

Greek Philosophy 2001/1, Term 1, Lecture 6

# THE IMMORTAL SOUL IN PLATO

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The Phaedo taught that the soul is in origin simple and purely rational, and takes on complexity and conflict only as it assumes a body. When Plato advances in Republic Book 10 away from describing the soul as we find it within the body to identifying its 'ancient' and 'true' nature (a deeply Platonic equivalence, 611d2, 612a3-4), he rather multiplies options than excludes any.

Much of what he proposes permits, and even suggests, the Phaedo picture of an originally simple soul ('single in form', 612a4, cf. Pdo 80b2) taking on mental accretions like the sea-god Glaucus encrusted with shells and seaweed (611c7-d7), so that the immortal is contaminated by the mortal, the purely mental by the partly physical. However, he also moots an alternative picture of an immortal soul always manifold ('many in form', 612a4), but consisting of elements put together in the finest manner (cf. 611b6). This alternative in turn might be explicated in two ways. The soul that is not put together in the finest manner and will 'not easily' be immortal (most likely an understatement, b5-7) may be the corrupt soul of Books 8 and 9, marred by 'other evils' on top of 'communion with the body' (611b10-c2); the description in Book 4 (443d3-e2) of the unity which can be achieved through temperance within the tripartite soul may have implied that there is no inherent deficiency in the inter-relations of its parts (which need not imply that these are all ideal).

Or else, the imperfectly related soul may be the tripartite soul of Book 4, 'marred by communion with the body' (10.611b10-c2) and so at least always liable to corruption, in contrast to a finer but also composite soul that exists before incarnation and outside the cycle of rebirth; even if it happens to be triple in composition, this soul will not be tripartite in the sense of 'part' that implies at least a tendency to conflict. An inherent complexity of a kind is confirmed by the signal fact that the proof of the immortality of the soul in Book 10 (608d3-611a3) rests on its indestructibility by its proper vices, injustice, self-indulgence, cowardice, and ignorance; for their nature was defined in Book 4 in terms of the tripartite soul (444a10-b8). Yet Socrates may be indicating that the soul free of the body enjoys complexity without partition when he remarks that, viewed in its purity, it will permit a far clearer sight of the varieties of justice and injustice (611c4-5).

It tells with some force on the other side, that of identifying the true soul with a simple rational substance as in the Phaedo, that it is called 'akin to the divine and the immortal and to eternal being' (e2-3, cf. Pdo 80b1-3). However, so long as it is harmonious and fully follows reason (cf. 9.586e4-5), it may be counted indirectly as 'all following' reality (10.611e4) even if it extends beyond reason; and, if it is triple but not tripartite, it may resemble the soul of the world in the Timaeus which, though compounded of the Same, the Different, and Existence, is described as 'invisible and endowed with reason and harmony, being the best creation of the best of intelligible and eternal things' (36e6-37a2). Plato concludes here by leaving the options open (612a3-5). We shall find two of them developed later: in the Timaeus the human soul is described as originally complex but not partite, while in the Phaedrus it is presented (we have to consider how seriously) as originally tripartite.

Early in his second speech in the *Phaedrus*, Socrates offers a proof of the immortality of ‘all soul’ (245c5), by which he evidently means soul both human and divine (cf. c3). He proceeds to symbolize the form of the soul as follows:

Let it then resemble the combined power of a winged team of horses and charioteer. Now in the case of gods, horses and charioteers are all both good and of good stock; whereas in the case of the rest there is a mixture. In the first place our driver has charge of a pair; secondly one of them is noble and good, while the other is oppo-site and of opposite stock (246a6-b3).

Perhaps consideration of these divine souls might clarify how a soul can be complex and yet perfect. The charioteer is the emblem of reason, both in its grasp of reality outside the soul (‘the plain of truth’ offers ‘the pasturage which is fitting for the best part of the soul’, 248b6-7), and in its imposition of order within the soul (as will be spelt out in relation to incarnate souls). If gods are wholly rational, why are they assigned horses at all? One explanation is solely at the level of imagery: even winged chariots need horses. But that cannot be all, for Plato makes the most of the necessity: Socrates adds that they have their own nourishment, not the pasturage of the plain of truth, but ambrosia and nectar in their own manger (247e4-6). Perhaps the chariot with its horses nourished by the charioteer sym-bolizes that the gods’ life is practical as well as theoretical, but with practice wholly informed by the-ory and owing to it its divine nature (just as the Homeric gods owe their immortality to ambrosia and nectar). ‘All soul has the care of all that is soulless, and ranges about the whole universe’ (246b6-7): divine life is unified but not uniform, and complex without conflict. How many aspects are there to a divine soul? Unlike the question about the number of soul-parts (given a good criterion of partition) this one has no answer, as Socrates may be acknowledging when he leaves open how many horses there are to a divine team.

However, if this is right, it obscures the issue raised in *Republic* Book 10 as to whether the true nature of the soul is multiform or single in form (612a3-4). It is no news to the *Phaedo* that the soul has at least a dual role, grasping truth (65b9) but also exercising rule (94b4-5). If we now distinguish practical from theoretical intellect (while still insisting, with Plato as against Aristotle, that practical thinking is nothing but an application of theoretical), we recognize the complexities of reason without extending the soul outside reason. If rational activity has two forms, is reason itself multiform? We might answer yes, bearing in mind Plato’s discrimination between powers or capacities (*dynamais*) in *Republic* Book 5 on the basis of differences between objects and operations (477c9-d5); or we might answer no, on the ground that its operations are not independent of each other. Divine souls exem-plify a complexity of rational functioning that may yet be accommodable within the simplicity as-cribed to the soul (at least before incarnation and contamination) in the *Phaedo*. Where the soul is wholly rational, and its rationality has different operations but a single source, any new talk of multi-formity, if that means that reason has many roles, expresses rather a shift in emphasis than a change of mind from the old talk of singleness in form, if that meant that those roles are all rational.

We might expect to find light cast on the possibility of psychic complexes without parts once the Socrates of the *Phaedrus* turns to souls in heaven that are not gods. Instead, he ascribes to them a complexity that is also a partition. It is true that the term ‘part’ does not appear, but it never did much work, and there is evidence enough of conflict even here: one of the horses is opposite to the other

(246b3), and, unless it has been well trained, the bad horse will weigh the driver down (no doubt against his will, 247b3-5). The nature of the horses before incarnation is somewhat mysterious, as the sketchiness of Socrates' description, and the bareness of his labels ('good' and 'bad' horse), may concede; it is particularly difficult to envisage an unembodied appetite. Talk of weight may remind us of how, in the *Phaedo*, a bodily element can remain attached to the soul to weigh it down even after death (81c8-10), and this may suggest that the divided soul of the *Phaedrus* is always liable to incarnation for the reason that it already carries with it the residuum of a previous body (cf. *Pdo* 81e9-d2). Yet the *Phaedrus* twice describes a first incarnation (248d1-2, 249a5), which can hardly, with no indication, mean the next one; and it says that the soul 'lays hold of something solid' and takes on 'an earthly body' after it has shed its feathers (246c2-4). It remains true that the identity of the horses seems parasitic upon the possibility of incarnation: the bad horse can only, before it fully possesses appetites, have the desire to become appetite (and so too for the good horse in relation to spirit). By carrying back the soul's tripartition into its prehistory, Plato can hope to use the tasks and trials of the soul in heaven to highlight those of the lover on earth: a fall from heaven is the converse, almost as if a film were being run backwards, of the ascent from earth.

If this is all there is to it, we may interpret the prehistory as myth. Plato is cultivating ambiguity: that the human soul was originally tripartite may or may not have been mooted as possible in *Republic* Book 10, and may or may not be meant as actual in the *Phaedrus*; I incline to think that it is never a serious option.