

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

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,

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

the physical and conventional moral

articulated purely on the biological level, does not clarify all of the powers that belong to the different kinds,

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.

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 al

Hans Gadamer, *Plato's Dialectical Ethics*