

A METAPHOR IN PLATO: 'RUNNING AWAY' AND 'STAYING BEHIND' IN THE *PHAEDO* AND THE *TIMAEUS*

In an earlier article I sought to analyse the metaphor of withdrawal in the last argument of Plato's *Phaedo* for the immortality of the soul.¹ The key to the metaphor lies, I believe, in recognizing the paradox that in terms of Plato's metaphor something *stays as it is*, for example continues to be fire and to be hot, or to be cold and to be snow, by *running away*. Plato's argument is that fire will either 'run away', i.e. it will escape the onslaught of cold, and so *continue* to be fire, or else it will perish. For in terms of Plato's metaphor if something which is characterized essentially by one of a pair of opposites, in the way that soul is, were to 'stay behind' then it would have to 'accept' the opposite of the form by which it is characterized, and that it cannot do. Fire cannot be cold. Snow cannot be hot. The soul cannot be dead.

A similar form of metaphor occurs twice in the *Timaeus*.

(i)

Fire and water can properly be called only 'such', not 'this'. They 'flee from and cannot abide the appellation of "this" or "that" or any expression that designates them as having a stable or permanent existence', 49 E 2–4: *φεύγει γὰρ οὐχ ὑπομένον τὴν τοῦ 'τόδε' καὶ 'τούτο' . . . καὶ πᾶσαν ὅση μόνιμα ὥς ὄντα αὐτὰ ἐνδείκνυται φάσις*.

The use of the metaphor is in part determined here by the notion of stability (*μόνιμα*) attaching to the description of something as 'this'. But the principal point remains that fire and water *stay as they are* by *running away*. If they are to *stay as they are* (i.e. if they are to continue to be 'such' and not 'this', 49 E 4–7), then in terms of the metaphor they must refuse to *stay where* they are: *φεύγει . . . οὐχ ὑπομένον*.

So too in the *Phaedo*, if fire is to remain fire it must 'run away'. It cannot 'stay behind' and 'accept' cold, for it would then be fire and cold, which is impossible.²

The way to look at it is evidently that if the inhabitants of Alsace are attacked by the Germans and wish to remain French (assuming they were French to start with), then they must run away. Otherwise, they will be overrun by the enemy,

¹ CQ N.S. 17 (1967), 198–231, and 18 (1968), 95–106. I am grateful for their criticism of the present note to Mme F. Zaslowski and to Dr. S.V. Keeling.

² For simplicity's sake, I attach the relevant expression of the metaphor to fire, which is how the metaphor is employed at 103 D 10, cf. 'what cannot be cooled' 106 A 8. It is applied also to snow, 103 D 5, or 'what cannot be hot', 106 A 3, to 'the large in us', 102 D 7, 'the small in us or any other of the opposites', 102 E 6–8, to 'things which are not themselves opposites, but which always possess the opposites', 104 B 7–9, cf. C 7–9, to 'three', 104 C 1, and

finally to soul, 105 D–E, 106 B–E.

The expression of the metaphor varies. *Φεύγειν καὶ ὑπεκχωρεῖν* is used at 102 D 9. Elsewhere, to express the same point, Plato uses *ὑπεκχωρεῖν* alone, 103 D 8, 104 C 1, 106 E 7, *ἀπέρχεσθαι* 103 A 1, *ὑπεξίεναι* 103 D 11, 106 A 4, and *ἀπὶόν* or *ἀπελθὼν οἴχεσθαι* 106 A 10, C 5, E 7. *ὑπομένειν* joined with *δέχεσθαι* occurs at 102 E 2, E 3–4, 106 A 5–6. Elsewhere, to express the same point, Plato uses *ὑπομένειν* alone at 104 C 2–3, C 7, C 8, and *δέχεσθαι* or *προσδέχεσθαι* alone at 102 D 8, 103 D 6, D 11–12, 104 B 8, B 9, throughout 104 E to 105 E, and at 106 A 6, B 4, D 3, D 4.

and they will 'perish', whether literally or at least in the sense that they will have to give up being French and become Germans instead. What they cannot do is 'stay behind' and be Frenchmen and Germans at the same time.

So too, fire cannot 'stay behind' and be cold in the *Phaedo*, nor can it 'stay behind' and be called 'this' or 'that' in the *Timaeus*. In either case, if it is to continue to be as it is, it must 'run away'.

The additional nuance in the *Timaeus* is that the avoidance of 'stability', and the need to 'run away', is not, so to speak, a temporary phenomenon, as it is in the *Phaedo*. In the *Phaedo* fire has to 'run away' only when it is attacked by what is cold (προσιώντος τοῦ ψυχροῦ, 103 D 10). But in the *Timaeus* fire and the like 'never appear the same' (οὐδέποτε τῶν αὐτῶν ἐκάστων φανταζομένων, 49 C 7–D 1). They are, so to speak, always 'on the run'. They are always slipping beyond our grasp (cf. ὑπεξέρχεται and ὑπεξίέναι in a similar context in the *Cratylus*, 439 D–E).³

(ii)

The second use of the same imagery occurs a few pages later in the *Timaeus*, where Plato describes the transformation of the main cosmic masses in terms of their resolution into elemental triangles.

When fire is surrounded by air, or air by water, then either body is broken down into its elemental triangles, which will recombine as air or as water, unless in the process of this transformation they are attacked by bodies of another kind. In that case the process of resolution continues, and there are two possibilities.

1. The triangles 'escape to join their kindred': ἐκφύγη πρὸς τὸ συγγενές.

2. Alternatively, they are 'defeated, and recombining to form a body of the same kind as that of the victor, they stay behind and take up their abode with him': . . . ἢ νικηθέντα, ἐν ἐκ πολλῶν ὁμοίων τῷ κρατήσαντι γενόμενον, αὐτοῦ σύνουκον μένῃ.⁴

Again the metaphor has a particular relevance to the context, since the fire which 'runs away to join its like' was already on the way to becoming, or had become, air and must therefore literally move back to a different area of the cosmos if it regains its identity as fire.

But the point of the image of withdrawal is essentially the same here as in the *Phaedo*. If fire is to re-establish its identity as fire, it will 'run away', just as in the *Phaedo* fire will 'run away' if it is to remain fire.

The second part of the metaphor is not quite the same in the *Phaedo* and in the *Timaeus*.

³ Taylor, *Commentary*, p. 317, sees a legal metaphor in the sentence I have quoted: 'they will not face a trial but evade the issue of an impeachment of being a this or a that . . . or any other indictment of permanence'. But φάσις (from φαίνεω) and ἐνδείξις, the terms which Taylor principally relies upon, describe procedures which are radically distinct: see A.R.W. Harrison, *The Law of Athens* ii.218 ff., and Lipsius, *Attische Recht* ii.309 ff., cf. especially Demosthenes 58.10–11, where both terms appear. It is

difficult therefore to see that the combination of the two terms, in ἐνδείκνυται φάσις, would have any very definite legal meaning. As for the notion that fire and water agree to 'face a trial', the verb which Taylor himself cites is not ὑπο- but παραμενεῖν. I conclude that the legal flavour, if present at all, is very diluted.

⁴ *Tim.* 57 A 7–B 7: I follow Cornford's interpretation of this tricky passage, *Plato's Cosmology*, pp. 227–8.

1. In the *Phaedo*, fire *cannot* 'stay behind': for Plato's assumption is that if it did so it would have to 'accept' cold, which it cannot do 'while still being fire'.
2. In the *Timaeus*, fire *can* 'stay' where it is: but if it does so then it will cease to be fire.

For the point is that if the triangles of fire are 'defeated' they will 'stay with the victor and live in his house' or perhaps 'occupy the same territory' (αὐτοῦ σύνουκον μένῃ), but only because they will have changed their nature 'to become the same kind of thing as he is' (ὅμοιον τῷ κρατήσαντι γενόμενον).

In effect, therefore, the alternative of 'running away' and 'remaining' in the *Timaeus* is equivalent to the alternative of 'running away' and 'perishing' in the *Phaedo*. Plato's meaning, in both places, is that if fire 'runs away' it will continue to be fire, and that otherwise it will cease to be so.

What makes the situation similar is that in both the *Phaedo* and the *Timaeus* if fire is the subject of the metaphor then it cannot hope to be victorious. Escape is the only means by which fire can continue to be fire. In the *Phaedo*, if fire does not escape it will perish. In the *Timaeus*, if fire does not escape, it will have to stay with the victor, and lose its identity by 'becoming the same kind of thing as he is'.

The inhabitants of Alsace cannot hope to defeat the Germans. There is no possibility even of 'resistance', whereby they might hope to continue to be French while living under German domination. Escape or exile (both meanings are perhaps present in *φεύγω*) is their only means of remaining French. In the terms of the *Timaeus*, if they stay behind and share their territory with the victor, then they will be able to do so only at the cost of 'becoming the same as he is'.

(iii)

The point to appreciate, in these two passages of the *Timaeus* as in the *Phaedo*, is that Plato does not follow the notion which is expressed, for example, later in the *Timaeus*, to the effect that a balanced process of accretion and secretion 'will allow any part of the body to stay the same as it is, safe and sound and healthy', 82 B 4–5: . . . ἐάσει τὰντὸν ὃν αὐτῷ σῶν καὶ ὑγιὲς μένειν.

In the *Phaedo*, if snow is to be 'safe and sound and unmelted' (σῶς καὶ ἀττηκτος) when heat is brought towards it, and if the 'immortal part' of man, his soul, is to be 'safe and sound and inextinguishable' (σῶν καὶ ἀδιάφθορον) when faced with death, then they cannot be so by *staying where they are*. They can be so, only by *running away*, by 'getting out of the way of' heat or death (ὑπεξίεναι, ὑπεκχωρεῖν 106 A and E).

In the *Phaedo*, as in the two earlier passages of the *Timaeus*, the point is that in order to stay as it is a thing must *run away*. It cannot *stay behind* and at the same time continue to be what it is.