3.1 Plato’s *Phaedo*: Prologue

“Plato’s Dialogues seek to form, not inform, their readers.”

Like the Sophists, Plato centers his thought in man as knower and agent. But unlike them, he affirms a vision of man as capable of transcending his particularity, open to knowledge, virtue, justice and friendship with others. Plato pictures human life as both dynamic and rational: caught between finitude and transcendence, human beings are not simply contained by the former, even if they never quite possess the latter. There is a powerful visionary aspect to Plato’s account of reality and of humankind in it.

The *Phaedo*, the last dialogue of Plato’s tetralogy on the trial and death of Socrates, is a distillation of the idealist vision Plato has come to be known by in the twenty five centuries since his death. In it, Socrates presents a Theory of the Immortal Soul and a Theory of the Forms, as the two ultimate features of knowledge and reality. The *Phaedo* presents a religious conception of humanity, and of reality as divided between the fallen, material world and the ideal, perfect world of immortal souls and the Forms.

**Postwar Athens, Postsocratic Philosophy**

Xenophon also reports that shortly after Socrates’ execution in 399, the Athenians were ashamed, and turned around and condemned many of his accusers. The Athenian Imperial Democracy was shattered; defeated by its enemies, it committed an act of pollution against its most famous philosophical son (who was also a veteran, having fought in several campaigns). The “glory that was Athens” had given way to defeat and public despair, and its foremost thinker and citizen, Socrates, was gone.

How could Socratic philosophy—which occurred in living dialogue, the exchange of two human beings with one another, Socrates never having written a single word of philosophy himself—be kept alive in the post-Socratic era? What could philosophy—in this new era in which the gods seemed to have died—offer to Greek culture, that might lift it out of darkness and despair?

I believe that Plato wrote the *Phaedo* as an attempt to address these concerns. He wanted to provide a final vision of the Socratic logos as continuing
beyond Socrates’ own life. But he also wanted to provide Greek culture with a philosophical religion, a new mythology to replace the Homeric gods. This religious vision centers on the idea of the immortality of the soul, a mystical conception of the human being as divine.

**The Phaedo**

There are many features of the *Phaedo* which suggest it might be more subtle than it first appears. A philosophical treatise tries to compel agreement, prove its claims. The chief intention of a Platonic dialogue, however, may be to provoke the reader to thinking about its questions and arguments—even to criticisms of them. If this sounds complicated, it is because Plato was convinced that would-be philosophers have to think for themselves about philosophical questions and decide what to live by. As the quote at the start of this chapter says, Plato’s goal in his dialogues was to “form” or dialectically instruct his readers. *Philo-sophia* is intellectually active examination, not passive reception and memorization.

In addition to the argument and action, the *Phaedo* introduces myths (*mythoi*). From the beginning, the *Phaedo* is structured on the **myth of Theseus**, the hero-founder of Athenian political liberty, who travelled with 14 youths to Crete and saved them by slaying the minotaur and making his way out of the labyrinth. And so too Socrates, hero-founder of philosophical liberty, is there in his cell with 14 young companions and it is his foremost task to save them all from the evil oppressing them, the fear of losing Socrates and more: the fear of death, with all it seems to imply of darkness, nothingness, chaos, in a dialogue that otherwise stands for light, order, and being. To do so he must lead them out of the labyrinth of arguments that threaten to imprison them in fear and doubt of their own ability to inquire, back to the light of philosophy and hope for deliverance.

The Platonic effort to save Socratic philosophy is paralleled by Socrates’ effort to save his companions’ hope in the *logos* he has articulated and *lived* for them and thereby keep it from passing away. Will Socrates complete this, his last mission in the service of the God of Truth to the Athenians?

**What is the “Art of Dying”? (57a-69e)**

The narration of the story of the *Phaedo* is set in Phlius, a Pythagorean community, and the dialogue closely reflects the interests of the Pythagorean tradition, with its themes of asceticism, reincarnation, mathematics, the community of friends, and the immortality of the soul. As Phaedo tells the story to Echecrates and the others, we hear of Socrates’ last day, spent largely in conversation with his students and friends, talking until the sun goes down and he must drink the hemlock and die. But before that, he must defend
himself against the accusation that he is leaving his friends too easily and that he should resent having to die.

To answer these new charges, Socrates must show his friends that he is not mistaken to be “of good cheer” in the face of death and “hopeful” regarding the life to come (63-64). This challenge may be greater than the one he faced in court before his enemies, not only because he is now facing his own imminent, unavoidable death. What does that death mean, for the life he has lived? Is it simply the extinction of all feeling, thinking, and meaning? This is the fear we all feel before death, which makes it so hard to think about. Yet this is the uncanny prospect of death, when recognized not as something that happens to people, but as the chasm standing before me, threatening to annihilate my being.

Socrates in prison

Socrates’ challenge is to defend the view that “the one aim of those who practice philosophy in the proper manner is to practice for dying and death” (64a). This does not mean, he is quick to add, what most people think: that philosophers are self-denying, ascetic, useless types who don’t know how to enjoy themselves and be successful in business, politics or social life. Its real meaning—its mystical meaning—is expressed in the Greek word katharsis, or “spiritual cleansing.” This meaning concerns the choice of life the philosopher leads.

Reflection on death is somehow essential to the examined life. It is not something simply terrible, which we should try not to think about; on the contrary, thinking about it and relating to it in the right way is critical for us to be fully alive. For the true philosopher is the one who “separates his soul as much as possible from his body” both in his moral life, by moderating his desires for physical pleasure and wealth (64c-65a), and in his intellectual life, by lifting his thought to the Ideas or Forms of Justice, Beauty, and Goodness (65b-66a). The true philosopher discovers that our bodies enslave us with desires and emotions that distract us from virtue and philosophy, and mislead us into thinking that the ever-changing world we apprehend through our bodily senses
is all of reality, which it is not (66a-67e; cf. also 83cd). This model of “the philosophical life” or “art of living/dying” is in its basic form very like what Socrates presents in the *Apology*, where he distinguishes his discussion of himself as a skeptical, inquiring critical thinker, who seeks wisdom concerning the good life (especially 21a-23b), and a moral, self-governing agent, who wills to “never do wrong” and to value virtue and truth above selfish goods such as wealth and honor (esp. 28b-30e). It is also, as we will see, very like the model of the good life extolled by the Roman Stoic philosophers, inspired by Socrates, centuries later. What Plato will add to this vision of the good life, is a metaphysical picture of the immortality of the soul, and of the universal laws and ideals which it strives to know and live by.

Most human beings are confined by their thought and desires to physical or materialistic things, thinking and acting from the standpoint of the particular, biased, egocentric subject—the perspective, as it were, of the cycles of pleasure and pain Socrates alludes to early in the dialogue (60b). But the “true philosopher” lives in the domain of ideas and values that transcend material desire and physical reality—the realm of universal knowledge and moral freedom. Socrates associates the former way of life with the body and mortality, the latter with the immortal soul.

Even though Socrates says most people misunderstand the way in which philosophers “deserve to die,” there is something troubling about these statements. Does he really favor a repressive, puritanical morality? That after all is why most people think “philosophers” (i.e. Pythagorean-type ascetics) are already half-dead: men or women, they don’t know how to live in their bodies (cf. 65d). But aren’t these words contradicted by the start of the dialogue, where we learn Socrates has just met with his wife and their young children? And in other Platonic dialogues, we know that Socrates was perfectly willing and able to join in wine and convivial pleasure. (Cf. the *Phaedo*’s sister-dialogue, the *Symposium.*) Socrates’ deeds (erga) suggest we should look for a more subtle meaning in his words (logo).

However we interpret the *Phaedo*—and it does seem to support an ascetic ideal of self-sufficient virtue—the “true philosopher,” I suggest, neither devotes himself to worldly power and pleasure (as Callicles thinks one should), nor is he repressively unable to enjoy life in his/her body. The “caretaking of the soul” that Socrates encourages need not exclude dance, music, sport, gracious meals, making love, or serving in public office (Socrates served dutifully both as a soldier and as a judge in Athens)—if they are part of a life in pursuit of wisdom. Similarly, the philosopher is conscientious of death, but this adds meaning to his life, rather than takes it away. If there is an “art of dying,” it must be complementary to an “art of living” that brings measure and reason to all of
our life’s activities, rather than greed or impulse, mere appetite or selfish ambition.

Caution along the same lines, it seems to me, should be taken about Socrates’ remarks about philosophy, both here and later in the dialogue. Socrates will reject both (a) the scientistic attitude which teaches a version of metaphysical naturalism (materialism) that leaves no distinctive place for human thought, freedom and responsibility, and also (b) the sophistic view that virtue and knowledge are mere human constructs, functions of subjective preference (relativism) or Calliclean lust for power (immoral naturalism). Those conceptions of reality lose sight of the whole—the scientist blind to his own personhood, the sophist blind to the good as the fulfillment of his rational nature. Philosophy must somehow strive to validate the discoveries of science, without abandoning an ethical conception of man; and it must affirm our rational nature, without ignoring our social embodiment.

Socrates affirms the possibility of freedom and reason, and of human beings as inhabitants of “two worlds.” Thus at the end of the dialogue, Socrates tries, with his second Theory of Forms, to bridge the gulf he has described as separating the actual and the ideal, the particular and the universal. This argument suggests that rather than there being (i) two worlds or realms of reality, “becoming vs. being,” there might be (ii) two aspects of one world, experienced through sensation and thought, dialogue and action, in which man lives and strives, seeking the good in the light of reason. But even this argument, he acknowledges, may not stand, so the inquiry is not done.

Socrates develops the ideal of a godlike life in the Phaedo, of immortal souls who may live in the light of eternal truth. This is profoundly appealing to the young Pythagoreans who are gathered to be with him, but his initial portrait of the philosophical life as an “art of dying” exaggerates the opposition between body and soul, reason and the senses, perhaps to emphasize their separation in order to reunite, or at least draw them back more closely together again later on. (Cf. 67d: psyche is defused throughout the body.) As the dialogue unfolds, we wonder if the “immoral soul” is none other than the “ideal person” each of us tries to be—thinking, choosing and acting in the world—and that Plato’s “Ideas” not only transcend, but are somehow also immanent—present in the world of human thought and agency.

Plato claims the human person is rationally open to the eternal—the realm he associates with the Forms—and may strive to live in the light of it; but the same person is meant to live in her body, not as a prison, but as a vehicle of action and enjoyment. Plato rejects the materialist dogma that we are our bodies; but should we accept the Pythagorean dogma that we merely have them, alien things we can discard when we are done with them? Might we somehow be both of these realities—“body” and “soul” together?