

Maritza Marquina

Plato

I. On the Soul

One of the most interesting issues in Plato's work is his characterization of the soul. Indeed, this is one of the issues that make Plato's work perennial in its appeal, as it remains a salient question. But to understand the idea that Plato might have wanted to present for discussion, it is important to look at the characterizations of the soul that can be found in both the *Phaedrus* and *The Republic*. Let us look at these first as each view is presented before we move into any comparison of the two.

In the *Phaedrus*, Plato characterizes the nature of the soul as analogous to a charioteer and his horses. He says,

To begin with, our driver is in charge of a pair of horses; second, one of his horses is good and from stock of the same sort, while the other is the opposite and has the opposite sort of bloodline. This means that chariot driving in our case is inevitably a painfully difficult business (246b).

Here we see that the soul is divided into three basic parts, which are analogous to the charioteer, the good horse and the bad horse. The purpose of this unity is the elevation of the soul towards the forms in heaven and to try to see them. We can see this when Socrates describes the procession of the godly and mortal chariots towards the heavenly feast that awaits them. He says, "They have a steep climb to the high tier at the rim of heaven..." (247b).

Once there, we see that the purpose of the voyage is to see the forms, i.e., to see things as they really are. Socrates makes this clear when he says,

On the way around it has a view...of Knowledge – not the knowledge that is close to change, that becomes different as it knows the different things which we consider real down here. No, it is the knowledge of what really is what it is (247 d-e).

But, we also see that the major obstacle in this voyage is the bad horse, which thwarts the smooth sailing along this trip. Indeed, Socrates says, “The heaviness of the bad horse drags its charioteer towards the earth and weighs him down if he has failed to train it well, and this causes the most extreme toil and struggle that a soul will face” (247b). We see quite clearly that the division of the soul has left us with a major hindrance.

Plato’s aforementioned analogy becomes much clearer to me when I see it in the context of the analysis of the soul that is provided in *The Republic*. In this work, Plato also provides us with a tripartite division of the soul; we get the rational, the irrational appetitive and the spirited parts of the soul (439c-441e). This approach is one that seems to provide the concrete statement of the analogy; I will try to elaborate on this point.

If we apply this to the chariot analogy, we can see that the charioteer is analogous to the rational part of the soul, because as the charioteer it “is really wise and exercises foresight on behalf of the whole soul...” (441e). Merely by the symbol that Plato has chosen, we can see that the charioteer plays the role of the rational, as he is the one who guides and drives the chariot.

Moreover, we can see that the good horse plays the role of the spirited part of soul because it is “...a third thing in the soul that is by nature the helper of the rational part” and “in the civil war in the soul it aligns itself far more with the rational” (441a, 440e). The appetitive part is the bad horse then not only by process of elimination, but because it is the part that is the “companion of certain indulgences and pleasures.” Recall that the bad horse is the part of the chariot that follows these pleasures, as with the example its reaction to the love of the boy in the *Phaedrus* (254a).

The struggle that is constantly waged against the bad horse is also expressed in *The Republic*’s account of the soul, as the relation between the rational and spirited is expressed as a

“civil war” in the soul (440e). And the best function of the soul in the second account is also when all the parts are in balance, that is, when “each one of us in whom each part is doing its own work will himself be just and do his own” (441e). But here I must say that though the accounts are analogous, they are not identical; as, the account in *The Republic* has as its end the definition of a just person, not the apprehension of forms.

II. On Rhetoric

In the *Phaedrus*, Plato puts forth certain criteria for what makes a good speech. Socrates says that for a rhetorician to provide a good speech, three elements must be understood. One of these is that the rhetorician must understand the subject that is being addressed. We see this when Socrates says, “You must know the truth concerning everything you are speaking...about...” (277b). But, part of this knowledge is the knowledge of the soul, as it is the agent that is being acted upon (271a).

In addition to this element is the requirement of knowing your audience. To show this Socrates says, “Whoever intends to be a rhetorician must know how many kinds of souls there are...some people have such-and-such a character and others have such-and-such character” (271d). Basically, we are left with the understanding that the rhetorician must be sensitive to the audience and what that particular audience is swayed by (271d-e).

Indeed, the third requirement overlaps with this final point. The rhetorician must be able to discern what sort of character is present in the audience. That is, the rhetorician should be able to adequately gage the audience’s quality of soul to understand the arguments that should be presented (272a).

Given all of this, it is safe to say that Socrates has provided a good speech in the *Phaedrus*. He has filled his requirement of understanding the subject that he is addressing, as he gives several characteristics of love in his great speech (244a-245c). He also understands the nature of the soul itself – or at least he claims to. To show this, we get the analogy of the soul as a chariot and charioteer as well as a lengthy discussion about the soul (245c-249c, and the previous section of this paper).

I also think Socrates has a deep understanding of what kind of person Phaedrus is, and what arguments will work with him. That is, there is a deep understanding of the audience. I say this because Socrates understands that Phaedrus saw Socrates' first speech as effective, so he incorporated some of the elements which were convincing to Phaedrus into the second speech. I take a specific example of this to be the idea of love as madness which he first addresses in 241a-c and then revises in 244a-245c. I think this shows a great deal of sensitivity to the mindset of his audience, and because of this he knows that the arguments that he employs will work to convince Phaedrus. Indeed the best proof for this is that Phaedrus is actually convinced (257c).

As for the question of the literary value of this speech, this is a dichotomous response. It seems to be a good argument for Phaedrus, but not from a philosophical standpoint. This is because Socrates has fulfilled the requirements that he has put forth for a good speech, but not for a good philosophy. He has in many ways addressed the issues that were important to Phaedrus, and has filled all requirements relevant to him. But this has come at the cost of losing the dialectical form which for Plato is conducive to good philosophy.

III. On Writing

Writing is one of the ways that, at least I initially thought, information is transmitted, stored and made permanent. However, in the *Phaedrus*, Plato seems to tell us this view is inappropriate. Plato claims this is because the text itself is mute. Socrates illustrates this by saying that the nature of writing is that

if anyone asks...anything, ...[it]... remains mostly silent. The same is true of written words. You'd think they were speaking as if they had some understanding, but if you question anything that has been said because you want to learn more, it continues to signify just that very same thing forever (275 d-e).

This is a limitation in writing because it cannot be a permanent log of ideas, as the robust and full idea cannot be captured to be fully understood later. The only purpose of written words, according to Plato, is to remind us of what has been said. Socrates affirms this by saying, "How could they possibly think that words that have been written down can do more than remind those who already know what the writing is about?" (275c-d). Writing, then, is an aid to memory not to communication.

Another limitation of writing is that it cannot be selective about its audience; that is, anyone can pick up a piece of written work and read it. Plato says that the good author knows this and does not spend his best words on writing, rather he

sows his gardens of letters for the sake of amusing himself, storing up reminders for himself 'when he reaches forgetful old age' and for everyone who wants to follow in his footsteps, and will enjoy seeing them sweetly blooming (276 d-e).

This leaves us with the possibility of writing is merely a reminder to the self, and as a form of entertainment – as well as other forms of inferior writing.

But Plato also identifies what he sees as true writing, and it is here that the dialectical process' significance becomes explicit. True writing, says Socrates, "is a discourse that is written down, with knowledge, in the soul of the listener; it can defend itself, and it knows for whom it should speak and for whom it should remain silent" (276a). True writing, then, is done in the soul of the person that is engaged in the process of dialectic, and anything else is a mere shade; one that cannot even approach the real splendor of the original.

This has serious implications for Plato's dialogues, as we are left with the possibility that they are (in the best case scenario) merely reminders or forms of entertainment. Either way, they are definitely not adequate reflections of his real ideas, as those can only be transmitted directly from person to person. We cannot see the dialogues as containing any of the real ideas that Plato had, for this reason. Rather they are sketches, guides indicating the route for further dialogical discussion.

In Letter VII continues in the tradition of the *Phaedrus* by asserting that writing is not reliable, but it adds, it is not wise to write down true ideas. But this is tied in with a more complex understanding of our process of acquiring knowledge. The author of the first letter says, "For every real being, there are three things that are necessary if knowledge of it is to be acquired: first, the name; second, the definition; third, the image; knowledge comes fourth, and in the fifth place we must put the object itself, the knowable and truly real being" (342 a-b).

The author wants to argue that if we accept this schema, we cannot possibly think it sensible to write down our ideas; this is because "their names are by no means fixed...Indeed the same thing is true of the definition: since it is a combination of nouns and verbs, there is nothing surely fixed about it" (343 a-b). It is this mutability that makes knowledge such an illusive

creature, as the features of one through four are discontinuous with the fifth element of the actual state of being of a thing in the sense that

each of these four elements is unclear, but the most important point is ...: that of the two objects of search – the particular quality and the being of an object – the soul seeks to know not the quality but the essence, whereas each of these four instruments presents to the soul, in discourse and in examples, what she is not seeking, and thus makes it easy to refute by sense perception anything that may be said or pointed out, and fills everyone, so to speak, with perplexity and confusion (343 b-c).

It is then this linguistic ambiguity that makes the communication of knowledge a difficult enterprise. Because of these linguistic limitations, arguing against an author becomes much easier, as arguments about one through four are seen as arguments against the author. The author makes this much clearer by saying that

when it is the “fifth” about which we are compelled to answer questions or to make explanation, then anyone who wishes to refute has the advantage, and can make the propounder of a doctrine, whether in writing or speaking, or in answering questions, seem to most of his listeners completely ignorant of the matter on which he is trying to speak or write. Those who are listening sometimes do not realize that it is not the mind of the speaker or writer which is being refuted, but these four instruments mentioned, each of which is by nature defective (343d).

The ideas of the person are thereby open to sharper, but misguided criticism; that is, it is criticism of the limitations of one through four, and not of the actual ideas of the author. There is a point similar to the point made in the *Phaedrus*, this being that once an idea is written down it is open to a general audience which is free to trivially object to and misinterpret the text. Because of this, the author argues, it is very unwise for an author to write down the ideas that are actually held about a subject. This is to such an extent that “whenever we see a book, whether the laws of a legislator or a composition in any other subject, we can be sure that if the author is really

serious, this book does not contain his best thoughts; they are stored away with the fairest of his possessions” (344c).

This is in contrast to true knowledge, which cannot be transmitted through writing, rather it is such that it can only be transmitted through a dialectical engagement between teacher and pupil of the issues in one through five; and then only if the nature of the person that is learning is appropriate (343e-344b). Knowledge is a treasure that is found in an interpersonal fashion, there must be an engagement with the teacher.

All of this has serious implications for the interpretations that we may have about Plato’s dialogues. Clearly, if take the implications of Letter VII seriously, we cannot purport to have any knowledge of what Plato actually thought about the subjects in the dialogues, as he never would have written these down. But additionally, the author of Letter VII claims that we cannot even interpret these as reminders of ideas, as “there is no danger of their being forgotten if the soul has once grasped them, since they are contained in the briefest of formulas” (344d-e). This leaves us with the sense that there is no complete truth in the dialogues, as it cannot be contained in them according to the argument that the author has presented to us in Letter VII.