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INTRODUCTION

1. LITERATURE AND PHILOSOPHY

A typical class of British philosophy students, coming to the *Phaedo* for the first time, will probably wonder why they have to wait for so long before getting to any real philosophy; and many recent books and articles on the dialogue, themselves written by philosophers, will encourage them to skip smartly to the four arguments for immortality and the long passage on explanation, looking at the rest – if at all – merely as a place from which to excavate hidden premisses. A typical class of literature students, on the other hand, will be puzzled and irritated when they come to the 'philosophical' parts. This is, of course, a caricature; it is however true that the work makes unfamiliar demands on the modern reader. The closest parallel is with a serious novel, or a play; and there are indeed features which the dialogue shares with tragedy, for example the chorus-like presence of Phaedo and Echecrates, and an Aristotelian-type περιπέτεια or reversal of fortune (see also 115a5,[1] where Socrates compares himself with a tragic hero, albeit ironically).

The analogy should not be pressed too hard. The *Phaedo* is certainly a work of creative fiction (written some twenty years after the events it pretends to relate). But a conversation between philosophers is hardly a promising subject either for the novelist or for the dramatist; and while Plato as writer of dialogues, like the writer of novels or plays, withdraws behind his characters, he probably does so less far and less genuinely in the case of a dialogue like the *Phaedo*, where the directness and singlemindedness of Socrates' delivery of his general message about the importance of the philosophical life makes it hard not to see him in this respect as the authentic voice of Plato himself. If we wish to identify the genre to which the *Phaedo* belongs, it will perhaps best be treated as hovering somewhere between that of serious fiction or

[1] This is the standard form of reference to Platonic works: '115' represents the page number in the relevant volume of H. Stephanus' 1578 edition of Plato, 'a' the relevant section of that page, and '5' the line in that section. (Line-numbers will normally only be given in this volume in references to *Phd.* itself.)

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drama on the one hand, and that of the treatises of an Aristotle or a Kant on the other. But there is one respect in which the analogy will certainly hold. It is as perverse to equate reading the *Phaedo* with reading certain portions of it as it would be to stage excerpts of *Oedipus Tyrannus* and call it a performance of Sophocles' play, or to claim to have read *War and Peace* on the strength of having read the first or the middle three hundred pages.

In fact, however, the 'philosophical' sections of the dialogue bulk so large that it is impossible to ignore them. The more pressing task – at least from a modern standpoint, when discussion of the *Phaedo* tends to be dominated by professional philosophers – is to demonstrate the importance of the allegedly 'non-philosophical' parts of the work. What makes it all the more pressing is that the verdict on most or all of the arguments at the core of the conversation reported by Phaedo is generally negative. Thus we have the odd situation that what is generally recognised, even by its philosophical critics, as one of the greatest works of European prose literature, is simultaneously seen as resting on a series of philosophical mistakes. But how can bad philosophy make great literature?

My response is, first, that the critics have been too hasty in condemning Plato's arguments, which are more carefully and ingeniously constructed than they have sometimes supposed; second, and more importantly, that exclusive concentration on these has prevented a proper estimation of the subtlety of Plato's own attitude towards them, which becomes apparent when we begin to look at them in their dramatic context. Analysing the individual arguments may be a useful pedagogical exercise, but is only a part of the process of interpretation. We need also to understand them in their context: how they are received by the characters in the dialogue itself, why each is succeeded by the next, and so on. What emerges is a picture, not of a series of self-standing arguments woodenly inserted into a dramatic framework, but rather of a group of philosophers engaged in debate, listening, criticising, and responding to each other; and this is indeed what philosophy is, according to the *Phaedo*. The *Phaedo* is a written representation of live philosophical conversation, in which failure is, and is acknowledged to be, as much a possibility as success (and perhaps rather more frequent), and where either will have immediate consequences for choice and action: most immediately, we shall be able to judge the

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reasonableness or otherwise of the contentment with which we see Socrates facing his execution. If none of the arguments proves the immortality of the soul, then on the terms of the discussion, death will be something to be feared; if they are successful, we should not fear death, but rather the manner of our life, which according to Socrates will determine our fate 'in Hades'. Seen in this way, the 'philosophical' and 'non-philosophical' parts of the dialogue together form a perfectly integrated whole.

2. PLATO'S CONCEPTION OF PHILOSOPHY

The distinction between literature and philosophy is certainly not one that would have interested Plato. After all, he had before him examples (Parmenides, Empedocles) of philosophers who wrote in that highest of literary forms, epic verse. (If he sometimes opposes poetry and philosophy, that is because of the lies he claims that most existing poetry tells.) What would have interested him more is the distinction between written representation of philosophical activity and doing philosophy itself (as artistic representation of anything differs from that thing). According to the view he has Socrates develop in the *Phaedrus*, philosophising consists in actual, live conversation between individuals in search of the truth (φιλο-σοφία). Written texts 'contain much that is merely for amusement',[2] and should not be taken too seriously either by their authors or by their readers, because they are incapable of *teaching* anyone anything. The man who knows anything about the most important subjects ('the just, the fine and the good'), if he writes, will do so 'for the sake of amusement . . . , laying up a store of reminders both for himself, when he "reaches a forgetful old age", and for anyone who is following the same track';[3] the best writings 'have really been a way of reminding people who know'.[4] Although Plato's own works are not explicitly included within the scope of these remarks (and cannot be, since from within the dramatic context of the *Phaedrus* they are themselves conversations rather than written texts), it is hard to see any grounds for excluding them. We thus reach the surprising result that neither the writing of a dialogue like the *Phaedo*, nor the reading of it, will count as doing philosophy as such.

[2] *Phdr.* 277e. [3] *Phdr.* 276d. [4] *Phdr.* 278a.

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We may of course ourselves enter into a kind of conversation with the text, and can indeed hardly avoid doing so: at every point in the dialogue we shall need to ask, like those taking part in it, whether what is being said is acceptable or not. But this will not be a real conversation, since the other party, the text, is dumb, and if you ask it something, it cannot reply, but 'stands there in solemn silence'.[5] According to the *Phaedrus*, the essential feature of philosophical conversation or 'dialectic' (διαλεκτική, the art of διαλέγεσθαι) is that it involves *exchange*: one person (the one who has some knowledge) produces statements, which another person then questions, forcing the first to defend what he has said, and so on. Only so, it is suggested, is any advance, or transfer of knowledge, possible.

It cannot of course be assumed that what Plato (or rather Socrates) says in one dialogue is necessarily applicable to any other. Each dialogue is self-contained; and there are moreover numerous cases in which Plato's views seem to have changed or evolved.[6] However, the conception of philosophy we find in the *Phaedrus* does appear in most respects to be directly transferable to the *Phaedo*. The only significant difference is that whereas the *Phaedrus* seems to presuppose that the conversation will be between unequals (master and pupil), the protagonists in the *Phaedo* appear close to being equals (see §4); but there is no obvious reason why the latter type of situation should be ruled out – if advance is possible between master-philosopher and pupil, it will *a fortiori* also be possible between two or more philosophers working together. Just so Socrates, Simmias and Cebes agree that they have (probably) achieved a definite result, after a long conversation of the type recommended in the *Phaedrus*: statement, followed by questioning, leading to defence of the statement, and so on.

It may have been this view of philosophy – as a two-way process – that determined Plato's initial choice of the dialogue form. The closest approximation to philosophy in writing will be a written portrayal of philosophers in dialogue with each other. Simple declamation, or the rehearsal of arguments without the possibility of criticism or counter-argument, is the province of the rhetorician, not of the philosopher. To the extent that even dialogues cannot be forced to defend themselves, Plato as writer will himself be playing the rhetorician. But in reading

[5] *Phdr.* 275d. [6] Cf. below, §8.

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them, and entering their fictional context, we become like the audience of a conversation, able like them to learn from it and to share in (or reject) its conclusions.

3. THE AIMS OF PLATO'S PHILOSOPHICAL WRITING

The *Phaedo* has two main conclusions: that the best life is the life of philosophy, and that the soul is immortal. They are inseparably connected, in that the main argument for the choice of the philosophical life is that it will ensure a better fate for us after death, which clearly presupposes that we survive it as conscious beings. That Plato firmly believed in both propositions is hardly in doubt, since he recurs to them repeatedly in other dialogues. But would he have been content if, as philosophers, and using the methods he recommends, we went on to reject the case for immortality? More generally, does he see philosophy as an open-ended process which may lead in unforeseen directions, even to the extent of undermining his own beliefs, or rather as moving ineluctably towards the confirmation of those beliefs? Is he, in other words, a philosopher still groping for the truth, whatever it may be, or one who thinks he already has it, and is trying to confirm it for himself, or even (a third possibility) just looking for ways of allowing us, his readers, to begin to see it?

So far as the *Phaedo* goes, none of the three alternatives is obviously false. Socrates admits that even the last argument for immortality, the one about which he is most optimistic, is based only on hypotheses, on whose precise meaning he has declined to commit himself. Then again, given that he has accepted criticism of previous arguments, he ought also to be prepared to accept criticisms of this one – and Plato's arguments for immortality elsewhere, in the *Republic*, *Phaedrus*, and *Laws*, are in fact of a quite different type. Yet if he could seriously have envisaged dropping the idea of immortality, it is odd that he should have made it so central to the case for the philosophical life, which he would certainly not have given up; and it could be that he in fact had a longer story to tell about his 'hypotheses' which he chose not to allow Socrates to divulge, perhaps because he thought it excessively technical for his intended audience. Similarly, earlier in the dialogue, when he has Socrates complain about his inability to discover the kind of

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αἰτία or explanation of things that he was looking for, he could mean either that he has abandoned the search, or that he is still hopeful about finding what he wants; or else, again, he has more up his sleeve than he chooses to tell us.

Aristotle certainly attributes to Plato a set of 'unwritten opinions'[7] about the first principles of explanation which might fit the bill – and which he might also have claimed to be capable of converting the hypotheses of the final argument into something more solid. But if he did come to form such opinions (and Aristotle's evidence is hard to write off), we cannot be sure how strongly he held them, or that he had formed them by the time when he wrote the *Phaedo*. There is in my view nothing in the dialogue which compels us to believe that he had. No doubt he could have said more on many subjects, but we have no reason to believe that the projects he suggests (for further investigation of his hypotheses, and for a complete teleological explanation of things) have already been completed. On the other hand, he clearly thinks that they can be successfully completed. In other words, the Plato of the *Phaedo* is a thinker whose mind is neither completely made up nor completely open. Like the Socrates he portrays, he knows what he believes in a general way, but is still busy constructing the arguments he needs to support his opinions, and to convince us of them.

4. THE *PHAEDO* AND PYTHAGOREANISM

The *Phaedo* is set in Phlius in the Peloponnese, where Phaedo, fresh from Athens, relates the story of Socrates' last hours to Echecrates, a native of the city. Echecrates was evidently one of a number of Pythagoreans working in Phlius; he and his friends therefore seem an entirely appropriate choice of audience for a conversation which turns around two ideas which themselves seem to have been quintessentially Pythagorean: that the soul is immortal, and that it may be reincarnated periodically in different bodies. However, the *Phaedo* not only fails to mention Echecrates' Pythagorean credentials, but actually casts doubt upon them, since it represents him as an enthusiastic supporter of the soul-as-harmony theory, which is incompatible with immortality. No doubt he was a Pythagorean, but somewhat unorthodox, and

[7] Arist. *Phys.* 209b14–15.

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a rather odd choice if Plato's aim was to introduce us to an ambience of (orthodox) Pythagoreanism. His true role is perhaps just as a philosopher, outside Athens, who is anxious for news of Socrates. Phaedo, we are told, had been taken as a prisoner of war during the Spartan war with Elis, and sold in Athens (apparently as a male prostitute), where his freedom had been bought at Socrates' instigation; he then joined Socrates' circle, and left for his home town of Elis after the execution, calling in at Phlius on the way.[8]

It used to be held[9] that Simmias and Cebes were also Pythagoreans, on the grounds that they are said to have 'associated with' (συγγίγνεσθαι) the famous Pythagorean thinker Philolaus when he was in Thebes.[10] But 'associating with' someone does not necessarily imply adherence to their ideas; and there is no ancient evidence outside the *Phaedo* for the affiliation of either Simmias or Cebes to Pythagoreanism. Again, Simmias' espousal of the harmony theory of soul proves nothing: even if it was held by at least one Pythagorean (Echecrates), and is therefore claimed to be 'Pythagorean', holding a single view in common with a school does not make one a member of it. Rather, Simmias and Cebes are, like Phaedo, members of Socrates' group; they have participated many times before in philosophical discussions ('our questions and answers'),[11] and are less interested in doctrine than in listening to argument, and in finding out what can be established by argument. Paradoxically, it is Socrates himself, the master of those who know nothing, who has acquired 'Pythagorean' beliefs: in the *Apology*, Plato represents him as agnostic about survival after death.[12]

5. THE 'THEORY OF FORMS'

'Forms' (εἴδη) play a fundamental role in much of the conversation in the *Phaedo*. They are the things which 'we' (Socrates and those who have taken part in discussions with him) label as 'what is (equal, or beautiful, or good, or anything else)',[13] and of whose essence 'we' give, or try to give, an account.[14] The standard formula used for referring to forms is αὐτὸ τὸ *F*, i.e., apparently, what is just *F* and nothing else; e.g.

[8] See McQueen and Rowe 1989.
[9] See esp. Burnet 1911.
[10] *Phd.* 61d.
[11] *Phd.* 75d, 78d.
[12] *Ap.* 40c.
[13] *Phd.* 75d.
[14] *Phd.* 78d.

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equality, or *beauty*, not particular examples of equality or beauty. That such things exist is enthusiastically endorsed by Simmias and Cebes; Simmias calls it 'a hypothesis worthy of acceptance'.[15] In fact, the version of the form-hypothesis which appears in the *Phaedo*, and especially its stress on the idea that forms somehow exist separately from particulars, is likely to be Platonic rather than authentically Socratic. But by portraying it as a familiar topic to those present Plato avoids the need to explain in detail what believing in 'forms' might amount to. The implication is perhaps that any philosophically-minded reader will easily come to see that, whatever 'forms' may be, and whatever their relationship with particulars, the assumption that they exist is necessary and uncontroversial. To the extent that it is possible to talk about, and define, something like equality (if not beauty) without special reference to any individual pair of equal things, Plato may seem to have a point; on the other hand, we may well have doubts about whether, as he supposes, what we are talking about in such cases is the sort of thing we could have grasped in some discarnate state, or whether it is capable of 'explaining' (being the αἰτία/αἴτιον of) particulars.[16] The latter proposition is one that 'Socrates' himself treats as a hypothesis: it is one of the two hypotheses that he leaves for further investigation at the end of the final argument,[17] the second being the basic proposition that 'each of the forms is something'.[18] But the difference between us and him is that whereas we would be likely to approach these propositions with scepticism, he clearly thinks that they will turn out to be viable.[19]

6. PLATONIC CONCEPTIONS OF THE SOUL

The word in the *Phaedo* which we translate as 'soul' is ψυχή. What this word refers to is something which inhabits the body while the latter is alive, and is indeed what brings life to it; it is also apparently, in essence, an entity with rational thoughts and desires, which acquires irrational tendencies – desires which are out of line with its rational essence – through its association with the body. Both conceptions have their roots in ordinary Greek language: in non-philosophical contexts, ψυχή ranges in meaning between something close to our 'life',

[15] *Phd.* 98d. [16] See *Phd.* 100b, etc. [17] *Phd.* 107b. [18] *Phd.* 102a.
[19] See above, §3.

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and 'mind', as the seat of consciousness, thought and emotion. In yet another role, it is that shadowy, insubstantial version of our former selves which, in Homer and in later poetry, goes to Hades when we die, still with visible shape but impotent and witless. It is from this idea that the main part of the argument of the dialogue begins, since it is what allows Socrates to gain easy acceptance for his definition of death as the separation of the ψυχή from the body. He is then forced to show that the ψυχή which survives this separation is durable and has 'power and intelligence',[20] as he has claimed, so grafting his own view of it (as animator of the body, and as a rational entity) onto the Homeric one, and extending the vague Homeric notion of continued existence into a full-blown immortality. In one partly playful context, Socrates envisages souls which were too attached to the body and its concerns in life as weighed down by corporeal elements, and so visible, like Homeric shades;[21] but in other passages discarnate souls are invisible and incorporeal.

Two problems in the treatment of the 'soul' in the *Phaedo* can be at least partly mitigated. The first problem is that it seems odd to make a rational entity responsible for the life of a biological organism, many of whose aspects are distinctly non-rational. However, Socrates' claim is only that the soul may *become* purely rational, when divested of the body. While incarnated, he hints, it is necessarily involved to some degree in the body's activities. In other dialogues the point is more explicitly recognised, through the division of the soul into rational and irrational parts; the *Phaedo* seems carefully to leave it open whether the soul is composite or unitary,[22] perhaps because it is more interested in its potentiality to achieve a godlike rationality than in what it is forced to be by its conjunction with a body.

The second problem is that whereas Socrates is clearly concerned to establish the immortality of the individual soul (since it is the individual's fear of death that forms the starting-point of the discussion), that is actually incompatible with the belief – to which he appears to be equally committed – in a cycle of reincarnation of souls. He does not propose any continuity of consciousness between one period of incarnation and another: the donkey into which Sardanapallus' soul enters does not remember having been Sardanapallus. The only soul which

[20] *Phd.* 70b. [21] *Phd.* 81c–d (cf. 108a–b).
[22] See esp. *Phd.* 78b–80b, with nn.

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will apparently maintain its identity is the truly philosophical one, which will join the company of the gods. That, however, may be enough for Plato's purposes, since philosophy then becomes important just because it is the only way of achieving full immortality – though the cost of achieving it, if it involves giving up everything except the search for knowledge, may seem rather high.

7. MYTHS AND PHILOSOPHY

The conversation Phaedo reports as having taking place in the prison falls into a number of interrelated parts. Socrates begins by defending his cheerfulness at the prospect of death. Challenged on the chief presupposition of this defence, the survival of the soul after the demise of the composite thing we call a 'human being', he then mounts a series of three arguments to try to establish it. Simmias and Cebes, however, are unconvinced: they ignore the first argument, claim that the second does not prove enough, and introduce powerful objections to the third – to the dismay of the others present, whose critical powers seem to be markedly inferior to those of the two Thebans. Socrates rallies them, but instead of defending his third argument, mounts an assault on the rival account of the soul proposed by Simmias (the 'harmony' theory), and then, in response to Cebes' objection, introduces a fourth and last argument, prefaced by a long disquisition on types of explanation. Finally, he launches into an elaborate 'myth' or story about the various destinations of the soul after death.

If the 'philosophy' of the *Phaedo* is identified with those parts of it which modern philosophical commentators find interesting,[23] then the myth at the end is certainly not philosophical. But from the point of view of what I claim to be *Plato's* view of philosophy,[24] the issue is rather less clear-cut: the myth, after all, is set within the same conversational context as the preceding arguments, and takes its starting-point from them ('if indeed the soul is immortal . . .'; 'since the soul is clearly immortal . . .').[25] Moreover, elements of Socrates' story link up closely both with his original 'defence' and with the arguments for immortality themselves. The usual explanation of Plato's use of myth is that it is a persuasive device to which he resorts as an adjunct to, or

[23] See above, §1. [24] Above, §2. [25] *Phd.* 107c.

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