The Symposium and The Phaedo Plato

Raymond Larson
Translator and Editor

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and

The Phaedo

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PLATO

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TRANSLATED AND EDITED BY

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contents

introduction

The *Symposium* and the *Phaedo* are two of Plato's most delightful and interesting dialogues, dealing, respectively, with the nature of *eros* (love or sexual attraction) and the immortality of the soul. They differ sharply in setting and mood. The *Symposium* recounts a party held at the home of a fashionable poet who is entertaining some well-known celebrities. The *Phaedo* presents a discussion held in a prison cell, where Socrates is spending his last day with some humble companions. The guests at the party play a kind of intellectual parlor game in which they show off their brilliance by making speeches on love. The companions in prison discuss immortality, a topic appropriate to the occasion: Socrates' imminent death. The rowdy *Symposium* ends in a revel and sleep; the elegiac *Phaedo* closes with Socrates' death. In neither dialogue does Socrates succumb to the mood, and he remains calm and unaffected throughout both.

the forms

Both dialogues presuppose an acquaintance with those peculiar Platonic entities, the forms. The forms arose something like this: As we look around us, the world presents to our senses a confused heap of ceaselessly changing particular things and an incessant bombardment of particular, random events. Particular things and events are all that we ever perceive. Each particular thing is unique, distinct from every other. No two roses are exactly alike; no snowflake precisely resembles another. Yet we instantly recognize all roses as roses and all snowflakes as snowflakes. How do we do it? Not with our senses. They only give us impressions of particular things; they do not sort them out.

The world would be a wild and terrible place if our minds did not somehow apprehend relations that allow us to divide the jumble of perceived things into classes and the swarm of events into ordered progressions. These relations I shall call "universals." Each universal gives its name ("rose," "snowflake," "equality," "beauty," etc.) to every particular thing that belongs to its class. Our ability to grasp universals is what enables us to recognize and name roses and snowflakes and everything else. It also enables us to think and to speak, and to acquire such understanding of the world as we have. The mind, which floundered helplessly in a sea of particulars as long as it had only the senses to observe with, now has something firm to hold on to. In this respect, universals are more solid and stable than particulars.

The ability to recognize universals, to see relations and form conceptions, is absolutely essential to human existence, even on the most primitive level. Without it, the world would be incomprehensible. There could be no thought, speech, or knowledge; and man would have to live solely by instinct and habit, like an animal, with no possibility of ever changing his condition.

But the situation is a paradoxical one because these universals, so essential to thought and so solid and stable to the mind, have no solid, physical existence. They are bodiless, invisible and intangible. Take any physical objects—two wooden rulers, for instance. Looking at them we may say: "I see two rulers." But this statement is not literally true: We see the rulers, but not the "two." Again, we may say "I see equal rulers," and again the statement goes beyond what we actually see: We see only the rulers, not the equality. The rulers are there on the table, but where are the universals, the "two" and the "equal"? We have to admit that wherever they are, they are not in the physical world. From this observation we may draw a general conclusion: Particular things exist, or seem to exist, in the world that we perceive with our senses (the "sensible" world); universals exist in a world that we apprehend with intelligence (the "intelligible" world).

We also know that our rulers are not really equal, even though we agree to regard them as such. Even if they could be perfectly machined, they would still differ in length at the atomic level. Equality, however, never falls short of perfection. We thus arrive at our second conclusion:

Particulars are always imperfect; universals are perfect.

Finally, we may look at our two rulers and try to imagine what they were in the past and what they will become in the future. A few years ago they were parts of living trees (it would be hard to say what they were before that). Now they are dead artifacts. A thousand years from now they probably will not exist at all, at least not in a form that we could easily recognize. They are in a continual process of change. In fact, they are changing before our very eyes, as we could see if we had a sufficiently powerful microscope. Heraclitus, a pre-Socratic philosopher, summed up this process in a famous saying: "Everything flows." In Plato's words, things like our rulers are always "becoming," or "coming into being and passing away." Ceaseless change, therefore, characterizes everything in the sensible world, from electrons to galaxies. But what about things in the intelligible world, like twoness and equality? What were *they* a hundred (or a million) years ago, and what will *they* become in the future? The answer is obvious: Time and change do not affect them; they do not "flow." In Plato's words they do not "become;" they always *"are."* Thus we reach our third conclusion: Particular things are transitory and always changing; universals are eternal and unchanging.

We may sum up our conclusions by saying that particulars are perceptible, imperfect, and changing; universals are imperceptible, perfect, and unchanging. The two classes, the sensible and the intelligible, therefore have opposite characteristics. Is there any relation between them? There doesn't seem to be much. We know universals, but we cannot see them; we see particulars, but we cannot know them. I can know (in the sense of define and intellectually apprehend) "catness," or *cat* in the abstract, but I cannot in that sense "know" the cat purring in my lap. The more I look at him, in fact, the more evanescent he becomes, like the Chesire Cat, who keeps vanishing and reappearing until Alice exclaims: "You make one quite giddy!" I too am caught in a giddy predicament because if the sensible and the intelligible realms are unconnected, if what I see has nothing to do with what I know, then there is no necessary connection between my thought and the external world, between "knowledge" and "reality." The mind recoils from this impasse and tries to find a way out, a bridge that will join the two realms.

Plato discovered a whole system of bridges and christened them "forms." The forms *are* the intelligible world, and

they not only connect the sensible and the intelligible realms, but they actually cause the world of sense. Now, when we contemplate the chaos presented to us by our senses and then compare that with the relative order revealed to our minds through universals, we are (or ought to be) struck dumb with wonder. There must be some powerful force at work here. It seems like magic. And that, according to Plato, is just about what is is. The forms are universals—timeless, invariable, and perfect—which enjoy true existence outside the world of sense. They are not ideas that exist in our minds, but objective realities that would exist even if there were no minds to perceive them. (Therefore the traditional translation of forms as "ideas" is misleading in modern English.) From some vital force that causes them to throw shadows or reflections, the forms give rise to the motley collection of darting, shifting, fleeting particulars that make up our world, lending them a sort of shadow existence. The forms therefore cause the particulars, to which they stand in the relation of originals to copies. Our world of transient, changing particulars is merely a pale reflection or a wavering copy of the eternal, unchanging world of forms. There are innumerable forms, one for every conceivable universal, and particular things "participate" in them in various complicated and shifting ways to produce this pageant that our senses perceive. We can have knowledge only of these intelligible forms, and only our souls can grasp them. Of perceptible things we cannot have knowledge, but only a sort of quasi knowledge, which Socrates calls "opinion."

Socrates refers to the forms in various ways. Besides "forms," he also calls them "shapes" and "figures." More often, he uses expressions on the pattern of "the beautiful (or the equal, etc.) itself" or "the beautiful that *is*," where the italicized *is* denotes "true existence."

dialectic and myth

The *Symposium* and the *Phaedo* present two important ways of dealing with forms. One is dialectic, Socrates' method of question and answer, which aims at truth. The *Symposium* sets dialectic against rhetoric, which aims at persuasion. Using dialectic, Socrates reveals the truth about Love and thus defeats the other speakers, whose rhetoric merely reveals conflicting opinions. In the *Phaedo* Socrates contrasts

dialectic with observation, the method of the natural sciences. Observation uncovers facts, but not the truth that governs the facts. Both dialogues show that only dialectic can lead the mind from opinion and deceptive appearance to truth.

The other way, closely connected with dialectic, is myth. The whole *Symposium* is cast in the form of a myth, and the *Phaedo* culminates in a myth. The importance of myth is this: Dialectic, an activity of the reasoning faculty, has mainly a negative function. It forces us to recognize the discrepancy (mentioned in the Section above) between thought and perception, and it convinces us of the need for clearing up this discrepancy. But reason alone cannot clear it up; that is a task for our intuitive or imaginative faculty. We must "see" the forms directly in a revelation. But before that can happen, two things are required: Our reason must be made aware of the discrepancy and convinced of the need for clearing it up, and our soul's intuitive faculty must be awakened and prepared for the revelation. The first is the task of dialectic, the second of myth. One purpose of myth, then, is to exercise our intuition and make it receptive to revelation. Another purpose of myth is to express the revelation once it has been seen. Ordinary language cannot adequately express suprarational truth; that requires special modes of expression, such as metaphor, simile, and myth—the language of mystics and poets. Myth is therefore both a preparation for and an expression of the revelation of the forms. Once the forms have been revealed, however, thought can contemplate them directly. This direct contemplation of the forms is again dialectic. Dialectic, therefore, is both the rational process of arriving at specific truths by question and answer and the intellectual contemplation of ultimate truth after it has been revealed to a soul made receptive by myth.

greek homosexuality

A modern reader, bemused by the sexual attitudes that Plato's characters seem to display, may shake his head in wonder and say of the Greeks what Herodotus says of the Egyptians: "They reverse the manners and customs of the rest of mankind." This observation holds true for the Athenian leisure class, the circle in which Socrates habitually moved. When a Greek of the classical period speaks of love, he is normally thinking of homosexual love. The Greeks

envisioned the ideal love relationship as one between a young man (the "lover") and a teenage boy (the "loved one"). Both parties had to follow rigid rules and conventions to escape public disapproval. Custom demanded that the lover "pursue," the loved one "flee." The lover was expected to court his loved one, to shower him with gifts and attention, to dote on him, and to serve him like a slave. The loved one, on the other hand, was supposed to be modest, passive, and hard to get. With perseverance and luck, a worthy lover might finally attain the ultimate bliss of sexual union with his loved one. A pretty boy could expect to begin his sexual career as an ardently pursued loved one. Later, when mature, he would assume the active role of lover, eagerly pursuing other young beauties. Such love was considered admirable, even ennobling. Heterosexual love was held to be rather vulgar; a man married to have children, but he directed his erotic impulses toward young men. Unfortunately, we know very little about the love lives of Greek women. The lower classes were much more heterosexual, but even among them homosexual affairs were common.

The Greek custom resembles medieval courtly love, except that the boy replaces the high-born, married lady as the object of desire. Both conventions were artificial and stylized, both enjoined strict rules of etiquette, and although their ideals were often betrayed in practice, both conventions inspired men to transcend their selfish, earthbound interests and aspire to a higher goal. To what heights the practice of "proper boy love" could lead may be seen in Plato's *Symposium.*

the symposium

A symposium was a drinking party. Normally, it seems to have been an intimate affair with only a few guests, invited first for dinner. Like all things Greek, a symposium was a formal activity, with a "master of ceremonies" and rules for everything from the seating arrangement to the drinking procedure. The guests might play games, sing drinking songs, or be amused by professional entertainers (jesters, flute girls, etc.) such as appear in Xenophon's *Symposium.*[1]

[1] **Translated** by the present author in *The Apology and Crito of Plato and the Apology and Symposium of Xenophon,* (Lawrence, Kansas: Coronado Press, 1980).

Conversation was also important. A topic would be set for the guests to discuss (as in Xenophon) or to give speeches on (as in Plato). The drinking might be moderate, as in Xenophon, or heavy. In Plato's *Symposium* the guests agree at the beginning "to drink more for pleasure than to get drunk" (176e). Like other good intentions, this one is soon forgotten, and the symposium degenerates into a revel.

In form, the *Symposium* and the *Phaedo* are both indirect dialogues. A character in the direct dialogue tells a story to a group of friends, and this narrated story constitutes the main dialogue. The *Phaedo* is thus a tale within a tale. But the *Symposium* is a tale within a tale within a tale, and at its climax it contains yet another tale within these three. It may therefore seem confusing unless one understands the situation.

The narrator of the *Symposium* is Apollodorus, an enthusiastic follower of Socrates who also appears in the *Phaedo*. *The Symposium* plunges us into the middle of a conversation that Apollodorus is having with some unnamed companions. They have obviously just asked him to tell them about a party given by the tragic poet Agathon. The dialogue does not open with the question, but with Apollodorus's reply: he answers indirectly by repeating a similar request made of him "the day before yesterday." Everything moves by indirection; the reader must infer the present request from the request of two days earlier. This brief reported conversation establishes several facts: The symposium took place long ago; it was held to celebrate the victory of Agathon's first tragedy (in 416 B.C.), when these characters (and Plato as well) were still only children. Apollodorus, therefore, could not have been present. He got the story from a man named Aristodemus, who had been there. We learn that Agathon moved out of Athens "years ago," but he is spoken of as being still alive. From other sources we know that Agathon left Athens about 407 B.C. and died around 401; therefore the external dialogue must take place about 402 B.C. The main dialogue, then, will be Apollodorus's version of Aristodemus's account of a party held some fourteen years earlier.

Apollodorus is characterized in the opening scene of the *Symposium* as a sharp-tongued fanatic (his nickname is "Maniac") who is impatient with his friends for not sharing his fanaticism for philosophy. The *Phaedo* presents him as having little control over his emotions, and Xenophon calls