

Faidon

*Platon*¹

April 3-5, 2014

The point of life is to prepare yourself for death. This is the message of Socrates in this dialogue, which takes you back to his ordered suicide. Socrates contemplates his end with great tranquility and confidence, in contrast to his distraught disciples. How come? As it transpired, Socrates is not so much of a stoic as being convinced that his soul will survive his physical death, and what awaits him yonder, is an existence to which he has looked forward all his life. How come he can maintain such a confidence? If that would be the case, would he not already have sought death earlier to escape an earthly existence, which appears to have been irksome to him? Socrates is nevertheless convinced of the bliss that awaits him, and the only source he has for that is though his own reason and the interpretation this has offered him. His disciples - Kebes and Simmias, are, however, not as convinced, and the dialogue is turned into a sparring match between Socrates and the two dissenting and skeptical voices. Socrates is not perturbed by their doubt, in fact he encourages it, and points out that the point of an argument is not that one side should win, however exciting and desirable such an outcome may be, but for all parties involved to achieve more insight and wisdom. A view which Popper very much advocates, no doubt having been inspired by it, through his reading of Plato. Much as Socrates (and ultimately Plato) decries the tactics of the sophists, it is inevitable that any purely verbal argument of an issue so momentous, will smack of sophism, a charge that can be laid at Socrates door, and may have been one of the reasons that in the drama 'The Cloud' he is indeed portrayed as a sophist.

The argument rests on two claims. One the existence of the soul, as something that transcends mere materialism. Two that the soul is immortal. Of the two, doubt is most liable to be focused on the latter, most momentous of the claims. In fact his two interlocutors readily concede the first point. It is obvious to any thinking man that he is thinking, that he has consciousness and intentions, and that those cannot conceivably be explained in any materialistic terms. The very conviction of this fact, so deep indeed that it seems to go against any empirical opposition, makes the question of its immortality so much more critical. It is easy enough to stoically accept the degeneration of your own body including its final destruction, than seeing anything so precious as a soul go to waste.

As for support of his first claim Socrates presents his much quoted suggestion that learning is just a matter of remembering what we thought we had forgotten. This if anything proves to us that our soul existed before our body. The idea is of course not so harebrained as may at first he thought. Indeed, especially if coming to some understanding by some compelling argument, say in geometry, we do feel, once we have thoroughly digested the fact, as if we have always known it, and cannot conceive of how we may have not. One can endow this by a variety of explanations and similes. One, to focus on the

¹ Translation into Swedish by Jan Stolpe

geometrical example, that all the consequences of a set of assumptions (axioms) are so to speak implicit in them, and that any conclusion that might be drawn, we have already in some sense known. More interestingly though is to refer to the nowadays generally accepted maxim, that we do not enter the world as clean slates, but come with all kinds of pre-wired skills. Indeed 'remembering' the past prior to our birth is in fact becoming aware of the evolutionary history of which you are a product, and which in a very direct sense is part of your identity, your soul.

As noted on this point Socrates encounters no problems, the real serious challenge to his power of persuasion (which is of course a sophist approach) is to convince his skeptics that the soul will stay on, and not be dispersed as so much smoke, as feared by his two disciples. In fact, they can concede that the soul may survive a series of bodily deaths, but that this is no proof that it will continue to do so, and that there will be no final destruction.

Now Socrates is in no hurry and takes his time to present his arguments, approaching the matter at hand at an oblique level. There are long digressions, which may not forward any claims, but at least keeps the problem in view plastically so, meaning from different angles. It is almost as if he is gaining time, hoping that in due time, some favorable approach will turn up. One of the digressions, is on the matter of the distinction between body and soul, how the body should only concern itself with wisdom and understanding, and stay away from the seduction of the body, being it in physical enjoyment. Socrates claims that affection for the body, not only taints the soul, but in fact fetters it, and prevents it from achieving its true aim, namely its separation from mere matter to achieve the liberation it craves. Thus it becomes clear what Socrates means with the task of a philosopher, namely to prepare himself for death, by liberating himself from the captivity of the body. A task accomplished by literally loving wisdom and understanding, and making that the goal of his earthly existence, so he may pursue it with even greater clarity and force, one he is dead and at large from the material world. An individual who has cleansed himself from the tainted associations with the body, can without apprehension embark on the journey death constitutes.

The parallels with Christianity are of course manifest. The very separation between body and soul, the fact that anything that has to do with the body, not only its carnal pleasures, but the second order satisfactions such as riches and fame, have to be renounced in order to prepare yourself for the higher calling, namely that of being in heaven. The idea of what paradise really is, is left tantalizingly vague in Christianity. In Islam it is tempting to interpret it as an enhanced corporality, all the pleasures that the earth can provide, are here offered in reliable abundance. The indications that Socrates gives of the life here-after are more precise, presenting the prospects of disinterested congress with congenial spirits engaged in the pursuit of knowledge and insight. In Christianity, where truth is identified with God, and timeless intercourse with God, it can consequently be translated into a passionate pursuit of truth, undistracted by earthly cares.

Now the arguments of Socrates are presented at different levels. There is of course the first obvious one, in which you are invited to take everything for its face value. Hard as it may be to renounce the pleasures of life, at least you know what to do. Probing deeper you realize that it is not just a matter of renouncing, but it has to be done in the

right spirit, otherwise you only return to the starting point. If you renounce in the hope of gaining something more costly, you are still caught in the same trap, you are just running around, all your efforts only being ostensible ones, however ostentatious you may conceive of them. Thus, to put a Christian take on it, you should not avoid sinning in order to reap advantages, something the Catholic church lost sight of, and inspired Luther to his reformation. The love of truth has to be disinterested, it has no reward beyond itself. Although of course the way Socrates paints it, it seems to enjoy all the advantages.

To clinch matter, Socrates is forced to resort to sophistic arguments. To play with words, to make suggestive analogies, to take metaphors literally. One example is how things are born out of its opposites. How sleep is born out of wakefulness, and wakefulness follows out of sleep. In the same way death is born out of life, and life out of death. Socrates is in no hurry, he states every step, as in the presentation of a mathematical proof, and pedagogically he guides the intellects of his disciples, provoking them by leading suggestions, to draw the necessary conclusions. In fact at one point Kebes points out that by skillfully posing questions, the right insights are generated by themselves (as if being remembered by appropriate prompting). In fact just as we may be aware of the soul, as a fact remembered, we may eventually recall the memory of its immortality. In fact Socrates is very pedagogical, dwelling at length at our ability of pre-understanding. As an example he brings up concepts such as being alike and not being alike, which unlike material objects do not present themselves directly to our perceptions, but make up categories we cannot learn from experience, but have to be innate in the terminology of Kant. But of course, as noted above, all what that can persuade us of is the pre-existence of the soul, it is its post-existence which is the real issue, and to which the skeptical Kebes and Simmias keep returning to. Socrates is in no hurry. He takes great pleasure in the unfolding of arguments, how they lead us on (a terminology which incidentally has a sophist touch, in the meaning of leading somebody on) onto greater and greater knowledge. In particular he explains what are the objects worthy of the souls contemplation and invisible to the eye of the senses. What we need to appreciate are not the horses, clothes and houses, which we can see and touch, but the beauty of which they all partake. The Platonic heaven is the heaven of abstract forms, no surprise that it appeals to the mathematician, although with concomitant dangers. Socrates explicates patiently what it means to understand, of removing you gaze from the obvious in front of you, perceived and understood by the senses, and instead to remove yourself to another point of view, to look at the invisible as an explanation for the visible. Mathematics again.

But the doubt remains. All this abstraction of which Socrates expounds on is of course impressive, yet the abstraction seems nevertheless to be attached to concrete manifestations, and the example of a lyre is produced by Simmias. As a lyre it is a physical object, its wood, its strings and all that. But what gives the lyre its value is it being tuned, the music it can produce, and which clearly transcends its physical representation. But destroy the lyre as a physical object, what happens then to its tone? You can no longer produce music on it. Could it not be the same with the soul? It clearly transcends the body, yet it is attached to the body, and when the body is destroyed, it is as with the tuning. Now Socrates is presented as being a bit baffled by that argument and is seen as playing for time, inviting Kebes to present his objections, so as to have time to formulate a response.

Kebeles puts forward the argument above, that a soul could tire out many bodies, but in the end, be overwhelmed by all the tiring-outs and eventually succumb. And all the rest of the disciples feel very ill at ease at this moment, because after they all they had all been convinced, and now realized that they may have been mistaken after all and been thrown back into doubt. What can be more disconcerting, than to have been convinced by your reason of a fact, only to realize later that you have been misled, and your conviction was illusory. What solid ground below your feet can there be, if not even rational conviction is fool-proof from illusion? Maybe this is the result of sophistic reasoning, maybe Socrates all along has reasoned like a sophist, leading his audience on?

Socrates is forced to take a deep breath. To have suffered such a disappointment is liable to make you a hater of reason (and in fact, as we will see, this is how Socrates diagnoses the sophists, they have been at some point frustrated with reasoning, and then become vengeful). But, he continues, to be a hater of reason, is as foolish as being a hater of men, just because you have been deceived a few times. If you have been let down by men, it is because you have not mastered the art of dealing with people. It is in the same way with arguments. You have not been critical enough, allowing yourself to be swayed one way or the other. If you do, you start to distrust your power of reason, in fact of reason altogether, and you start to take a pleasure in arguing both for and against a case, believing that there is a competition, and the one wins who is most skilled with words, not on the basis of truth. And so sophistry is being born, we are led to conclude. And after Socrates has once again encouraged his skeptics to attack his arguments, because after all, truth and nothing but the truth, is the object.

As to the objections of Simmias Socrates points out that a tuning of a lyre did not exist before the lyre, while the soul existed before the body, had he not accepted that? To which Simmias shamefacedly concedes. And then follows a lengthy detailed interchange, which, like many other of similar interchanges becomes rather tedious and explains why Plato's dialogues do not naturally lend themselves to being performed on a stage. In fact the tedium is broken up by digressions, and Socrates goes on for a long time of his youthful desire to learn about the world and the realization that this could not be done by thinking alone, and there follows a long exposition of how the world really is (and incidentally drawing on Anaximander, without revealing the source, that the earth does not fall because it does not know in which direction to fall, everything being symmetric), much of it referring to a higher reality, and that we earthlings really are like people living at the bottom of a deep sea, mistaking the water above as the sky, while creatures living higher up in the sky, have a much better idea. A variation on the simile with the cave. But when it comes to the punchline? What is it? The reader is bound to be a bit disappointed after all those lengthy and meticulous interchanges, all those careful reasoning and distinctions, all those colorful and instructive digressions. What do we call numbers that are not even, which reject evenness? Socrates asks, and receives the expected answer - uneven. What do we call people who cannot accept art or justice? Unartistic and unjust is the answers. And finally what do we call something that rejects death and does not accept it. Immortal, is the answer. Hence as the soul cannot accept death it must be immortal, in the same way as a number that rejects evenness ends up being uneven. A sophist argument if any. But of course Plato thrives on irony, and may have had a good laugh, and invites the clever ones

of his readers to join him in his contempt of the common ones. Irony being a pact between writer and reader, in which the former assures the latter, that he is indeed unique, that he alone sees through things, that he is on the same elevated level as the author himself.

And the dialogue is being rounded off. Socrates has no reason to dwell hanging on to the last precious dregs of a material life, he purports to despise. His wife is sent away, as are his children, who seem to occupy no particular place in the affection of the philosopher. Maybe he sees his disciples as his true soul mates, his family is just an aspect of his bodily life. He takes the cup, empties it, walks about until the legs start to feel heavy, then lies down, more and more of his body turning cold and into stone, until the vital parts are reached and he dies, meanwhile shaming his disciples not to cry but to control themselves.

April 5, 2014 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden* ulfp@chalmers.se