

New Europe College Yearbook 1996-1997



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Tipărirea acestui volum a fost finanțată de
Published with the financial support of



**BANCA ROMÂNĂ
PENTRU DEZVOLTARE**
GROUPE SOCIETE GENERALE

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ISBN 973 – 98624 – 4 – 6

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PLATONIC IMMORTALITY REVISITED

This text is based on a series of lectures I gave in 1996-97 at the New Europe College in Bucharest, as a NEC Fellow. The lectures were pitched to an audience of scholars from all fields except philosophy. I am grateful to Prof. Andrei Plesu, Father André Scrima, Mr. Alexandru Dragomir and all those who attended my lectures for their interest and critical remarks. There is a saying about the existence of God that goes like this: God does exist, and the proof is that he does not want to get involved in anything. I would like to express my profound gratitude to Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin, the main patron of the New Europe College, for encouraging God to get involved in this part of Eastern Europe. Finally, I wish to thank the New Europe College for awarding me a NEC Fellowship. I dedicate this essay to all my fellow Romanians who in December 1989 overcame their fears and stood up for freedom.

*On. Say on. Be said on. Somehow on. Till
nohow on. Said nohow on. [...] All of old.
Nothing else ever. Ever tried. Ever failed. No
matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.
Samuel Beckett, *Worstward Ho**

I

Nowadays we seem to wonder more whether there is life after five o'clock than whether there is life after death. So, if we happen to see Woody Allen's *Hannah and Her Sisters*, we are bound to be more or less surprised, for this film deals precisely with the issue of afterlife (and with that of *Sein zum Tode*, if I may use this Heideggerian expression).

The character played by Woody Allen is a TV director who is a hypochondriac and who realizes, eventually, that his hypochondria is caused by his fear of death. "If death means nothingness", he says, "then isn't that enough to spoil everything?" He then seeks comfort in religion. He attempts to convert to Catholicism, but his father mocks him ("Why Jesus?" "Well, I know it sounds funny..."). Then he muses about joining a Hare Krishna group, but he mocks himself ("You're gonna shave your head and put on robes and dance around airports? You'll look like Jerry Lewis. Oh God, I'm so depressed"). In the end, after he fails to shoot himself, he enters a cinema theatre where, looking at a most funny scene from a Marx Brothers' film, he has a sort of illumination and says to himself:

[...] how can you even think of killing yourself? I mean, look at all the people up there on the screen. You know, they're really funny and, what if the worst is true? What if there is no God, and you only go around once and that's it? Well, you know, don't you want to be part of the experience? You know, what the hell, it's not all a drag. Geez, I should stop ruining my life searching for answers I'm never going to get, and just enjoy it while it lasts. And, you know, after, who knows? I mean, you know, maybe there is something. Nobody really knows.

Allen's character is, as I said, a TV director and he has his illumination about afterlife in a cinema theatre, while he watches a Marx Brothers film. We, the spectators, may experience the same illumination while we watch, in a cinema theatre, this Woody Allen film. Here, however, we are in medialand and that should make us suspicious. Films are addressed to the masses, to *hoi polloi*, the *vulgus*, to *das Man* himself; so this illumination may contain just a lay view about afterlife.

The most successful experts are nowadays the scientists. What do the scientists say about afterlife? Do they claim that the most reasonable thing to do is to enjoy the time we have within this world, the only world there is? We all know that each scientific discipline ends up by being accompanied by its own *vulgata*. But things have deteriorated lately, for we, the lay public, can hardly follow nowadays any scientific *vulgata* (in 1995 the University of Oxford announced a vacant readership in the public understanding of science; let us hope that they will come up with something).

New Europe College, where we are now, is an institute for advanced studies in the humanities. We, the experts in humanities that form its community, must admit that we do not have a clue about what the scientists say about afterlife. We only know that some of them, after they have won the Nobel Prize, start to talk about God, but no one, apparently, takes

them seriously when they do this. So, all we can do, *hic et nunc*, is to see what the experts in humanities have to say about afterlife.

Maintenant, sur une immense terrasse d'Elsinore, qui va de Bâle à Cologne, qui touche aux sables de Nieuport, aux marais de la Somme, aux craies de Champagne, aux granits d'Alsace — l'Hamlet européen regarde des milliers de spectres. Mais il est un Hamlet intellectuel. Il médite sur la vie et la mort des vérités. Il a pour fantômes tous les objets de nos controverses; il a pour remords tous les titres de notre gloire [...]. S'il saisit un crâne, c'est un crâne illustre. — *Whose was it?* — Celui-ci fut *Lionardo*. [...] Et ce autre crâne est celui de *Leibniz* qui rêva de la paix universelle. Et celui-ci fut *Kant qui genuit Hegel, qui genuit Marx, qui genuit ...* Hamlet ne sait trop que faire de tous ces crânes. Mais s'il les abandonne! ... Va-t-il cesser d'être lui-même?

These are Paul Valéry's words¹. They manage, I think, to express very well what happens to the modern humanist, who, unlike the modern scientist, is haunted by the history of his own discipline and who cannot make sense of any problem if he does not unfold its history. So, if we raise the question about afterlife to a modern humanist, we are bound to end up with something about the history of the doctrines and views that regard the issue of afterlife.

Like any other expert, the modern humanist is someone who manages to know something well because he, *inter alia*, has narrowed down to the extreme the area of his scholarly interest. And this fact has its importance; for it means that if we raise the question about afterlife to a modern humanist, we are bound to end up with something about a rather small segment of the history of this question. My field is philosophy, and within this field I have narrowed down my interest to one philosopher – Plato. So, if one asks me what I have to say about afterlife, I shall offer him an account of what Plato says about it. But, how relevant can be for us such a small segment of the history of the doctrines and views that regard the issue of afterlife? Let us first see, however, what Plato has to say about this issue.

II

"The most appealing account of the Big Bang I've ever read", claims Salman Rushdie in his *Imaginary Homelands*, "was written by Italo Calvino in his marvellous *Cosmicomics*. In the beginning, we're told by Calvino's narrator, the proto-being Qfwfq, 'Every point of each of us coincided with

every point of each of the others in a single point, which was where we all were ... it wasn't the sort of situation that encourage sociability.' Then a certain Mrs Ph(i)Nko cried out, 'Oh, if only I had some room, how I'd like to make some noodles for you boys!' And at once — bam! — there it was: spacetime, the cosmos. *Room*."²

In Plato's late writings there are several accounts of the soul's immortality and afterlife. They are a mixture of traditional legends and Platonic myths, linked with a cosmology that is even stranger than Italo Calvino's account of the Big Bang – a cosmology that involves a Demiurge, human reincarnation and many other curious things. We certainly do not want to rush into that. We had better start chronologically. (The modern humanists are so addicted to unfolding stories, that they would use any excuse for a chronological approach.)

Plato's earlier writings, the so-called Socratic dialogues, are dominated by their main character, namely Socrates, who was Plato's guru. Socrates is the weirdest philosopher ever. When the Delphic god was asked who is the wisest man, he replied that there is no one wiser than Socrates (cf. *Ap.* 21 b and *Phd.* 85 b)³. Socrates attempted to test the Delphic god, but eventually he came to the conclusion that all his fellow citizens – poets, politicians, sophists, skilled craftsmen – were less wise than he (for they all claimed they knew something without actually knowing it). And so, he proved the god's oracle to be true. Obviously, he annoyed everybody. Soon after he was brought before an Athenian court on a most ridiculous charge (corrupting the minds of the young and believing in other deities instead of the gods recognized by the state); and, eventually, he was condemned to death. The fact that all this happened in a democratic Athens is usually taken as an accident; for philosophers, we believe, have always been safe in a democratic regime. To this, Heidegger replies: it is true that Socrates seems to be the only philosopher killed by a democracy; but this is more likely to mean that, since the time of Socrates, not a single philosopher of his stature has ever lived in a democracy⁴. *Mais passons*; regardless of whether this is or not true, Socrates remains the most singular and eccentric philosopher.

Part of his eccentricity consists in his refusal to write anything. He would have perished of course, had Plato (and a few others) not written about him. As far as Plato's account of Socrates' views is concerned, there are no reliable means to determine its fidelity to them (the moment we approach Plato, we are faced with the issue of *original* and *copy*.) This is, however, what Socrates says about death at the end of Plato's *Apology*

(one of Plato's earlier writings, which contains, allegedly, the speech given by Socrates in his defence at the trial):

Death is one of two things. Either it is annihilation and the dead have no consciousness of anything, or, as we are told, it is really a change — a migration of the soul from this place to another. Now if there is no consciousness but only a dreamless sleep, death must be a marvellous gain [for it is like a one single resting night – cf. 40 c 9-d 1]. [...] If on the other hand death is a removal from here to some other place, and if what we are told is true, that all the dead are there, what greater blessing could there be than this, gentlemen? [For that would mean that one can entertain himself with all the famous man that have ever lived and with all the half-divinities — Minos, Rhadamanthus, Orpheus, Musaeus, Hesiod, Homer, Palamedes, Ajax, etc. – cf. 41 a-b.]⁵

(40 c-41 c)

Some of us, being workaholics, would not find the possibility of an eternal dreamless sleep as appealing as Socrates did, while others might be reluctant to mingle with half-divinities for ever. But apart from these peculiarities, Socrates appears, surprisingly, fairly sensible in his views about afterlife, for he simply says that death is either a conscious or a non-conscious state.

Plato's views on the matter, however, are less sensible; and yet, one of them, which first occurs in the *Symposium*, is not actually unreasonable. This view has in a way a Socratic origin.

When the Delphic god uttered his oracle about me, says Socrates in the *Apology*, he "is not referring literally to Socrates; he has merely taken my name as a *paradeigma*" (23 a 8-b). A *paradeigma* is, in this context, an instance or embodiment of something. It seems then that Socrates, Plato's spiritual father, invites us to look at him platonically; he invites us, that is, to focus not on him, but on what is embodied in him. So, what does Socrates embody?

In the *Crito*, when Crito asks Socrates to run away from prison and save his life, Socrates says: "[...] it has always been my nature never to accept advice from any of my friends unless reflection shows that it is the best course that reason offers" (46 b). Socrates, we know only too well, has always lived according to reason (*Grg.* 527 e; cf. also *Phd.* 82 d, 84 a-b). He embodies then, we may say, the possibility of living according to reason.

Now, most of us also claim to live according to reason. Does that mean that Socrates and we embody the same thing? Obviously, we are not as serene as he was when we contemplate the finitude of our life. We do not live without having any fears, as he did (cf. *Phd.* 84 b and 114 e); and, of course, we would not attack any flattering oracle. But whenever we live according to what our reason tells us, we embody the same thing as he did and so we resemble him. Only that our embodiment of a life led by reason is not as resistant and enduring as his; that is: we are not as committed to our reason as he was to his, and we cannot live all the time according to what reason tells us, as he did.

Socrates, says Alcibiades in the *Symposium*, “does not resemble any other man” (221 c), and so he appears to be a divine (*theios, daimonios*) person (cf. 215 b, 216 e, 219 c, 222 a). Why? The answer that Alcibiades’ praise suggests, in the *Symposium*, is this: what is divine in Socrates, and so what differentiates him from other men, is his *remaining the same* for the sake of something thought of as good (cf. 213 e, 216 d-e, 217 d-e). For, as Alcibiades says, nobody and nothing can force him to do something which does not agree with what he believes reason recommends us as being good – be it wine (214 a, 220 a), bodily temptations (219 b-d), hardships (220 a-b), dangers or wars (221 b-d). This belief that the divine must always remain the same is to be found in many ancient religious doctrines, such as the Mosaic one (see, *inter alia*, the *Old Testament*, Mal. 3,6). But we should confine our inquiry to Plato. So: why did he hold this belief? This is a very difficult question, which I cannot enter here; but this motif of *remaining the same*, which Socrates brought forward in his life, is interwoven with all major Platonic themes.

In the *Symposium* Plato claims that human beings (like all mortal creatures) are always changing (207 d-e), and so they cannot, like the divine, be fully and always the same (208 a). Not even Socrates, we may say, going along with Plato’s thought; although he always listens to what reason has to say, Socrates grows older too and thus he is not fully and always the same. So, Plato concludes, the only way in which man partakes of what is *always* the same is by perpetuating himself, i.e. by “leaving behind new life to fill the vacancy that is left in its species by obsolescence” (208 a-b). And he seems to suggest that love, *Eros* (that drives each individual man during his life), is nothing but a longing for maintaining the sameness of the human race (cf. for instance 206 e, 207 a, 212 a). A very similar view occurs in the *Laws* (allegedly, Plato’s last work), at 721

b-c; here, claiming that a man should marry when he has reached the age of thirty and before he comes to that of thirty-five, Plato argues that

[...] there is a sense in which mankind naturally partakes of immortality, a prize our nature makes desirable to all of us in its every form, for to win renown and not lie in our graves without a name is a desire of this. Thus the race of man is time's equal twin and companion, bound up with him in a union never to be broken, and the manner of their immortality is in this wise. By succession of generations the race [of man] abides one and the same [*tauton kai hen on aei*], so partaking in immortality through procreation.

That is: it is the human race that has (actually: can have) an endless duration, not the individual soul. This implies that there is no actual afterlife and conveniently solves the whole matter. Thus, the *Symposium* and the *Laws* contain a view of the soul's immortality that seems, to us, quite reasonable (though in the Book X of the *Laws* things are slightly more complicated). In the *Phaedo*, however, Plato argues that it is the individual soul that is immortal. And this casts a long shadow on this appealing (because down to earth) approach from the *Symposium* and the *Laws*.

III

The *Phaedo* is the dialogue in which Plato describes Socrates' last conversation with some of his friends. Socrates knows that he will soon die and he tells his friends, as he told the jury at his trial, that he looks forward to it.

If I did not expect to enter the company, first, of other wise and good gods, and secondly of men now dead who are better than those who are in this world now, it is true that I should be wrong in not grieving at death. As it is, you can be assured that I expect to find myself among good men. I would not insist particularly on this point, but on the other I assure you that I shall insist most strongly — that I shall find there divine masters who are supremely good. That is why I am not so much distressed as I might be, and why I have a firm hope that there is something in store for those who have died, and, as we have been told for many years, something much better for the good than for the wicked.

(63 b-c)

This echoes what he said in the *Apology*. Now, however, he is Plato's voice and he is caught up in a scenario that has at stake an elaborated philosophical construction.

Cebes, one of those listening to Socrates' brave words, says that, after all, "it requires no little faith and assurance to believe that the soul exists after death and retains some active force and intelligence" (70 b). Socrates, in response, produces several arguments that, in his view, demonstrate that the soul is immortal: one about the existence of pure knowledge (63 e-67 a); one about opposites (70 d-71 e); one that introduces the so-called theory of recollection (cf. 72 e-73 b); and one about the nature of the soul (78 c-81 a). These arguments may be quite exasperating for a modern reader. The one about opposites, for instance, states that, since "everything which has an opposite is generated from that opposite and from no other source" (70 e), and since death is the opposite of living (71 c), the living must come from the dead, just as the dead come from the living (71 d-e), which amounts to say that the soul exists in the next world (71 e). One of these arguments, however, the one that introduces the so-called theory of recollection, is a most complex philosophical argument. It resumes, in a different form, the argument about pure knowledge and it goes like this: "if what we call learning is really just recollection, [...] then surely what we recollect now we must have learned at some time before, which is impossible unless our souls existed somewhere before they entered this human shape. So in that way too it seems likely that the soul is immortal" (72 e). Now, what does all this mean?

Seeing is one of our most intimate experiences; and yet we seldom understand what does in fact happen when we see something. When we look around, we see things that have an identity – trees, stars, mountains. That is: we always see the things that we look at *as something*: this one as a tree, that one as a mountain; which means that when we look at things we instantly identify them as being what they are. Now, in order to identify an object as something, say that thing over there as being a chair, I must realize that that object has the appearance, the look, the aspect of a chair. I must recognize, in other words, a specific aspect, viz. the aspect of chair, in that thing over there. This act of recognizing a particular aspect in a given object brings forth a can of philosophical worms, which was first opened by Plato.

If in looking at things we identify them as being what they are, then our seeing is not actually a mere visual sensation: it is rather a sort of an interpretation, in which I see something as something. In which case we

should say that that which must be responsible for this interpretation, for this hermeneutic experience (to be pretentious), cannot be my eyes, but my mind. Plato stresses out this point explicitly in the *Theaetetus*, a dialogue written later than the *Phaedo*. There, at 184 c, he makes Socrates ask: “Do we see with our eyes or through our eyes?” That is, he continues, do we see with the eyes or do we see with something else — “a soul, or whatever is to be called” (184 d) — through the eyes, as they would be merely an instrument? And Plato’s answer is very clearly stated: we see through the eyes with the soul (184 d). Let us go back, however, to the *Phaedo*.

Here the question of recognizing specific aspects in the things we look at is explicitly put; at 74 e-75 a and 75 b ff., for instance, Plato brings forward the case of seeing equal things:

We must have had some previous knowledge of equality before the time when we first saw equal things and realized that they were striving after equality, but fell short of it. [...So] before we began to see and hear and use our other senses we must somewhere have acquired the knowledge that there is such a thing as absolute equality. Otherwise we could never have realized, by using it as a standard for comparison, that all equal objects of sense are desirous of being like it, but are only imperfect copies.

Here in the *Phaedo* Plato calls the act of recognizing specific aspects in the things we look at *anamnêsis*, recollection (73 c-d, 74 c-d; cf. also 73 d); and for “aspect” he uses the words *eidos* and *idea* (102 a, 103 e), which in Greek mean “form” or “shape”, and which are usually rendered in English by “form”. (Both *eidos* and *idea* contain an implicit reference to *sight*, which we do not perceive any more in the modern word “idea”; and they seem to come from a verb root that originally meant “to see”.) So, to put it Plato’s terms: when we look at an object and see it as being a particular object, say, an arrow (or as having a particular feature – say, as being equal to another arrow), we actually recollect the form, the *idea* of arrow in that object (and the *idea* of equality in the two equal arrows)⁶.

Now, Plato said many queer things about forms and he developed an actual doctrine about them, usually referred to as his theory of forms. He believed, however, that to know what a form actually is, say, the form of equality, it is not enough to recollect it in the various equal things we see around us; we have, he believed, to discuss about it in a particular way (which he called dialectical) (*Phd.* 67 a-b, 78 e-79 a; cf. also *R.* 534 b ff.) (at *Phd.* 99 d ff. he goes even further and says that the senses are more

likely to prevent us from reaching true knowledge). But we have to leave all this aside and focus on our subject – recollection and immortality.

If seeing implies a recollection of forms, then we must somehow know that form beforehand; and this brings forth the question of when we first came to know all those forms. In the *Phaedo* he claims that the right answer is this: before our birth. Here is what he says at 72 e (cf. also 75 c):

[... if] what we call learning is really just recollection, [...] then surely what we recollect now we must have learned at some time before, which is impossible unless our souls existed somewhere before they entered this human shape.

So, Plato argues, if your soul existed before your birth, it will continue to exist after your death, which means that your soul is immortal (*athanaton*) and imperishable (*adiaphthoron*) (102 b-106 e). And if all this is so, he concludes, then after death soul reaches pure knowledge (66 e); and, eventually, it is reincarnated and lives another earthly life (81 d ff.), but without being able to preserve the pure knowledge it received in its afterlife (a point which is implicit in the *Phaedo*, but explicit in the *Republic*)⁷.

Recollection and reincarnation are issues that are brought forth by the so-called theory of forms, which is introduced as a theory that explains the way our soul knows things (e.g. our recognizing forms in the things we look at). And immortality is an issue that is brought forth by the issues of recollection and reincarnation. That is: immortality, as it appears in the *Phaedo*, is a question that occurs within the broader context of Plato's way of putting the problem of knowledge (cf. 92 d: "the theory that our soul exists even before it enters the body surely stands or falls with the soul's possession [of the forms]"). This theoretical package about forms and recollection, however, comes with an ethical point, which, in its turn, brings forth a complex and fantastical eschatology.

IV

In the *Phaedo*, Plato attaches to the theory of recollection a most unexpected argument, which may be summarized as follows. (i) The knowledge that we recollect is a pure knowledge of forms (66 d), i.e. a knowledge that the soul acquires in the other world, where it is pure, viz. released from its body (66 e). (ii) In the other world, however, the access to this pure knowledge is not democratic; "for one who is not pure himself

to attain the realm of purity would no doubt be a breach of universal justice" (67 b) (cf. also 82 b-c: "no soul which is not absolutely pure when it leaves the body, may attain the divine nature [of the pure knowledge]"). (iii) During its earthly life, the soul is "permeated by the corporeal" (81 c); and purification aims precisely at "separating the soul as much as possible from the body" (67 c). (iv) So, one should attempt to accomplish this separation in his earthly life (67 b, 69 d, 84 a-b); yet, this "desire to free the soul [from the body] is found chiefly, or rather only, in the true philosophers" (67 d), who seem thus to "make dying their profession" (67 e) and whose life seem to be a "practice of death" (81 a).

But this is not all. At the end of the dialogue, Plato includes in all this an ethical point. At 107 c he makes Socrates say this:

If death were a release from everything, it would be a boon for the wicked, because by dying they would be released not only from the body but also from their own wickedness together with the soul, but as it is, since the soul is clearly immortal, it can have no escape or security from evil except by becoming as good and wise as it possibly can.

I do not think that this inference – "since the soul is immortal, it can have no escape or security from evil except by becoming as good and wise as it possibly can" – is safe from objections. And the claim made further on, at 107 d, that the soul takes with it to the next world not only its education (*paideia*, i.e. its knowledge in a very broad sense) but also the way it has lived, is simply postulated. One may accept that if knowledge is recollection, then soul must be immortal in order to acquire that pure knowledge that makes possible the act of recollection; and that if pure knowledge is easier to acquire when the soul has purified itself in its earthly life through philosophy, then one should consider the practice of philosophy very seriously. But the view that one should be not only as wise, but also as good as one possibly can is, apparently, not grounded on anything.

Plato, however, construes in the *Phaedo* a complex eschatology, at the core of which lies the idea that soul, in its afterlife, is judged and then punished, or rewarded (as the case may be), for its moral conduct in its earthly life (107 d-108 a, 113 d) (an idea that was also expounded, in a different form, in the *Gorgias* 523 ff.; cf. also *R.* 614 b-621 d); and he argues that when soul is reincarnated, its reincarnation and its new life is part of the punishment or the reward for what it did in its former earthly life (see for instance 81 e: "those who have cultivated gluttony and selfishness or drunkenness, instead of taking pains to avoid them, are likely

to assume the form of donkeys and other perverse animals [when they are reincarnated]”). Here is a sample of this eschatology as it occurs in the *Phaedo*:

This is how the story goes. When any man dies, his own guardian spirit, which was given charge over him in his life, tries to bring him to a certain place where all must assemble, and from which, after submitting their several cases to judgement, they must set out for the next world, under the guidance of one who has the office of escorting souls from this world to the other. When they have there undergone the necessary experiences and remained as long as is required, another guide brings them back again after many vast periods of time. Of course this journey is not as Aeschylus makes Telephus describe it. He says that the path to Hades is straightforward, but it seems clear to me that it is neither straightforward nor single. If it were, there would be no need for a guide, because surely nobody could lose his way anywhere if there were only one road. In fact, it seems likely that it contains many forkings and crossroads, to judge from the ceremonies and observances of this world. Well, the wise and disciplined soul follows its guide and is not ignorant of its surroundings, but the soul which is deeply attached to the body, as I said before, hovers round it and the visible world for a long time, and it is only after much resistance and suffering that it is at last forcibly led away by its appointed guardian spirit. And when it reaches the same place as the rest, the soul which is impure through having done some impure deed, either by setting its hand to lawless bloodshed or by committing other kindred crimes which are the work of kindred souls, this soul is shunned and avoided by all.

(107 d-108 b)

All this is bound to discourage anyone who wants to learn something about Plato's views on afterlife. First, everything is too complicated; secondly, we do not know if we should take his fantastical stories literally or figuratively. Harold Cherniss, a fine Plato scholar, said that “the Analysts of Oxford have succeeded to their own satisfaction in reading the dialogues that they call ‘critical’ as primitive essays in their own philosophical method. The author of *these works*, they feel, they could adopt as their worthy precursor, if only he could be absolved of the embarrassing doctrine of ideas that he elaborated in all its metaphysical and epistemological absurdity in the *Phaedo*, the *Symposium*, the *Republic*, and the *Phaedrus*”⁸. Well, if you think you have a difficulty in accepting Plato's theories from the *Phaedo*, you had better have a look at one of his last writings, the *Timaeus*.

V

If forms are recognized in the things we see, then it means that the latter somehow embody the former. So we have to admit that there are two main ontological realms — that of the forms and that of their sensible embodiments. And this brings forth the question of the nature of the relation between forms and their embodiments.

In the *Phaedo* Plato says that this relation is *causal*, in the sense that the forms are responsible for the way their sensible embodiments are (100 c-d). But he does not determine this causal relation (which he refers to by the obscure verb *metechein*, usually rendered in English by “to partake of”) (cf. 100 d: “I do not go so far as to insist upon the precise details – only upon the fact that it is by beauty that beautiful things are beautiful”). Only in the later dialogues, such as the *Republic* (see for instance 596 a ff.), he describes this relation as a *model-copy relation*; that is: the forms we recognize in various visible objects are to be conceived as models, and the objects that embody them as their copies.

Now, according to Plato these models of sensible objects, the forms, must always remain the same (cf. *Phd.* 78 c ff.). Why? Because, as he claims the *Cratylus*, “you cannot know that which has no state” (440 a); because, in other words, “we cannot reasonably say that there is knowledge at all, if everything is in a state of transition and there is nothing abiding” (440 a-b; see also *R.* 585 c ff.) (and here, that motif of *remaining the same*, of which I said earlier that Socrates brought forward in his life, surfaces again). You may have never thought about it, but here Plato is certainly right: only that which remains the same can be known. That table over there is obviously quite old; its colour has become uncertain and its drawers look stuck. But I still recognize it, I have sat at it many times. Yet, Plato would claim, each time you looked at that table, your mind saw, through your eyes, only unchanging forms – the form of table, the form of drawer.

And here comes the *Timaeus*, which makes everyone interested in Plato’s philosophy despair. Plato develops in this dialogue the model-copy idea by claiming that the whole universe is a product framed from a primordial given matter (52 d), by a Demiurge (28 a ff., 29 d-e, 31 b) and other gods, who had an ideal model in front of their eyes (30 c), i.e. an ideal universe (cf. 38 b-c, 39 e). And, as if all this was not strange enough, he introduces, at 37 c-38 c, a most bizarre distinction between time (*chronos*) and eternity (*aion*).

Time, claims Plato, is a “moving image of eternity” (37 d). In other words: time does resemble eternity, but they are not actually the same, just as a copy of a model is similar to, but not the same as its model. One may be tempted to construe eternity as an endless duration, but then, since time is not the same as eternity, one would have to construe time as a limited duration. This interpretation, however, has to cope with a major difficulty, for Plato says that the existence of the universe (and so of time, with which the universe was bound from its very beginning – cf. 38 b) is endless: the created universe, he says at 38 c, “has been and is and will be in all time” (cf. also 33 a, where it is claimed that the existence of the universe is not limited by old age and disease).

Plato says very little about what eternity is, and this very little is a rather confusing phrase, namely that “eternity remains in one” (37 d). What could this “one” mean here? Plato does not explicitly say, in the *Timaeus* or elsewhere, what this “one” might be. According to several Ancient scholars the Platonic notion of eternity should be understood as a timeless present⁹. In which case we should read the phrase from 37 d like this: “eternity [is: to] remain in the same one [now]”, and we should take eternity as a “remaining in the same now”, and time as a “moving from one now to another”. The Latin scholars, who were very good at finding clear-cut expressions for the obscure thoughts of the Greek philosophers, called the timeless present of eternity *nunc stans*, and the running present of time *nunc fluens*; and Boethius is credited with introducing another clever pair of Latin words into all this: *sempiternitas*, for the endlessness of time; and *aeternitas*, for the timeless eternity (*de Trinitate* 4, ll.64-77). To use this more convenient Latin terminology, we may say then that the realm of that which is always the same, i.e. the realm of forms, should be understood as existing in a *nunc stans*, i.e. as being eternal, while the sensible embodiments of the forms as existing in a *nunc fluens*, i.e. as being sempiternal.

If so, what happens to the human soul? Is it eternal? If eternity is “to remain in a single now”, then a soul cannot be eternal during the time in which it is embodied in a man, for during this time it exists in the moving now of time. Yet a soul, one might argue, can be eternal after the death of the body that embodied it. But if so, then “during” such an eternal, i.e. timeless present, the soul will be deprived of any kind of motion; and if there is no motion in it, then it cannot perceive or know anything, for, according to Plato, any kind of awareness requires movement (cf. *Sph.* 249 a, where Plato claims that human soul, human thinking and life in

general cannot be separated from motion; cf. also *Tht.* 153 b-c: “soul acquires knowledge and is kept going and improved by learning and practice, which are of the nature of movements”). Yet in the *Phaedo* (and in some later dialogues, such as the *Phaedrus* 246-249), Plato claims that only after death does soul reach real knowledge (cf. *Phd.* 66 e: “wisdom [...] will be attainable only when we are dead, and not in our lifetime”). And in the *Republic*, in the so-called myth of Er, he claims that soul, after it witnessed the harmony of the world and fate (616 ff.), journeys to the Plain of Oblivion and drinks from the River of Forgetfulness (621 a-b), reaching thus, we may say, a state of complete oblivion, i.e. a state in which it is not perceiving anything any more (and this complete oblivion is what makes recollection necessary when soul is reincarnated).

We are facing then, after too long a discussion, a difficulty, an *aporia*. “Geez, I should stop ruining my life searching for answers I’m never going to get, and just enjoy it while it lasts” – one can say, borrowing this line from Woody Allen’s character in *Hannah and Her Sisters*. Almost all of Plato’s Socratic dialogues, however, end up in an *aporia*; and for him an *aporia* is simply the beginning of understanding. Which means that, according to Plato, we may be on the right track after all.

VI

I have, at this point, to make a digression. There is a piece of practical advice about luggage which goes like this: when you pack, put in only the necessary things; then take them all out and put back only half of them. I did the same with this essay of mine (on the assumption that, outside my community of fellow-Platonists, it is better to travel light). I left out, that is, half of the things I first considered necessary for a brief account of Plato’s views on immortality and I confined myself to the task of stressing a few points he makes about it in the *Symposium*, the *Phaedo* and the *Timaeus*¹⁰.

Now, does my account of Plato’s views on immortality describe accurately his thoughts? My account is just one interpretation amongst many; and there is no widely accepted interpretation of Plato’s philosophy (like there is one of, say, Newton’s physics). Suppose, however, that Plato

himself would endorse my account of his views and let us ask ourselves if these views are true.

In *Oedipus Wrecked*, if I may refer to another Woody Allen film (which is his segment of *New York Stories*), Allen's character listens to a woman who plays something very nice on the piano; she is a fortune-teller and a magician who is helping him to find his mother, but never mind. "Wow," he says, "you play very well; do you practice a lot?" "No," she replies, "I was a musician in a former life". Most of us find this joke funny and Plato's doctrine of reincarnation ridiculous.

Some of us may accept several philosophical points made by Plato's theory of forms. But most of us would find embarrassing the countless fantastical details that occur in his philosophical accounts of the origin of the universe and afterlife. And it is precisely these fantastical details that almost convince us that his views could not be true. The Renaissance scholars found Plato's mythical explanations of the universe rather seductive, but in the long run these explanations provoked the hostility of the majority of modern scientists. There are nevertheless a few notable exceptions to this severe excommunication – such as Heisenberg or Popper, to cite only the best known names – who claim that Plato's explanations of the universe have influenced many important scientists, from Galileo to Kepler, Newton, and even Einstein. But, most of the modern scientists tend to consider Plato an illustrious representative of Greek pseudo-science; and we are quite tempted, I would guess, to say they are right in doing so.

Why, however, did he use so many fantastical stories and metaphors? Because, one may argue, he had no choice. That is: in dealing with philosophical matters, with what is most abstract, we cannot but produce, eventually, various metaphors. Can we rely on a metaphor? According to Plato, we certainly can, for according to him metaphorical language has heuristic powers, i.e. it has a certain ability to lead us to truth (cf. *Ti.* 48 d and 53 d-e). But why did he hold such a view?

Roughly speaking, Plato's fantastical stories aim at finding a non-abstract embodiment for an abstract matter, in such a way that that embodiment (partially) reveals that which is embodied in it (cf. what he says in the *Politicus*, at 277 d: "It is difficult [...] to demonstrate anything of real importance without the use of examples. Every one of us is like a man who sees things in a dream and thinks that he knows them perfectly and then wakes up, as it were, to find that he knows nothing.") For Plato, however, one might argue, this act of revealing is metaphysically justified

by the fact that the forms are embodied, and thus partially revealed, by the sensible things. That is: for Plato the fact that we can (partially) express abstract ideas through non-abstract terms is grounded on the fact that the sensible is a “manifestation” of the intelligible.

So, we may conclude, for Plato a philosophical account of the origin of the universe and afterlife cannot be phantasm-free (for the unfolding of these subjects requires, besides an abstract, yet rough framework, an amount of fantastical details); and these details, insofar as they embody something that cannot be grasped otherwise (viz. in an abstract way), may be said to be leading us in the proximity of truth (for the *meta*-physics and *meta*-phorical discourse correspond to each other in their attempt to go beyond, *meta*, what is before our senses)¹¹. This is a very refined explanation of Plato’s use of fantastical stories. But it somehow fails to persuade us to believe that his fantastical cosmology and eschatology may lead us to truth.

Whitehead is credited with a saying that has made a beautiful career: “the safest general characterisation of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato”¹². For many philosophers this is simply an exaggeration, though no one could deny Plato’s enormous influence on the history of philosophy. But, you may ask, if his philosophy seems so unlikely to be true, then, apart from satisfying a historical interest, *à quoi bon lire Platon?*

VII

Plato claims in the *Phaedo* that his eschatology is accessible only to the true philosophers (67 d, 80 e, 83 b) and that it is quite different from the views entertained by the “masses” (64 b, 68 c, 77 b, 80 d, 83 e). And in the *Timaeus*, his cosmology is presented as being the view of one who “has scaled the heights of all philosophy” (20 a), namely Timaeus (the character who tells Socrates and a few others the story of the creation of the universe); and this view is opposed to the common understanding (cf. 28 c: “the father and maker of all this universe is past finding out, and even if we found him, to tell of him to all men would be impossible”). So, we may say, we are apprehensive about Plato’s fantastical cosmology and eschatology because we are not true philosophers. What is then for him a true philosopher?

Plato's most famous myth is the so-called myth of the cave, from the *Republic*. In this myth men are represented as prisoners in a cave (514 ff.); they have their necks chained and can look only in front of them, at some shadows projected on the wall of the cave which they believe are true beings (cf. 515 c). One of them, however, escapes from his fetters and realizes that the shadows seen before on the wall of the cave are only shadows (515 c ff.), and that the true light and the true beings are outside the cave (516 a ff.). The sun, which generates the true light, seems here to be used as an analogy for the ultimate principle of the entire existence, called also "the good", *to agathon* (cf. the passages known as the Sun, the Divided Line and the Cave: 507 a-509 c, 509 d-511 e and 514 a-517 a).

Socrates presents this myth about the cave and its dwellers as an analogy for "our nature in respect of education and its lack to such an experience" (514 a). What is then for Plato education, *paideia* (of which he says in the *Phaedo* 107 c-d that it is a thing the soul takes with itself to the next world)? After Socrates told his audience the myth, he says that education is not "what some people proclaim it to be in their professions", when they say "they can put true knowledge into a soul that does not possess it, as if they were inserting vision into blind eyes" (518 b-d). In the *Republic*, vision is often taken as an analogy for knowledge. The seen things (507 b, 508 a) correspond to the known things (508 e, 509 b) and sight (507 d) corresponds to knowledge (508 e). So, says Socrates, according to this analogy (which is at the core of the myth of the cave), education appears as the process of turning one's eyes from darkness to light (518 a-c). That is: education is not like an art of producing vision in an eye, but, "on the assumption that it [i.e. the eye] possesses vision but does not rightly direct it and does not look where it should, an art of bringing this about" (518 d). Yet, says Socrates, the eye cannot be converted from the darkness (say, the darkness of a cave) to the light (say, the light of the sun outside) except by "turning the whole body" (without which the eye cannot be brought outside the cave); and, he continues, so it is with knowledge, which requires "a turning around of the entire soul" (*periagôgê tês holês psuchês*) from the world of becoming to the world of ideas, of which the brightest one is the idea of the good (518 c-d). And he concludes: "a conversion and turning about of the soul from a day whose light is darkness to the veritable day [is] that ascension to reality of our parable which we will affirm to be true philosophy" (521 c).

Most of us will certainly look with suspicion at the claim that the ultimate goal of one's education is to grasp, sometimes through metaphors

or fantastical stories, the principle of everything, which one can compare with the sun and call “the good”. Yet, we must admit, the idea that education implies the effort to see things differently does appeal to us. We may even put everything in Kuhn’s terms and say that each one lives in a paradigm, which becomes, eventually, one’s own cave. So, we may conclude, one’s spiritual growth (i.e. his *paideia*) depends on his attempt to escape from such a paradigm and experience something else. If so, then even a particular philosophy, say the Platonic one, may turn into a cave, outside of which there is a world full of other disciplines and points of view.

Applied to our case, namely that of dealing with the topic of immortality, this view will lead us to say that what is important is to escape the given phantasms about immortality that surround us and attempt to reach another points of view about it, even if some of them, like the Platonic ones, are nothing more than a collection of more sophisticated phantasms. One could also venture to claim that in fields such as the one of eschatology, where truth is beyond our reach, this is the only thing to do.

Plato would certainly look at all this with suspicion. For him, what is important is the attempt to grasp the ultimate, singular truth. But he would certainly encourage us to do whatever we can to challenge all the views and opinions that we take for granted and turn our mind from what is familiar to us to what makes us wonder and lead us to an *aporia*. So, if thinking about afterlife and what Plato has to say about it will do, then why look further?

Notes

1. *La Crise de l’esprit, Oeuvres* (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1957) t.1, 993.
2. S. Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991* (London: Granta, 1991), 262.
3. References to Plato’s text are given by means of the marginal sigla derived from the pagination and page subdivision of the Stephanus edition of Plato’s works (1578). The abbreviations I use are those of the Liddell-Scott-Jones’s *Greek-English Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961).
4. M. Heidegger, *Vom Wesen der Wahrheit. Zu Platons Höhlengleichnis und Theätet* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1988), *Gesamtausgabe*, Band 34, 84-5.

5. Translations of Plato's texts are from *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, E. Hamilton and H. Cairns (eds.) (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989).
6. The Platonic notion of recollection has raised many controversies; the scope of this essay, however, does not permit a proper discussion of it.
7. Before souls are reincarnated, he says in the *Republic*, they journey to the Plain of Oblivion and there they drink from the River of Forgetfulness, thus losing that pure knowledge they reached after they separated from their former bodies (621 a-b).
8. H. Cherniss, "The Relation of the *Timaeus* to Plato's Later Dialogues", *The American Journal of Philology* (1957) LXXVIII, 3, 234.
9. See for instance Proclus in *Tim.*, Diehl, 3, 51, 11.15-21 and Plotinus III, 3, 20 ff..
10. In the *Politicus*, which comes, chronologically, between the *Phaedo* and the *Timaeus*, Plato introduces a rather strange cosmological account that can be summarised as follows:
 - (i) The universe has two alternating cosmic eras: the reign of Kronus, in which time moves from past to future (making that "with which it moves" older), and the reign of Zeus, in which time moves from future to past (making that "with which it moves" younger) (269 a-270 e).
 - (ii) In the reign of Kronus "all men rose up anew into life out of the earth, having no memory of the former things" (272 a); they had no political constitutions (271 e), for God was their shepherd, and fruits "sprang up of themselves out of the ground without man's toil" (272 a).
 - (iii) In the reign of Zeus, God abandons men. "[...] things go well enough in the years immediately after he abandons control, but as time goes on and forgetfulness of God arises in it [the world], the ancient condition of chaos also begins to assert its sway" (273 c-d). ("At last, as this cosmic era draws to its close, this disorder comes to a head. The few good things it produces it corrupts with so gross a taint of evil that it hovers on the very brink of destruction, both of itself and of the creatures in it. The God looks upon it again, he who first set it in order. Beholding it in its troubles, and anxious for it lest it sink racked by storms and confusion, and be dissolved again in the bottomless abyss of unlikeness, he takes control of the helm once more. Its former sickness he heals; what was disrupted in its former revolution under its own impulse he brings back into the way of regularity, and, so ordering and correcting it, he achieves for it its agelessness and deathlessness" — 273 d-e.)

Could this account be integrated in the larger picture I have retrieved from the *Symposium*, the *Phaedo* and the *Timaeus*? In my view, it could; but most Plato scholars do not like combining Plato's doctrines that belong to dialogues written in different periods and so every claim of this kind needs a careful argumentation. Given the limited space I have at my disposal here, I have to leave the cosmology from the *Politicus* aside.

11. As Ricoeur put it, the idea that *meta*-physics and *meta*-phorical discourse correspond to each other in their attempt to “emporte les mots et les choses au-delà..., *meta*... revient à dire que tout l’usage de l’analogie, en apparence neutre au regard de la tradition ‘métaphysique’, reposerait à son insu sur un concept métaphysique d’analogie qui désigne le mouvement de renvoi du visible à l’invisible; la primordiale ‘iconicité’ serait ici contenue: ce qui, fondamentalement, fait ‘image’, ce serait le visible tout entier; c’est sa ressemblance à l’invisible qui le constituerait comme image; conséquemment, la toute première transposition serait le transfert du sens de l’empirie dans le ‘lieu intelligible’” (*La Métaphore vive*, Paris, 1975, 366). This view is to be found in several other philosophers, such as Heidegger, who claims, in *Der Satz vom Grund*, (Pfullingen, 1957, 89) that “das Metaphorische gibt es nur innerhalb der Metaphysik”.
12. A. N. Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology* (New York, 1929), 62.