

Phaedo – Paradox and Possibility

“The one aim of those who practice philosophy in the proper manner is to practice for dying and death.”¹

Phaedo recalls the death of Socrates. When relating those present to bear witness we are told: “Plato, I believe, was ill,”² we are struck by a telling irony. Would Plato really choose not to be present at his friend and mentor’s most trying time? It is certainly more plausible to believe that in mentioning he is not there, Plato is signaling that the dialogue is his own creation, and not Socrates’ actual words.³ Given that the closeness of their relationship causes me to assume the strong likelihood of his presence, even though in writing he claims not to have been there, this claim seems to point to a deliberately recurring theme of paradox – occurring here in that an apparent absence is not necessarily a real absence. Paradoxically including contraries into a deeper understanding of unity, *Phaedo* shows that our current limitations in comprehending life and death do not mean there is nothing future-based left to be comprehended as at least *possible*.

This teleological approach stems from Socrates’ sense of divine appointment as philosopher, given him by the god Apollo through the oracle at Delphi.⁴ The significance of his vocation is brought to mind in that *Phaedo* begins with a delay in his execution, due to the Apollo festival in which a ship was blessed by a priest and sent to Delos before returning to Athens. This was done to commemorate Theseus’ mission, in which by

¹ Reeve, C.D.C. and Patrick Lee Miller, eds. 2006. *Introductory Readings in Ancient Greek and Roman Philosophy*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc. (110: *Phaedo*, 64a).

² Reeve et al. 2006, 108: *Phaedo*, 59b.

³ A middle dialogue (Platonic dialogue), *Phaedo*’s Socrates is more confident, offering definitions. Offering and arguing for metaphysical claims, this represents Plato coming into his own position.

⁴ Reeve et al. 2006, 60: *Apology* 20e-21a: Socrates relates belief that through the oracle at Delphi, the god Apollo granted him insight that “no one” was “wiser” than he. He therefore took on philosophy as an all-encompassing duty.

beating the Minotaur who lived in a labyrinth designed by Daedalus to death, he saved innocent lives from being sacrificed to it. One way to interpret what Plato means by this inclusion is to immediately discern that Socrates, or the death of Socrates, is being ironically equated with the triumph of Theseus.⁵ Another way is to see Socrates in the context of his “ancestor, Daedalus,”⁶ whom Socrates claims to have surpassed:

Then, my friend, it looks as though I’ve grown cleverer in my area of expertise than my venerated ancestor, in that he made only his own works not stay put, whereas I do this to my own, it seems, and also to other people’s. And the most subtle thing about my area of expertise is that I’m wise in it without wanting to be.”⁷

Socrates is a stand for wisdom, even in spite of himself. By employing a means of doing philosophy wherein better questions and answers are sought simultaneously, he is seeking out definitions and what makes them possible. Mentioning him in the context of Daedalus’ labyrinth suggests an image of Socrates delving deep into and seeking to forge intellectual coherence from a vast conundrum of *ignorance*. A global phenomenon, for Socrates ignorance is demonstrated every time that people who claim to know something do not actually know it. While Socratic method authentically seeks

⁵ Cf. *ibid*, 107: *Phaedo*, 58-58c. The inclusion of Theseus shouts irony. In returning to Athens to establish democratic rule, he neglected to hoist a white sail indicating triumph, leaving a black sail indicating failure and his own death hanging instead. Devastated by grief his father flung himself off a cliff, foreshadowing Theseus’ own death later in life when he would be flung off a cliff himself. Consistent with other Greek tales (Orpheus, etc.), we see that earlier victories in life may not necessarily continue in perpetuity; at least not in an immediately recognizable manner as victorious, and prior to establishing the necessary exegesis that could reveal an underlying transcendence toward a somehow broader teleological victory in retrospect (for instance, democracy continues to exist in the world).

⁶ Though the following excerpt is from *Euthyphro*, which like *Apology* in Footnote 4 is not only not *Phaedo* but representative of early dialogues in which we are probably being presented by Socrates’ actual ideas and not necessarily Plato’s, I include them as contextual because they represent a transference of thought from Socrates to Plato, and are related to the theme of paradoxical inclusion I am establishing here: apparent opposites may point toward a more deeply established and sublime unity. In that both dialogues deal with piety, justice, condemnation and death, *Phaedo* can also be seen as picking up where *Euthyphro* leaves off.

⁷ Reeve et al. 2006, 54: *Euthyphro*, 11b-d. “Daedalus was a legendary sculptor of great skill. His statues were so lifelike that they moved around by themselves just like living things. Socrates’ father, Sophroniscus, is alleged to have been a sculptor or stone carver, and some of the statues on the Acropolis may have been attributed to Socrates himself” (*ibid*).

definitions, asks better questions, and even strongly implies answers (justice as piety throughout *Euthyphro* for example), sure outcomes and definitive answers are lacking. What groundwork for the possibility of clarity can then be established? How does one slay the Minotaur of ignorance?

While *Phaedo* relates the death of Socrates, it simultaneously illustrates how previous means of attaining philosophical clarity, which caused pain due to their capacity to only question and offer no ultimate solutions, are followed by the pleasure of the possibility of clarity. This is why we are told that Socrates turned from practicing the highest “art of philosophy,” toward writing poetry, in “obedience” to the recurring dream that he should “practice and cultivate the arts.”⁸ The epoch of Socrates and the context out of which he did philosophy were coming to an end, and the inclusion of poetry here represents the creating of a new sort of interior life. For Plato, this death in which questions would not be met with more questions but with *answers*, is transformed into new life with the possibility of the Forms.⁹

Embodying perfection, the Forms are simple and unitary in that they never change, are strictly definable, and can only be intuited with the mind. A Form is an eternal representation of an object, and the relationship between particular occurrences in the world of sight and sound is purely derivative. For instance, the Form of Science Fiction resulted in making the Leonard Nimoy directed film, *Star Trek III: The Search*

⁸ Ibid, 108: *Phaedo*, 60-60b.

⁹ There is a gradual movement toward philosophical monotheism here, where God is the Form of the Good. The difference between Plato and Christian theology is that while the Good is the source of everything toward which one ought to strive, it does not have a personality.

for Spock.¹⁰ No matter the object that is being represented, all Forms are entirely and completely independent of their instances.

Justification for the existence of Forms stems from his Theory of Recollection, which assumes we are born with an innate knowledge we could not acquire by other means. Though limited to sensory experience in the world, Socrates argues that we can obtain some knowledge of the Forms due to the immortality of our souls. In presenting his dualistic world-view, Socrates assumes that souls and bodies are different in that not only do souls exist, but do so prior to birth. Moreover, souls continue existing after death, and are immortal. The eternal, even omniscient nature of souls is such that they are very similar to Forms. In that sense perfect and capable of instantiating knowledge into bodies, what we think of as *learning* is actually *recollecting* what is already known.¹¹

The immortality of souls can be interpreted in that there is only one great affinity within which all human souls are related, the Form of Life. While reincarnation is referred to and perhaps assumed to be true, Socrates seems to be offering something like an Anaxagoras view, where becoming immortal ultimately means transcending the cycle

¹⁰ As the third film in the franchise, *Search for Spock* seems to affirm in the minds of most Trekkies/Trekkers the understanding that the odd-numbered films are worse than the even. Regardless of its shortcomings however, in presenting the transference of Mr. Spock's soul right before his death into Dr. McCoy's consciousness from the previous film *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan*, as becoming reintegrated into his body that was resurrected due to the Genesis planet effect, *Search for Spock* does further illustrate my point that current limitations in comprehending life and death do not exclude the possibility of future life.

¹¹ It would be a bad philosophical argument to simply assert that I already have what I don't have or appear to have. Originally presented in *Meno*, it is possible that the Recollection doctrine was initially offered as a means of generating simultaneous dialogue across many levels of society. The real point has more to do with the premise that when truth is shown, one intuitively grasps what is seen, thereby rendering an account. Our souls perceive something, and that is the hidden truth in the Theory of Recollection – that we intuit the Forms of things. Plato's position here takes a significant leap of faith, where deference to the Form of the Good is the preeminent qualifier.

of reincarnation.¹² While this could mean doing so toward eternal contemplation of the Good, it is also theoretically possible that, having been exposed in some capacity to Buddhism, immortality as personal experience may not be the point as much as disappearing into the Good.

His own argument for the existence of Forms, inseparable from the soul's immortality in terms of our being able to conceive of them at all is convincing, *if* one allows for the possibility that he is not contradicting himself, but rather allowing for the existence and deliberate inclusion of *paradox* as a means of perpetually uncovering the ramifications of his doctrine. Because immortality is argued for from the aforementioned unitarity in which immortality is as it is because there are no changeable parts, the metaphysics cannot be reconciled with the ethics in which one prepares oneself for death. That is, by turning away from the body and toward the soul by living a life of philosophy, thereby doing some measure of *good* to the soul, one changes the changeless.

Plato knows what he is doing, this is deliberate, and there is an overall thrust supporting the transcendence of right action. His argument occurs in a context, nascently beginning in the justice as piety argument in *Euthyphro*, and continuing to expand outward through the *Republic*. For now in *Phaedo* however, we experience both metaphysics and ethics, and universal Forms and particular occurrences of them, and the philosopher understands that he is taking the mystery as far as it can be presently articulated. While pertaining to its existence within the context of Forms, the immortality of the soul is also inseparable from its capacity to perpetually define itself.

¹² Though these accounts can come off as him talking to the uninitiated, it needs to be affirmed that the dialogues are meant to appeal to multiple audiences. There can be occasional noble lies that may be untrue in one sense, but are designed to at least point people in the right direction.

This basis in possibility is strongly implied by the last words Plato attributes to Socrates: “We owe a cock to Asclepius; make this offering to him and do not forget.”¹³ If one is familiar with the Apollo reference at the beginning of the dialogue, the inclusion of Asclepius at the end reveals the previously hidden format within which the dialogue was shaped.

A son of Apollo, Asclepius was killed by Zeus for resurrecting a dead man. While interpretation here could remain open, Zeus as Athens punishing Asclepius as Socrates satisfies my point. Though the particular occurrence of the Form of Life that is Socrates will perish, it is because he manifested no longer as the enigmatic Daedalus, but the life-giving Asclepius. The possibility of new life would live through the philosophical Forms that he had been instrumental in articulating, and the mantle of Apollo would be taken up by Plato and his descendants.

The Sun god Apollo is even more significant in that he is a stand for the Form of the Good, illustrated as being like the Sun, that “not only gives visible things the power to be seen but also provides for their coming-to-be, growth, and nourishment...therefore (one) should also say that not only do the objects of knowledge owe their being known to the good, but their existence and being are also due to it; although the good is not being, but something yet beyond being, superior to it in rank and power.”¹⁴

What is superior to being is the perpetually ongoing *possibility* of being. While affirming that the one aim of those who practice philosophy in the proper manner is to practice for dying and death, Plato is showing us that it is only because true death is the

¹³ Reeve et al. 2006, 138: *Phaedo*, 117e – Sacrifice was made to Asclepius “by the sick people who slept in his temples, hoping for a cure” (ibid).

¹⁴ Ibid, *Republic*, 509b – my point is further emphasized in that the very existence of this dialogue articulates continuity from *Phaedo*. The at-first changeless, and then changeable nature of the soul throughout the dialogues represents the ongoing unfoldment of life as possibility.

demise of obfuscation and finitude. Though the physical body perishes, the philosophical body of work retains a life that can be perpetuated through one's ideological progeny. Above all, however, is the final assurance that through the practice of philosophy, the soul can live forever, and reside with the Good. The paradox is thus resolved by the understanding that death is not death, but the possibility of immortality.