

# HM481 - Reading Plato : Between Philosophy and Literature

Final Report

Dialogue - Phaedo

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## 1 Introduction

The dialogue **Phaedo** is the creation of Plato. It is mentioned that Plato was ill and not present on that day. Phaedo was physically present there and the dialogue is in the form of Phaedo telling the last moments of him with Socrates to the Echecrates. In this dialogue, main characters in the discussion are Cebes, Simmias and our favourite Socrates. the scene is whole set on the day when Socrates was given poison. The discussion is mainly based on immortality of the soul. The discussion starts with Suicide and readiness of death, then some terminologies like misanthropy, misogyny, courage and temperance then theory of recollection and forms then The argument from the opposite then full discussion on immortality of the soul and Description of after life yet he bids his hearers not to accept the description as the truth and yet *"Something of the kind must be true."* and finally the scene of the great man Socrates accepting the death. The reason why it is important to prove the soul is immortal is because without that a person will stay either afraid of death or foolish and blindly confident even if he is a philosopher. Note that all the citations in the bracket are representing the number of paragraph inside phaedo. And that is from book [1].

## 2 Suicide and readiness of death

Cebes and Simmias asks that how it could be good to die, and also when the master is God, which is the best master one can get, so if someone has not done anything bad why for him it is good to escape the master ? In reply Socrates says, ordinary people think that death is bad, but philosophers think of death as a good thing and they are readily willing to die [62-b]. Because they are already far away from their desire from physical world, the body is needed for fulfilling the physical desires, so in that way philosophers are half dead and they

are preparing themselves for death during their whole life, so when the death comes why should he be afraid of it. And it is not escaping the god, it is actually going closer to the god as the soul is freed from the body and now in its unadulterated form.

Then there raised a question for Socrates, that if the death is good then why someone should not kill own self ? Socrates explains this as follows, we humans are not owner of the life, we are the possessions of the god, and without his willing if we do suicide then it makes him sad and disappointed.

Again a new question raised - If suicide is unjust then why you are drinking poison ? Then Socrates clarifies that we must not put an end to ourselves until god sends some compulsion like the one which we are facing now [62-c].

### **3 Important Terms**

#### **3.1 Virtue as courage and Temperance**

Socrates says that the courage is not what ordinary people sees. He wants to say that people take risks for various reasons - to gain something material or honor. That is not real courage because if they have two different type of threats then they do some calculation and identify which one is bigger and according to that he takes the courage to take one risk for avoiding the bigger one. This is something like mixed of cowardliness and courage.

Another word is Temperance or self control which we say controlling our action or behaviour, but Socrates asks for which reason we are controlling ourselves. Then he explains

that the person controls his action so that he can stay uncontrolled in another. We can understand it by an example ((this was not given by Socrates :) ) A person who is very much self controlled for diet and doing gym very well, but the reason for this could be that he wants to get a very good girl for dating. So this is like losing other pleasure which they desire so they refrain from one kind because they cannot resist the other[68-e].

But Socrates says that there must be wisdom, by which we can clearly see what is fearful and why to have self control. By wisdom we get both the things courage and temperance.

Socrates explains what is wisdom in [79-c to 79-d]. When soul uses instrumentality of the body, by body it enters the visible and variable domain and gets confused. So body is like the prison of the soul. But when it investigates by itself, it passes into realm of pure, everlasting, immortal and changeless, this state is called wisdom. It is like soul-the divine part rules on the body-the mortal part.

### 3.2 Problems with Misology

Misanthropy is induced when believing in somebody quite uncritically, similarly misology means a person who believes in any theory quite uncritically. It happens when a person starts putting all the trust on something without understanding, Socrates says that all the people are in between good and bad, there are very few people which are genuinely very good and very few other side that is terribly bad. Like these we cannot trust **completely** on a theory or people, indeed we have to use our brain and think about it logically. But many people trust one theory then when it does not help him then follows other theory and so on, until they feel like nothing is reliable, but fault is there with his process of accepting

the theory. They are misled by rhetoricians and politicians in the same way, because of the only fault that they do not put the logic and accept it without understanding. These kind of people just blame one or another theory and do not realize their fault and cannot know the truth.[90-d]

## 4 Theory of recollection and forms

Socrates says that knowledge is nothing but recollection. And we know that what we want to remind of must be learned some time before recollection. Like this, it gives the idea of existence of life before entering to this current human body.

For understanding the **Platonic form** we have few examples. One is example of *absolute equality*. We can see many objects around the world which seems to us as equal, not exactly equal but almost equal, like two chalk sticks. In practice we say many times that *this thing is like that*, So how do we know if they are equal if they are not absolutely equal ? The answer for this is that we already have the knowledge of *equality* in our mind and we see the objects in the light of that knowledge and call the two things equal when they share the features or quality.

Similarly in the case of *absolute beauty*, which we cannot see by our senses, it is the knowledge which we hold already, and by which we say that one object in comparison to another participate more of that *absolute beauty*, and from this we see leaves as beautiful but a flower as more beautiful as it participates more (we can say it).

But the *absolute equality* or *absolute beauty* itself is not a materialistic thing but it is unchanged and eternal. We recollect this knowledge which we already had from our previous life.

## 5 The Argument from opposites

Socrates says that everything that has opposites is generated from the opposites[71-a]. For example if something is larger then it must be smaller at some time, so by process of increasing it must have become the larger. Similarly smaller must have come from larger by the process of decreasing. Like this sleeping to waking and waking to sleeping. Then what about living ? Answer is dead. and the process for becoming living to dead is dying. But is there always a reverse process that is coming from death to living ? Here death refers to the death of body, that is separation of it from soul, not the death of soul itself. If we assume that there is not any reverse process, then logically it follows nothing must be living in the world, but there are so many living beings we see even only on visible earth, so proved by contradiction there exist the reverse process. Which also gives a proof of the soul has so many incarnations.

## 6 Is the soul immortal ?

### 6.1 Theory of attunement

In the [85-b] Simmias is getting confused because of the theory of attunement or harmony. Many Pythagoreans have believed that the soul is the harmony of the body and it's elements.

Here is an example - When the parts of the guitar, mainly the strings are assembled

together properly, it makes harmonious sound, like this when the parts of the body comes together and whatever is produced is soul. So whenever the guitar is destroyed the harmony goes away, similarly when the body is destroyed the soul goes away. By this way the soul comes after the physical body.

But Socrates tries to clear his confusion by this explanation, that if the soul is the composition of the body parts then it must have the property of its elements, but soul and body both have very different characteristics, so how one can be the composite of the elements which are opposite in nature. Also something can be more harmonious in nature and another is less harmonious in nature, but how it could be in the case of soul, because after all soul is absolute soul not more or less. Also soul is able to control the body, for example - if body don't like to exercise the soul will tell him that you must do it, but in case of harmony it does not command strings to move according to it. So these two are incompatible to compare with. this is how Socrates cleared his doubt.

### 6.2 The example of coat weaver

Cebes comes with another odd analogy, yet it is so much interesting. A coat weaver has many different coat and he wears different coats throughout his life. **Here coat is compared with body and and weaver as soul**, so like that soul transfers from many different bodies during successive incarnations, yet like when the weaver is dead then the last coat which he was wearing will stay as it is. So like this if we say soul dies some day then the last body will have stayed more after the death of soul, but the soul is more durable than body as the weaver is more durable than coat. Then where is soul after the last body is abandoned ?



Here Socrates explains - Let's assume we have a thing has quality  $X$ . Now whenever the opposite of  $X$  comes, which we call *anti* -  $X$ , the  $X$  goes away and *anti* -  $X$  will stay. But It is not always true.

In the case of snow. when we put heat closer to the snow the coldness of it goes away. But there is a problem because when the coldness goes away it is no more a snow. It is something else. Another example is of fire where  $X$  is heat and *anti* -  $X$  is coldness.

Similarly in the case of soul which have the quality of life, when the death appears the soul and body is broken apart and the opposite of life which is death is considered here as the separator of soul and body, here life is not replaced by death in the soul but the death meets the body and it becomes dead and soul flees away.

In this way Socrates used the argument of opposite to explain that in any case soul cannot be dead, so there will be nothing like last coat or in our case last body after end of soul. Because soul is immortal.

## 7 Myths of afterlife

Socrates has given very rich description of the earth's beautiful regions. After that he describes what happens to different types of people after death. First the souls of the dead are taken by guardian for judgement where everyone assembles. If the person has done very severe sins or crimes which are incurable he is given next life in **Tartarus** as a part of pun-

ishment and the purification. Also they have to beg to the people they have done bad during life for accepting them again. If they get accepted then there will be no suffering further, but if not then again they were sent to same bad place. There they will become bad animals. For example greedy people to wolves.

Some **OK people** will get life of other good animals like bees and ants, which are also social animals. Other **Decent people** might get their next life as human life also.

For **philosophers**, one who is not just studying but also practicing in life, they get to go to even better places of earth. This matches in many ways with Indian philosophy (*karma-siddhant*) as well.

## 8 Some eye catching moments

Socrates was composing the lyrics by adapting **Aesope's fables** and '**The Prelude**' to **Appolo**. It's strange because he was doing this on the last few days before he was going to put to death. Socrates answers this that he did it in the attempt to discover the meaning of his dream, which came to him so many times saying him "Socrates, practice and cultivate arts". He felt it like the dream is encouraging himself like a runner in the race. At this time he considered the delay of his execution because of the festival of god as a sign for him to study in that time more and also very grateful to that. This two thing impressed me a lot.

Another thing is in [115-a] in which he says - *I prefer to have a bath before drinking the poison, rather than give the woman trouble of washing me when I am dead.* I mean ! How a

person can think like this when he was just going to put to death. Also when he was given hemlock poison there were no change in expression or color on his face. This shows the true example of philosopher really practiced his philosophy throughout his life.

Also I was very much impressed by the behaviour and the relation of the Socrates with the Crito and Simmias. It seems mostly impossible for someone like Socrates who has the highest intellectual jump of that time, how he could be so down to earth with people.

The last words of Socrates - "*Crito, we ought to offer a cock to Asclepius, see to it, and don't forget.*". By offering a cock to Asclepius, Socrates may be expressing his gratitude for the healing of his soul through death, which he saw as a release from the limitations of the body. This act can be seen as a symbolic gesture of thanksgiving for the transition from life to death, with the hope of a continued existence in the afterlife.

## References

- [1] Edith Hamilton, Huntington Cairns, et al. *The collected dialogues of Plato*. Vol. 18. Princeton University Press, 1961.