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«Федон»

Roman Svetlov

What is Apollo's Band? Socratic Eschatology and Theology in *Phaedo* 63b*

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ABSTRACT. The “other gods” of the *Phaedo* are not those astral entities created by the Demiurge to fashion and foster the souls of mortals as mentioned in the *Timaeus* (41a–d). It might be hypothesized that Plato's texts (the *Phaedo* among them) implicated the grounds for later theological hierarchies typical for the Neoplatonics. However, the question of a divine hierarchy, in case of the *Phaedo*, is not one of an abstractly theological kind, but rather reveals a real existential pith.

KEYWORDS: Plato, *Phaedo*, Plato's theology.

One of the most known discrepancies between the theological doctrines Plato introduced in different dialogues is due to the lack of an unambiguous evaluation of the extent to which gods are involved in the deeds of humans. The *Laws* state that “all mortal creatures are possessions of the gods, to whom belongs also the whole heaven” (902b, cf. 906a: “and we the possession of the gods and daemons”).¹ Gods do care

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¹ Trans. by R.G. Vary. Θεῶν γε μὴν κτήματά φαμεν εἶναι πάντα ὅποσα θνητὰ ζῶα, ὧν περ καὶ τὸν οὐρανὸν ὅλον (902b), ἡμεῖς δ' αὖ κτήμα θεῶν καὶ δαιμόνων (906a).

for mortals (904e). In the *Phaedo* (64), we also find the idea of human beings as possessions of the gods, who care about us. The same idea is emphasized in the *Euthyphro* (15a), as well as in Plato's many other works. In the *Statesman* (271–274), on the contrary, it is maintained that we are living in that period of the rotation of the universe, when gods have withdrawn their immediate care for human beings. The divine chattels have been “set free”, and the cosmos is left alone to plumb and tame its outbursting “nature of the different”.

Socrates' introductory remarks in the *Phaedo* seem to reveal the ideas that help highlight the extent of the discrepancy between the attitudes Plato took in the later dialogues, the *Laws* and the *Statesman* — which allows, among other things, to specify the interpretation of the cosmological myth related in the *Statesman*.

Socrates, just released from his chains before the execution, brings out the inconsistency of the same and the different in our period of the cosmic rotation with his words about pleasure and pain. A god (presumably the Demiurge) could only reconcile these by concocting a creature with two heads joined together (συνῆψεν εἰς ταῦτόν αὐτοῖς τὰς κορυφάς, *Phd.* 60c). However, Socrates expects to leave this place shortly. He speaks about this a little later (63b), “I should go first to other wise and good gods, and then to men who have died and are better than men are here”.²

The location of these gods and men becomes relatively clear from the eschatological myth at the end of the *Phaedo*: it's on the apices of that dodecahedral ball, which is our earth looked at from above (110b). But what gods are they and why are they “different”? Aren't they those “other gods”, who, according to the Athenian, will judge us after our death (Lg. 959b)? And weren't they those same gods Socrates had been charged of worshipping by his accusers? (*Ap.* 26b).

Socrates apparently intends to enter into a state of direct communication with gods, which is later depicted in that half-serious, half-ironical account of the age of Cronos in the *Statesman*. The entire *Phaedo* is imbued with this anticipation. The dialogue starts with

²Trans. by G.M.A. Grube.

Socrates suggesting that he and his visitors might while away the time as if he were a traveler about to set out on a journey, offering “to tell stories about the life there and consider what we think about it” (61e).³ A philosopher’s soul is purified from bodily and material attachments. Freed from the power of senses and “gathered in itself” (ἐκ τοῦ σώματος συναγείρεσθαι τε καὶ ἀθροίζεσθαι, καὶ οἰκεῖν... μόνην καθ’ αὐτήν, 67cd), this soul doesn’t need the eschatological and alchemical purification in the netherworld. Even the composition of the dialogue may be perceived as a description of a process of preparation for the transmigration. In the beginning, Socrates confesses to be serving the Muses, and composes the hymn to Apollo, the patron of prophetic fury (cf. Phdr. 265b). Further on, he tells his friends about the main experience he got from his engagement in philosophy, which is the experience of the soul as something opposite to the body; he therefore understands the activity of philosophy as preparation for death. A philosopher attains separation from bodily senses, but the person who is insensible, is dead for the world of physical sensations. What follows are the four arguments confirming the eternity of the soul as its inalienable property (the soul “gathered in itself” values arguments of reason above the evidence of bodily senses, cf. Phd. 99e). Socrates’ contemplations culminate in a myth about the structure of the earth and its underground streams. He recounts the myth as if he were seized with Apollonian (prophetic) fury. He is already initiated — or pretends to be.

Shifting the focal point from Socrates as the protagonist of the dialogue to the ideas he handles there, we may conjecture their interpretation, within the context of the problem stated in the very beginning of the article.

From numerous texts by Plato, it might be inferred that the gods are ultimately responsible for investing the cosmos with whatever justice exists therein. However, the destructive “nature of the different”, when it uncontrollably exceeds the “circle of the same”, brings universal life to inevitable degradation. Not only in the *Statesman*, but in the *Timaeus*

³ Trans. by H.N. Fowler. διασκοπεῖν τε καὶ μυθολογεῖν περὶ τῆς ἀποδημίας τῆς ἐκεῖ, ποῖαν τινὰ αὐτὴν οἴομεθα εἶναι.

and the *Critias* as well, Plato depicts such degradation through the example of the inhabitants of Atlantis. The case of Atlantis, when Zeus was compelled to interfere in the run of history, destructively cleaning the world up, is similar to the myth of cosmic rotation in what it tells us about upcoming return of the divine Steersman. And this interference (change of direction) surely leads to a fundamental disaster like that undergone by a living creature at the moment of death.

The difference between the “age of Cronos” and the “age of Zeus” is stressed not only in the text of the *Statesman*. In the *Republic*, the Fate Lachesis says (617de), “Now is the beginning of another cycle of mortal generation where birth is the beacon of death. No divinity shall cast lots for you, but you shall choose your own deity.”⁴ In the “age of Cronos”, divinities used to patronize human beings, whereas during the “Zeus’s rotation”, it is the imperfect human mind that makes the choice, which leads to all kinds of errors, hampering the ability to change one’s fate.

All of these clues allow us to assume that Socrates is hoping, after his death, to find himself beyond the “age of Zeus”, in that fortunate epoch when the divine and the human were so close that the truth was present close at hand, so that in order to grasp it one, in all probability, had no need to resort to speech, let alone to philosophy (cf. *Plt.* 272d).

Granted, locating a heavenly state of existence within the course of human history, specifically in the past, may seem quaint (even though Plato succeeded in embellishing his mythological narration in the *Statesman* with many a didactical detail). But Socrates intends to reach it in a place where apparently there is neither time, nor history, where one has no need even in a bed of grass, nor in a walking food complying to one’s beck and service.

This draws us to a conclusion that if we take into account Socrates’ expectations from the *Phaedo* there will be no fundamental discrepancy between the *Laws*, where humans are stated to be in the possession of gods, and the story from the *Statesman* telling that gods, at a moment, have let go of both the cosmos and human beings. All justice still comes

⁴Trans. by P. Shorey. ἀρχὴ ἄλλης περιόδου θνητοῦ γένους θανατηφόρου. οὐχ ὑμᾶς δαίμων λήξεται, ἀλλ’ ὑμεῖς δαίμονα αἰρήσεσθε.

from the gods, and it is they who judge men for their earthly deeds. Those who lived a virtuous life and were true philosophers would leave their bodies (which are simultaneously their prison, their tool, and a “scuba” needed for breathing the air of our world), and get a chance to break free from the circle of reincarnations. But our contemporary age is no longer a period when one could directly grasp the truth (this is the reason why Socrates complains to be unable to do so through his physical senses, Phd. 99de). The “age of Zeus” is the time when one learns the truth indirectly, gradually ascending towards it. Philosophy, politics, and ethics are the major, though not the only forms of such learning, whereas experience and intellect as such don’t guarantee the good use of reason. Thus the abuse of the tools which by nature are congenial to the “circle of the same” and have divine origin, entails the need for redemption and purification in the waters of the underworld.

If so, it becomes clear that the “other gods” are not those astral entities created by the Demiurge to fashion and foster the souls of mortals (Ti. 41a–d). This is why it stands to reason to raise the question about the “band” (θεῖος χορός) of Apollo, the patron of prophecy, and about the nature of the twelve great gods who people have recourse to during the age of Zeus (Phdr. 247a). Do they belong to those gods Socrates hopes to meet after his death, or do they, like the god who commands him in his dreams, “Socrates, make music and work at it” (Phd. 60e),⁵ belong to a supercelestial “band”? All in all, it might be hypothesized that Plato’s texts (the *Phaedo* among them) implicated the grounds for theological hierarchies that would be later typical for the Neoplatonics. However, in case of the *Phaedo*, the question of a divine hierarchy is not one of an abstractly theological kind, but rather reveals a real existential pith.

⁵ Trans. by H.N. Fowler. Ὁ Σώκράτης... μουσικὴν ποιεῖ καὶ ἐργάζου.

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