus*, if that and the *Symposium* are the only dialogues they choose to read (and there are many who so choose, from what I can see), that Plato took such consummated male love to be a path that is at worst something not unworthy of being pursued, and at best perhaps something deemed even desirable (to use the word) by those for whom the life of pure philosophy is thought to be beyond reach. Either way, no one reading simply the *Phaedrus* or *Symposium* would ever imagine that Plato would one day come to feel that such consummated love might actually be, not a virtue at all but a vice, and worthy of significant punishment.

Yet this is exactly the view we find, propounded in some detail, in Plato’s final and largely unread work, the *Laws*. It is, on the face of it, a staggering change of view, and worth investigating both in itself and, more broadly, in terms of Plato’s more general views on soul, body, and person-hood. What

³ I carefully distinguish ethical ladder from ladder of talent. Whatever his views, in the *Timaeus* and *Laws*, on the intrinsic *moral* inferiority of the female soul, Plato, moving far beyond the stance he adopted earlier in the *Republic*, is also at pains to point out that “all female citizens” as well as all male citizens must receive education, and *equal* education, on the grounds that failure to do so will mean the use of at best half of Society’s available talent (*Laws* 804d-805b).

has happened, to put it briefly, is that, some time between the writing of the *Phaedrus* and the *Laws*, Plato has come round to the view that “nature in its procreative mode” (to coin a phrase) is the norm for sound conduct in the area of sexual morality. From what I have been able to discover, the notion is totally new in Plato’s writings⁴ and its repercussions are immediate and enormous. In his good society (second version) homosexual practices among citizens will now carry the penalty of deprivation of all civic rights (*atimia*[841e], surely the worst punishment for city-loving Greeks this side of the death penalty) (636c ff., 836b ff., 839a ff.). No distinction is drawn between morally good and morally bad homosexuals, as there is later on, in *Laws* 10, between morally good and morally bad atheists (908b-909d); all are, it seems, vicious, because all act contrary to nature in its procreative mode.

This is an argument which has of course, since then, had a very long history, and continues to resonate. What caused Plato to adopt it with what looks like some suddenness very late in life we do not know, and possibly never will. So I shall not spend time speculating on the matter, but pass on to the broader topic of its implications for Plato’s final views on soul and body.

We can begin with an expectation and a question. A natural expectation, given the drastic turn some of Plato’s ethical thinking has taken in old age (including the death penalty for contumacious atheism – and that punishment is for the *virtuous* [!] atheists...[909a]), is that his more general view of what it is to be a good person, and possibly indeed what it is to be a person at all, might have turned too. The question is: “Has” it? And if it has, in what way, and with what possible implications?

Our search can start with what seems to be a very new-looking notion of what constitutes soul. In the *Phaedrus* and *Laws* it is now defined as being in all its forms, including its human form, “self-activating change”, and by that very token without temporal beginning or end (*Phdr.* 245c ff., *Laws* 896a ff.). At a stroke an earlier vision of the soul, canvassed in the *Timaeus*, and stating, as part of a “likely account” of how things began, that human souls have no temporal end but do share the temporal beginning that the formed universe itself does⁵ and are on this score reasonably describable as temporally

⁴ A phrase at *Phdr.* 251a1 has been taken by many to be the earliest reference in Plato to the doctrine of homosexual practices as ‘unnatural’, but this seems to me to turn on a misunderstanding of the text. Plato is not talking about ‘running after unnatural pleasure’, but something quite different, ‘running after pleasure unnaturally’. The point presumably is that an appropriate balance between reason and impulse, in sex as in everything else, is called for, and the lover in the passage in question is being castigated for losing that balance, and letting pleasure get the better of him.

⁵ Following Aristotle, and against Xenocrates, I take the word *gegonen* at 28b7 *au pied de la lettre*.

contingent beings, is cancelled in favour of a dramatically different one, in which they are now reasonably describable as “non”-temporally contingent beings, and co-eval with the eternal gods and a world now also clearly thought of as being eternal. As in the case of the change of view with regard to the acceptability or otherwise of homosexual practices, we again, as far as I can discover, have no evidence as to why Plato made so drastic a change in his thinking, though one might hypothesize that it had at its base the powerful arguments of his pupil Aristotle, for whom the sum of things was eternal and the contrary hypothesis that drives the *Timaeus* intolerable.

Along with this change is a further one, in many ways just as startling, concerning the make-up of soul. As will be remembered, Plato set out on this journey, in the *Phaedo*, by arguing for the indivisibility of soul; indeed, one of his major arguments for immortality (that from Affinity) turned on such indivisibility. But in the *Republic* it has become tripartite, analogously to the tripartite state, and this tripartition remains a major feature of his philosophy of psychology up to and including the *Timaeus*, and is still to be found there, even if simply as part of an eschatological myth, in the *Phaedrus*.⁶

But by the time we reach the *Laws*, all we find of it are its *disiecta membra*, and Plato seems to have returned, in old age, to a familiar Greek distinction between reason and impulse. As in the case of the two other changes I have just mentioned, this change back to something that the historical Socrates, say, might have found more comprehensible comes as quite a surprise, particularly as it happens in a context of state-making that offered Plato a golden opportunity to re-iterate his earlier views on tripartition had he so wished. Attempts to account for such a change have at times been as drastic as the change itself, including the assertion by one scholar that, but for the testimony of Aristotle, he would want to *excise* the *Laws* from the Platonic corpus as a parody of Plato’s philosophy!⁷

⁶ Whether the doctrine of tri-partition and the doctrine of a ‘simple’ or ‘undivided’ soul are reconcilable or not continues to divide scholars. One common solution to the problem is to argue that the undivided soul of the *Phaedo* is in fact what is called ‘intelligence’ (*noûs*, or *to logistikón*) in the tripartite version of the soul espoused in the *Republic* and *Timaeus*, and it is *this* which is immortal, the other two parts simply dying with the body. The strength of this view is that it can be fairly easily inferred from a number of texts in Plato himself (notably in *Republic* 10 and the *Timaeus*); its weakness is that it is hard to square with the evidence of the eschatological myths, including the eschatological myth of *the Phaedo* itself, where all three parts of soul seem to be operative in the soul’s afterlife. An interesting new approach to the problem suggests that simplicity and multi-partition are reconcilable in that Plato’s part-generating principle is ‘empirical’, being as it is derived from an experience of human psychology, and hence metaphysically unable to produce any parts of the soul that are “necessarily” parts.

⁷ See CHRISTOPHER SHIELDS, ‘Simple Souls’, in *Essays on Plato’s Psychology*, ed. Ellen Wagner (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2001).

We ourselves need not go so far, simply accepting that the *Laws* is indeed by Plato, and that it manifests signs of the author's willingness to change his mind, often significantly, in matters of philosophical psychology as in much else, and leave it to others to decide whether the changes in question are manifestations of philosophical senility or philosophical acuteness. Whatever our conclusions on the matter, it will surely be agreed by anyone looking at the evidence of the *Laws* in particular that attempts to find a unified and wholly self-consistent 'doctrine' in Plato on the question of soul and body can never be successful⁸. To the end, in philosophical psychology as in so much else, Plato is an explorer, and willing to change his mind on the most central issues. True to the Socratic injunction, he "follows the *lógos*" to the end, wherever it takes him (including notorious dead-ends like astral theology in *Laws* 10), and whatever we his readers might "think" of where it is taking him. Sometimes this will involve a return to a simpler stance, as in the case of his returning, in the *Laws*, to a simple, familiar *bi*-partition of soul into reason and impulse that had long antedated his exploration of the notion of *tri*-partition. Sometimes it will show itself in the adoption of a bold *new* theory, like soul as self-activating activity, that he himself did not perhaps have years enough left to him to fully explore, but which would set the Academy, and particularly Aristotle, stirring, and, even if as such rejected by him, would lead directly to his own doctrine of the Unmoved Mover.

I can think of no better evidence of what I am trying to say than a small passage to be found at the end of *Laws* 10. In extreme old age, possibly just months or even weeks before his death, he asks an old question, central to all psycho-physicalist theory, on how soul relates to body. In this particular case he asks it of the sun. How, he queries, does the soul of the sun relate to its body? Does it push it, from without? Does it pull it, from within? Or does it relate to it in some other extraordinary way beyond our comprehension (898e,8- 899a,4)? After a lifetime of grappling with the matter, he still does not know the answer, struggle over the issue though he continues to do, and he is willing to admit it. It is a moment of penetrating intellectual honesty; a moment of the purest Socratic commitment, in this matter as in every other, to follow the *lógos* as the highest goal; and a truly distinctive claim, I would say, amongst his many claims, to greatness.

[recebido em fevereiro 2004]