Lecture 3.2: The Phaedo: Myth and Metaphysics

1. Who is talking? Who is Plato, and who is Socrates?

I have been talking in class about early and middle period dialogues. I’ve termed the early ones ‘Socratic,’ tacitly, if not explicitly, setting them apart from others. I’ve talked about (and will continue to talk about) the ethical concerns, and what, in future lectures, will be more epistemological and metaphysical issues. In the Phaedo, our dialogue for today, I will be ranting and raving about how inconsistent I find this dialogue to be with dialogues I like better—and concentrating on some little metaphysical issues.

(I don’t necessarily ADMIRE the dialogues I like better than I admire some of the ones I don’t like so well—but I do find some of them more sympathetic, maybe, to what I have come to be interested in, or what I want you to be interested in. But that’s my problem, not his…) Someone mentioned after class yesterday that in his previous encounter with the dialogues (and many of you have read the dialogues, or parts of them, in other classes and contexts)—he was told that the whole corpus is Socrates. And it’s true. Socrates is the mouthpiece in almost all the dialogues. I could equally say—and maybe I will say—that the whole corpus is Platonic. And when I talk about ‘what this dialogue tell us’ I am doing one of those interpretive things—pulling out positions or claims or arguments that I want to stress as elements in one kind of story I want to tell about the stories that Plato is telling.

I found a really good book the last time I was in the Literary Guillotine: It’s a book by Gerald Press called Plato: A Guide for the Perplexed. He presents a really good complex answer to the question of who was Socratic and who was Platonic in the dialogues. He points out that, as we know, Socrates never wrote anything. He points out the extent to which the dialogues themselves are artfully constructed fictions—something that’s easy to forget, since we know that some of the events in the dialogues really happened, that some of the people really lived and had histories and wrote things down…

[Artfully constructed fictions: Press suggests that Plato often follows the convention of Greek tragedy in taking the shape of a traditional story and retelling it in his own way to make his own points about what is true and what is important. He suggests that the Apology retells the story of Hercules’ labors; that the Crito reinterprets the embassy to Achilles, from the Odyssey; that our dialogue today, with 14 philosophers in the prison cell with Socrates is a re-telling of the story of Theseus going to Crete to save the 14 Athenian youths and maidens from the Minotaur. The philosopher emerges as the new Theseus, the new Hercules, the new Achilles…]

What we do know is that the dialogues simultaneously assert and deny what are sometimes said to be Platonic doctrines; the dialogues do and do not tell us what Plato thinks (or what Socrates thinks); that the topics are deadly serious, and approached playfully, ironically, paradoxically, sometimes ridiculously; that the arguments are to be taken seriously, explored for what they might suggest—but also taken dialectically, in light of the dialogical situation in which they occur, in light of who the interlocutors seem to be, and what they initially believe—and that the arguments are always open-ended, subject to question and possible revision. That the arguments, even if they don’t give us answers, circle around important questions that can only be ignored at our peril.

The Plato who writes the dialogues can be taken as either a skeptic, only asking questions (and when I emphasize that, I often call him Socrates) or as a theorist, sometimes suggesting answers (and when I emphasize that, I often call him Plato). He can be taken as a moralist, concerned primarily, maybe even solely, with burning questions of wisdom, “what IS the good life for man? How should I live?” He can be taken as a seeker after knowledge; not only wisdom, but rather, or as much, epistemological certainty, trying to find, or hypothesize, or to invent, a firm foundation for what we think we know, rational justification of our opinions, to give us the strength to persist and the belief that our quest for knowledge is not hopeless, any more than our quest for virtue. To take him as only the one, and not the other, is to underestimate the magnitude of the accomplishment. He wants—in both arenas, to move us from our ungrounded certainties, to doubts, and then onward, to a deeper understanding, to a higher level of philosophic comprehension.

Socrates is the elephant on which a whole world of rational inquiry rests.
Plato is the turtle on which he stands. And it’s turtles all the way down.

And wait: there’s another level of puzzle-boxes within puzzle boxes, a problem for our turtle. The Seventh Letter, supposedly written by Plato at the end of his life, Plato claims the following:
So much I can affirm with confidence, about any… who pretend to a knowledge about the problems with which I am concerned… there is no writing of mine about these matters, nor will there ever be one. For this knowledge is not something that can be put into words like other sciences; but after long-continued intercourse between teacher and pupil, in joint pursuit of a subject, suddenly, like light flashing forth when a fire is kindled, it is born in the soul, and straightway nourishes itself. (341c)

And later, (343a)

Because of the weakness of language… no sensible man will venture to express his deepest thoughts in words, especially in a form which is unchangeable, as is true of written outlines. (A great condemnation of Aristotle, who wrote only, or mainly, written outlines.)

Because of the limitations of writing—because, perhaps, of the very limitation of language as a conveyer of deepest truth and most complete understanding—the author of this letter claims he has never, and will never, write down the truth—[present any doctrines?]—about the things about which he is most serious. (The Seventh Letter, by the way, as is very appropriate for our author, is of very doubtful authenticity. But even if we assume it was written by Plato, I think we can safely say that there is little unchangeable about the form which Plato has chosen to write, the dialogues we are reading. Press says of Platonic theory: “even the ideas and theories most widely associated with his name… upon closer inspection seem to move around, like the untethered statues carved by Daedalus, referred to in the Meno at 97d-e.”)

2. Knowledge and wisdom

When I was talking about the Meno Tuesday I almost unconsciously fell into talking about knowledge. That was to this extent fair: the message in the internal message-box of the dialogue is about knowledge. Don’t despair of learning; don’t stop at your aporeia, the point at which you are filled with doubt about what you thought you knew. Persist through aporeia to a better understanding. Polish your initial intuitions, justify them; connect them up; tether your opinions with good reasons for holding them. See that among your opinions some are true and some are false; hold on to the good ones and discard the bad…

The dialogue as a whole—and this is why I wanted to be sure to talk about the material that follows on that central and crucial Act II—is a wisdom-box. I’m giving your slave-boy a geometry lesson, Meno; I’m giving you a lesson about what to prioritize in your shallow and self-centered little glory-seeking life. Surely you can see that just as your slave boy can come to a better understanding of this mathematical question, you too can come to a more examined life. Our quest for virtue is no more hopeless than his quest for mathematical understanding. And I, Socrates, don’t care a fig for geometry. But “I do believe that we will be better, braver and more active men if we believe it right” …to seek to become more virtuous. (Meno 86b)

The medium for that message—indeed, for both messages, the knowledge one and the wisdom one—in the Meno, for Meno, was the myth of recollection. (And if you got the impression that I was a bit skeptical or impatient about that as a medium for a message, just wait until you hear me on the eschatological myth of the Phaedo.) It is certainly true that I am more interested in the message, or what I want to think is the message, than I am in the medium in which it is conveyed.

[A promissory note: If we have time at the end of this hour, I’d like to revisit briefly what I take to be the message of the Euthyphro, about reason and revelation, about what the gods love and why they love it, and what that says about our human responsibilities…]

I wanted to call your attention to my shift of language, to my shift of concentration, from wisdom to knowledge, though, because that’s going to be more of that in the next few weeks. It would be desperately unfair to you all if you got out of this class not having any notion of what the doctrines are, the theories are, that are traditionally attributed to Plato.

In the Phaedo, and even more in the Republic, for what seem to him excellent reasons, Plato begins suggesting what he claims Socrates never did: he suggests various hypotheses about the nature of knowledge and about the nature of reality. In the trade [and the trade I refer to is my trade, the trade (like Ann Elk in the Monty Python skit, I call mine)] we professors of philosophy often, in a class like this one—an introduction to ancient philosophy—concentrate on Plato’s epistemology and metaphysics. And that means we chop up the dialogues. Instead of reading the whole dialogue, like I want you all to do, we pick out the pieces that contribute to the development of what we call “Plato’s Theory of Ideas”—a combination of (1) a metaphysical doctrine about the nature of reality; (2) a psychological doctrine, about the nature of
the human knower; and (3) an epistemological doctrine, about the relation of opinion and knowledge, and a hypothesis about what might justifies our claim to the latter.

3. The dialogue.

OK—I’ve put it off as long as I can. Let’s turn to our dialogue. When I think about this one, two words come to mind: myth, and metaphysics.

If, as Press suggests, this dialogue is a re-telling of the story of the hero Theseus, who went to the court of King Minos in Mycenae with 14 Athenian younglings and saved them from the minotaur by following a thread he had laid down out of the labyrinth—Socrates, a philosophical hero, saves the 14 philosophers crowded into his death-chamber from their monster, fear of death, by laying down his own orphic thread, a story about the pre-existence and immortality of the soul.

It is a tangled, a knotty thread—and as you will see from my attempt at an outline of the dialogue, which I uploaded for you to my website at an ungodly hour last night, it is a thread that I have failed to follow to its conclusion.

Some things about the dialogue are clear. It is dramatically set two days after the discussion in the Crito. The ship we were waiting for then has arrived, and today is the day that Socrates will die. His friends, including in the first few seconds, at least, his wife Xantippe, with babe in arms, who is ushered off-stage very quickly, have gathered around, lest he die alone.

The dramatic setting sets the question. We learned in the Crito that Socrates was not willing to escape the prison to escape death. The question remains, in the minds of his friends, why he seems so equanimous, so unconcerned, in the face of his imminent death. Heavens—he sleeps like a baby; he is cheerful, and as ascerbic and argumentative as ever—why is that?

The two interlocutors of the dialogue, the only ones of the 14 who speak at all, are both identified by my sources as Pythagoreans. [There’s a woman named Deborah Nails who has done a great job of listing all the interlocutors in all the dialogues, and collecting what seems to have been known about any of them from contemporary and later reports.] If, as I suggested above, dialogues takes the form they do in part because of the beliefs of the interlocutors, then some of the forms the myths take may be partially explained by that fact; on the other hand, Plato didn’t have to make them the interlocutors. They were his choice.

The dialogue consists of 4 arguments about the nature of the human soul, from which we learn among other things that it pre-existed the body, and also survives the death of body. The soul is immortal, in both directions.

1. the argument from opposites
2. the argument from recollection
3. the argument from the nature of the soul
4. the argument [of all things] from generation and decay

All four arguments depend crucially on various myths, stories, presuppositions carried into the argument by the interlocutors from common Athenian understandings of the day, or from particular doctrines and creeds that the various participants agree not to question. [And reading the dialogue, it is often as informative to see what the interlocutors don’t question, as it is to see what they do take issue with.]

But the dialogue is not only retailing myths. It is also presenting arguments. And it is presenting arguments that are of GREAT interest, not only to people who are interested in Platonic views about the immortality of the soul—but of interest to people who are wondering if Plato has views about the nature of reality, and the possibility—and nature—of knowledge. It is these arguments that, when we do chop up dialogues and pull out what we’re interested in in them, get pulled out of the Phaedo.

There are two places in this dialogue where these arguments appear.

(A) The first occurs in connection with a trope familiar to us from the Meno: the myth of recollection, in the second argument for the immortality of the soul.

There’s some slippery chicanery going on with the use of that myth in this context. But that’s not what I wanted to call your attention to. What’s of more interest here is what kind of thing the argument is applied to. The soul, while recollecting, is associating things present with things not seen. The example is of a lover seeing his beloved’s cloak or lyre, and thinking of his beloved. But the next set of examples, instances of defective association, involve the discussion of “equality in the abstract.”
(a) the soul is the kind of thing that upon looking at two sticks, can judge them as equal or unequal to each other;
(b) and can abstract from seeing them an idea of ‘equality itself’.
(c) Whatever that is, it is not identical to the physical things that prompted that idea.
(d) So we must have had that idea before we saw physical things, and perceive that they all strive to approximate it, but fall short.
This whatever-it-is is a non-physical something with attributes of identity: it is the kind of thing it is, in a particularly stringent and pure way.
--an abstraction (74c3)
--an absolute
--with some kind of relation to sensible things, but not itself sensible
--somehow better, purer, cleaner, than the sensible things it’s related to;
--graspable by reason, understanding—not by the senses
and it is somehow akin to the soul, allied to it, standing in a special relation to it.

(B) The second Passage of Interest is probably the second-most read passage in this dialogue. It occurs on page 140 on my text, 30 pages into this 40-paged dialogue—Stephanus 100b to about 102. I’d like to spend a minute on that passage. And you might as well dog-ear it in your text, because we will return to it later in the course, maybe next week or the week after. It’s Socrates’ “second string to his bow” (the first string being the nature of the soul).
This he describes as “the truth of existence” at 100 a 1—the truth of being—how what exists, exists. What we people in my trade call his “ontology.” He calls it “the kind of cause at which I have worked” at 100 b 3.
Do you agree with me in what follows? It appears to me that if anything besides absolute beauty is beautiful, it is so simply because it partakes of absolute beauty, and I say the same of all phenomena.
And, further down,
I hold to the doctrine that the thing is only made beautiful by the presence, or communication, or whatever you please to call it, of absolute beauty. I do not wish to insist on the nature of the communication, but what I am sure of is that it is absolute beauty which makes all beautiful things beautiful. This is the safest answer, that beauty makes beautiful things beautiful.
He proceeds to make the same claim of largeness, and says that what makes something two is that it participates in duality. The dialogue, dramatically speaking, wants to emphasize this point, so we pull out in 102a-b to the frame-discussion between Phaedo and Echecrates, where Phaedo, asked how the argument had proceeded from that point, summarizes: “they had admitted that each of the ideas exists, and that phenomena take the names of the ideas as they participate in them.”
Notice that this harkens back to the discussion of equality in Stephanus 74-5 (pages 122-123 in my text). These two islands in a sea of myth and psychologizing are considered central texts for Plato’s Theory of Forms.
Now—I said that this passage is the second-most discussed in the Phaedo. The most frequently read passage in this dialogue is at the end, the death-scene of Socrates, beginning on about 114 d and continuing to the end.
And the LEAST read passage is that wretched incomprehensible tedious cosmological exposition from 109-114. That can be safely skipped.

Rorty’s problems with the dialogue:
1. These arguments are integrated into a world view that is distinctly DUALISTIC. There’s the body; there’s the soul; the human being is – not so much a composite of body and soul, but a body that is at best a breadbasket, that contains the soul like a pail contains water—but no, that’s too kind, really, to this dialogue: the body is not a simple container—it’s a trap. It’s a corrupter. A misleader. A bad companion to the sweet, honest, innocent soul. It leads the soul astray.
Philosophy, in the early part of this dialogue, is described by Socrates as the study of death. The philosopher in order to attain truth must separate his soul from his body and all its interests, all the fun
things, that give the body pleasure. The recommendation of the best life that comes out of this dialogue is the life of the ascetic priest: the prophet in the wilderness on his stylobite; the driven visionary.

[Digression on Nietzsche and the Other Rorty’s tirade about the invidious effect of ascetic priests on philosophy…]

And that hostile dualism recurs at various points in this dialogue, as well. Personally, I don’t like that particular pessimistic, other-worldly strain much, so this isn’t one of my favorite dialogues. But at least I think it’s fair to say that it is not a consistent strain in Plato’s writings.

[I’m willing to argue about whether he is a dualist, but I can see one side of that argument; I can see some things in some of the other dialogues that we’ll be reading that might lead people to say so. I’m just saying that even if he can convince me that he’s some kind of dualist, he’s usually more cheerful about it than he is in the Phaedo.]

2. I sometimes get the feeling when I’m reading the dialogues that there are things going on that I don’t understand; that not all the cards are on the table. But I seldom have the pleasure, at least in the dialogues that we’re reading, of encountering something that strikes me as outright tricky and sophistical. But as I was outlining the dialogue last night, I encountered something that really wiped me out. Maybe you’ll appreciate it too.

Now you all remember from Tuesday that in the Meno, the immortality of the soul is presupposed; and the learning experiences of the immortal soul in its preexistence are given as the explanation for the possibility of learning in this life. (I’m sure you remember me complaining about what a rotten kind of explanation that was, in the Meno.) it goes like this:

i—the soul is immortal
ii—the soul has experienced everything in its previous lives, on earth and heaven
iii—when we learn here, we recall what we experienced in previous lives
iv—therefore learning is a process of recollection

But look what that foxy Daedalus does with the same myth in THIS dialogue: he presupposes it as an explanation for how we learn—and uses it to argue for the immortality of the soul. Since “we” all know that learning is recollection, and we obviously do learn, that couldn’t be the case unless the soul was immortal, and recalling things that it had learned before. The argument here goes like this:

i—learning is only a process of recollection
ii—we must have learned at a previous time what we recall now
iii—that would be impossible if our souls had not existed previously
iv—therefore the soul is immortal

The two dialogues in conjunction produce a completely circular argument. The conclusion of the Meno argument is the unexamined premise of the Phaedo argument. The conclusion of the Phaedo argument is the unexamined premise of the Meno argument. The same myth is used to prove each end of itself; a fascinating circularity. That is a neat sophistical trick, ya gotta admit.

For Tuesday: the Symposium. I hope you find it a pleasant relief from the heavy reading of this week. But I want to congratulate you. We’re starting week 4, and you are a third of the way through our text.