Plato on Reincarnation

Over the centuries Plato has been interpreted in different ways, often being claimed by readers and commentators as being somehow a forerunner of their particular worldviews. Our age is no exception, and our 'post-enlightenment' intellectual culture often presents Plato as a proto-rationalist, who would have embraced modern scientism had he had the *good fortune* to have been born in the last century or two. To read him this way has required a fair degree of looking past many of his oft-stated positions.

Perhaps the most outstanding example of this is his clear affirmation of the theory of reincarnation – the ideas the soul is on a journey as she appears "becoming situated at different times in different forms" and passing through various earthly lives in which she has the opportunity to unfold her otherwise hidden nature. If we look at what Plato actually says we may find that he is much closer to many Eastern philosophies than to western modernism. This is an opportunity to re-examine Plato and his ancient adherents in the light of this. What is the essential nature of the soul that could lead the tradition to affirm reincarnation teachings? Can we piece together an overview of the twists and turns of the journey? What is the purpose of the journey and is there an end to it, and if so what kind of end?

1 The soul

In the *Timaeus* the main speaker (Timaeus himself) states that there are two primary orders of things –

> "In the first place, therefore, as it appears to me, it is necessary to define what that is 27d
> which is always *real being*, but is without generation; and what that is *which is generated indeed*, or *consists in a state of becoming to be*, but which never *really is*. The former of these indeed is apprehended by *intelligence* in conjunction with *reason*, since it always subsists according to *same*. But the latter is perceived by *opinion* in conjunction with 28a
> *irrational sense*; since it subsists in a state of generation and corruption, and never truly is."

So we have an order of eternal things which are intelligible, and one of temporal order of sensible things. These two are distinct but not separated insofar as the eternal order fashions the temporal – the result is that we have an ordered universe which reflects the intelligibility of the eternal. But an import element of the outflowing power of the eternal is the communication of order by what Plato calls soul – he says that the creator of the manifested universe (the Demiurge) requires the soul to carry out a specific task, for he found,

> "that among the things naturally visible there was nothing, the whole of which, if void of 30b
> intelligence, could ever become more beautiful than the whole of that which is endued with intellect: and at the same time he discovered, that it was impossible for intellect to accede to any being, without the intervention of soul. Hence, as the result of this reasoning, placing intellect in soul and soul in body, he fabricated the universe; that thus it might be a work naturally the most beautiful and the best."

The soul, then, is an intermediary between eternal intellect and temporal manifestation – it is that very position between two orders that gives the soul both its nature and its primary task in the great scheme of reality. One of the obvious differences between the things of the two orders is that those of the first order are entirely unchanging and therefore not subject to death, while those of the second order are subject to change and, therefore, may be subject to death. The *Timaeus*, however, suggests that the soul is more than something that simply is born at one time, lives an earthly life, and then dies after its allotted span of time.

At the point where souls emerge from the intellectual order into the sphere of time the Demiurge, says Timaeus, "distributed souls equal in number to the stars, inserting each in each: 41d
and causing them to ascend as into a vehicle, he pointed out to them the nature of the universe, and announced to them the laws of fate . . ." How the human soul deals with fate, then determines its subsequent condition and the path it must take in order to form the best relation to its eternal causes.

Plato has it that something that changes with time can either be purely mortal – that is something which begins and ends at particular moments – or it can have a secondary immortality: not an eternal thing which just *is*, but a time-bound thing which continues through the whole of unending time in a state of *becoming to be*. In the *Phaedo*, Socrates says, "But it 107c
is just, my friends, to think that if the soul is immortal, it requires our care and attention, not only for the present time, in which we *say* it lives, but likewise with a view to the *whole of time*: and it will now appear, that he who neglects it must subject himself to a most dreadful danger."

2 The cycles of the soul

The *Phaedrus* is the dialogue in which Plato offers us the widest frame for considering the journey of the soul through the cycles of time, as we might expect from its first line: "Whither are you going, my dear Phaedrus, and from whence came you?" The dialogue describes the flight of the soul through the highest celestial regions in the company of the Gods: here it sees the beautiful forms in all their beauty – but its inability to sustain its flight leads it to fall to earth. Finding itself in a body, and having only a dim memory of the forms, it is obliged to live a mundane life, and struggle to recover its pristine vision and its winged condition. Socrates make the following claim:

> But in all these, he who passes his life justly will afterwards obtain a better condition of 248e
> being: but he who acts unjustly will pass into a worse state of existence. For no soul will return to its pristine condition till the expiration of ten thousand years: since it will not recover the use of its wings before this period; except it is the soul of one who has 249a
> philosophized sincerely, or together with philosophy has loved beautiful forms. These, indeed, in the third period of a thousand years, if they have thrice chosen this mode of life in succession, and have thus restored their wings to their natural vigour, shall in the three thousandth year, fly away to their pristine abode. But other souls, having arrived at the end of their first life, shall be judged. And of those who are judged, some proceeding to a subterranean place of judgement, shall there sustain the punishments they have deserved. But others, in consequence of a favourable judgment, being elevated into a certain celestial place, shall pass their time in a manner becoming the life they have lived in a human shape. And in the thousandth year, both the kinds of those who have been judged, returning to the lot and election of a second life, shall each of them receive 249b
> a life agreeable to his desire.

Thus, in highly symbolic language, the span of one round of incarnation – the choosing of a life (of which we learn when we look at the *Republic*), the living of that life, the judgement of the life, the reaping of that life's rewards, and back again to the next choice of life – is said to be a period of one thousand years. The *Phaedrus* seems to be saying that the philosophic approach to the task of living an embodied life leads to a return to a celestial state of consciousness, for the philosophic life is directed towards that very end. On the other hand leading a life which is not consciously directed towards that goal means a wandering through many periods of time.

The living of a just life is bound to the recovery of the original vision of forms. For Plato true education is nothing other than this recovery. In the Meno, when asked how it is we learn, Socrates begins by referring his view of it to Orphic authorities:

> Those who uttered them were of the priests and priestesses, such as made it their business to be able to give a rational account of those things in which they were employed. The same sayings are delivered also by Pindar, and many other of the poets, as many as are divine. The sayings are these: but do you consider with yourself whether you think them true. These persons then tell us that the soul of man is immortal; that sometimes it ends, which is called dying; and that afterwards it begins again, but never is dissolved; and that for this reason we ought to live, throughout our lives, with all sanctity. 81b

He quotes the writings of Pindar which talk of our dealings with Persephone, as queen of the souls in the afterlife, and summarizes the implications of them in these words:

> The soul then being immortal, having been often born, having beheld the things which are here, the things which are in Hades, and all things, there is nothing of which she has not gained the knowledge. No wonder, therefore, that she is able to recollect, with regard to virtue as well as to other things, what formerly she knew. For all things in nature being linked together in relationship, and the soul having heretofore known all things, nothing hinders but that any man, who has recalled to mind, or, according to the common phrase, who has learnt, one thing only, should of himself recover all his ancient knowledge, and find out again all the rest of things; if he has but courage, and faints not in the midst of his researches. *For inquiry and learning is reminiscence all*. 81c

This view of education underpins the second of the arguments for the soul's immortality in the *Phaedo*, for to remember is to bring to mind that which was formerly known, so that if learning is indeed reminiscence, the soul must have had an existence before it was born in the earthly body. Our ability to compare the approximations of ideas in the material world to the stable paradigms of the eternal world rests upon pre-birth experiences:

> If, therefore, receiving this before we were born, we were born possessing it; we both knew prior to our birth, and as soon as we were born, not only *the equal*, *the greater*, and *the lesser*, but everything of this kind: for our discourse at present is not more concerning *the equal* than *the beautiful*, *the good, the just*, and *the holy*, and in one word, about everything which we mark with the signature of *that which is*, both in our interrogations when we interrogate, and in our answers when we reply: so that it is necessary we should have received the science of all these before we were born. 75c

The *Gorgias* deals specifically with the judgement of souls as they pass from their earthly life to that in the afterlife. Socrates says that once the soul has been stripped of its covering of body, its true condition is seen by the judges of the dead. What follows is a period in which the effects of the lived life are given an appropriate recompense. He says that the judge,

> stopping them [the recently dead] contemplates the soul of each, not knowing to whom it belongs; but often seizing the soul of the great king, or of any other king or potentate, he beholds nothing sound in such a soul, but sees that it has been vehemently whipped, and that it is full of scars, through the perjuries and injustice impressed in it by its several actions; that all things in it are distorted through falsehood and arrogance, and that nothing is right, in consequence of its having been educated without truth. He likewise sees that such a soul through power, luxury, and intemperate conduct, is full of inelegance and baseness. On seeing however a soul in this condition, he directly sends it into custody with disgrace; whither when arrived, it will suffer the punishment which it deserves. 524e

On the other hand, sometimes the judge,

> beholding the soul of one who has passed through life with truth, whether it is the soul of a private man, or of any other - but I say, Callicles, especially of a philosopher, who has transacted his own affairs, and has not been engaged in a multiplicity of concerns in life - when this is the case, Rhadamanthus [the judge] is filled with admiration, and dismisses the soul to the islands of the blessed. 525c

The *Gorgias* has already established the parallel between doctors who cure the body of its diseases and judges who cure the soul of its diseases (of which injustice is considered to be the worst). The period the soul experiences either what we consider to be good (the "isles of the blessed") or bad (the "custody and punishments in Tartarus") are limited in duration, and eventually each soul will begin another round of earthly life, in order to make further progress towards its perfection.

The *Republic* ends with a story of Er the Pamphalian who, being taken up after a battle with his other fallen comrades, observes the whole process of judgement, sentencing, and further choices of life being made. He himself, however, was not actually dead and after twelve days, he revived and was able to relate the strange circumstances of the time between what we call death and the next birth. Of particular importance is the description of how we come to be born into our particular life.

He tells of souls about to be born who are required to make their individual choices of life – in the story before them are scattered many possible lives, and each soul is asked to make their choice in turn. But before they do so, they are told by the spokesman of the Fates, what lies before them:

> The speech of the virgin Lachesis, the daughter of Necessity: Souls of a day! The beginning of another period of men of mortal race. The [guardian] daemon shall not receive you as his lot, but you shall choose the daemon: He who draws the first, let him first make choice of a life, to which he must of necessity adhere: Virtue is independent, which everyone shall partake of, more or less, according as he honours or dishonours her: the cause is in him who makes the choice, and God is blameless. 617d

We might note that the daemon is the divine gift which will guide the life so that the choice of life made is worked out – for a life seems to be shaped by our own choices and, perhaps more so, by those of others, both human and of nature. But while the workings of Necessity, the mother of the Fates, are like a bundle of twisted threads, within that seemingly chaotic knot, is the space for human choices to be worked out. This is why "virtue is independent, which every shall partake" so far as she is honoured by the rational soul as it passes through the destined life.

What we seem to have here in the Platonic presentation of the journey of the soul is a great cycle of lives ("3,000 or 10,000 years) in which she moves from a kind of divine consciousness, through a series of lesser states of consciousness (in which forgetting and remembering play the primary part – as we attempt to live with virtue) and back towards that higher vision. Within that great cycle are a number of lesser cycles which Socrates describes as "a journey of a thousand years". This lesser cycle is made up of the choice of life, the living of that life, the judgement of it, the suitable rewards of that life, and then back to the next moment of choosing.

If we go back to the *Timaeus*, with its presentation of the soul as the carrier of intellect *within* the manifested cosmos, we might then consider that the very strange path we lead, struggling with forgetfulness and memory, attempting to honour virtue, experiencing the heights and depths of the cosmos – the heights and depths of consciousness, if you like – are the very means by which the Demiurge purpose given to souls is worked out.

Platonism sees this purpose of the soul as really only possible if it has the time to go through this great sweep of life – more or less impossible if we think that we have a few decades to unfold our true nature. In this way, the Platonic tradition is set apart from exoteric monotheistic religions, and from modern materialistic and mechanical theories which cannot see beyond the boundaries of the earthly life.