

## ZEUS AND PHILOSOPHY IN THE MYTH OF PLATO'S *PHAEDRUS*

The matter which I wish to discuss is a discrepancy between two accounts of the origin of the philosopher in the myth of Plato's *Phaedrus*. Before their incarnation the souls of all humans are imagined as having enjoyed the vision of reality, but not all in the same company or to the same degree. For, in the first place, the souls are distributed among the companies that severally follow eleven different gods, 247 a–b, a distribution which is regarded as important for the type of character an embodied soul will subsequently have, 252 d. In the second place, some souls are more successful than others in following their god, and accordingly they manage to see more of reality than do the others, and on this variation depends the sort of life each soul will subsequently have on earth, 248 d–e. And here arises the problem about the philosopher, corresponding to the two differences of company and degree in the soul's pre-natal vision of reality. For, in the one account, a lover whose soul was formerly in the company of Zeus will seek as his beloved someone who resembles the lover and his god, and will accordingly seek someone who is 'by nature philosophic and a leader', *φιλόσοφός τε καὶ ἡγεμονικὸς τὴν φύσιν* (252 e). Apparently, according to this account, a capacity for philosophy depends upon the identity of the god one followed: each man lives honouring and imitating to the best of his ability the god in whose company he was, 252 d; the lover in question is a follower of Zeus; the character he sees in his beloved must be that which he honours and imitates in his god, Zeus; the lover, then, must be of a similar character, philosophic and a leader. And since other characteristics are associated with other gods, it would appear that only the follower of Zeus can be a philosopher. But, in the other account, no reference is made to followers of any particular god, and the only criterion for whether a soul is born as a philosopher in its first incarnation is whether it has had a sufficiently clear view of reality; if not, it will be born into one of a further eight sorts of life, graded from king down to tyrant, 248 d–e.

Here, then, is a puzzle. If the followers of Zeus alone can become philosophers, we must assume that these souls alone had, before their downfall, a clear enough view of reality, and that the followers of Apollo and Hera and Ares and the others had more limited vision. But this hardly accords with 248 c, where a soul which follows any god with success is guaranteed security. If no distinction of this sort operates for souls who successfully avoid incarnation, why should it operate for souls who fail to maintain the sight of reality, and accordingly have to endure birth as a human being? Further, human understanding depends upon abstraction of general ideas from the mass of particular perceptions, and this is recollection of what the soul saw when 'it journeyed with god', *συμπορευθεῖσα θεῷ*; the philosopher, then, is the man who constantly recalls that reality, 249 c. Everything here implies that all gods are, in this respect, equal, and that Zeus' followers have no monopoly on philosophy. On the other hand, if the above is true – and it certainly seems fundamental to the myth's combination of recollection and *eros* –, then what does Plato mean by suggesting that the follower of Zeus will seek a person of philosophic nature for his beloved?

To decide which of these accounts is preferable, let us assume first that only the souls who were in Zeus' train can become philosophers, and let us see how this assumption fits in with the rest of the text. Since philosophic love is restricted in this

way, love felt by followers of Ares, Hera, Apollo and the others cannot be philosophic, but must be inferior. This is the line taken by Hackforth, who concludes from 252c–253c that a man may be a true lover without being a philosopher, the latter being a follower of Zeus. ‘Plato seems strongly inclined to confine the ideal *ἔρως* – the means of regrowing the soul’s wings – to a pair jointly pursuing the philosophic life – the life which he has most fully delineated in *Rep.* VI–VII. It is in our present section that he shows signs of resisting this inclination. . . We can hardly doubt that Plato sees in such pairs [e.g. followers of Ares] an inferior type of love to the former, though he does admire them’.<sup>1</sup> And in support he notes that the designation of the followers of Hera as *βασιλικοί* recalls the ranking of a *βασιλεὺς ἔννομος* in second place, below the philosopher, in the order of lives at 248 d.<sup>2</sup> Support may also be found in Plato’s ensuing description of the process of falling in love and of the formation of a love relationship. Two examples are given, the one a love which leads to a life of philosophy, 256a, and the other a love which leads to a life which is unphilosophic but devoted to honour, and is marred by an occasional lapse into carnal sexuality, 256c. The first of these results in an ideal life, a victory in one of the three truly Olympic bouts, *τῶν τριῶν παλαισμάτων τῶν ὡς ἀληθῶς Ὀλυμπιακῶν ἐν νενικήκασιν* (256b): and here the reference has been taken to suggest that the winners are followers of Olympian Zeus, reinforcing the restriction of philosophy to followers of Zeus.<sup>3</sup> The second, inferior but still valuable life of love, because it is *φιλότιμος* seems to relate to the honour-loving man of *Rep.* 8 as the first, ideal life corresponds to the philosopher of *Rep.* 6–7; but in the *Phaedrus* it is a follower of Zeus who is *φιλόσοφός τε καὶ ἡγεμονικὸς τὴν φύσιν* – words which seem peculiarly applicable to the philosopher-rulers of the *Republic*; hence, if the parallelism between the two dialogues is as firm as it seems to be, the honour-loving lovers of the *Phaedrus* should be men of the second order, followers not of Zeus but of other gods. In this way the concept of the follower of Zeus as the true philosophic lover ties in with the description of the two types of love as well as with the start at least of the grades of existence allocated to souls at their first incarnation.

However, this unity, attractive as it is, is only achieved at the expense of ignoring a pointer at 253c. Here we are reminded that what we have just had described to us is the devotion of true lovers to an aim, their *προθυμία*, with an indication of the initiation which follows if they achieve their objective in the way described, *τελετή*, *εἰάν γε διαπράξωνται ὃ προθυμοῦνται ἢ λέγω*. But what precedes is the account of how lovers seek their beloved, each according to the character he derives from his special god, and how they seek to make themselves and their beloved as like as possible to their god. In this account there is no suggestion that one god alone will be responsible for true love, while the others will produce an inferior, though admirable, brand. The different characteristic ways in which a lover will relate to his beloved are noted as different, not as graded in merit, and all are accommodated finally under the one description, *προθυμία τῶν ὡς ἀληθῶς ἐρώτων*. Surely we ought to conclude that the subsequent distinction between true, philosophic lovers and

<sup>1</sup> R. Hackforth, *Plato's Phaedrus* (Cambridge, 1952), p. 101. See also W. H. Thompson, *The Phaedrus of Plato* (London, 1868), p. 79, and J. M. Rist, *Eros and Psyche* (Toronto, 1964), p. 19: ‘In this passage, Plato speaks also of the “followers” of other gods: of Hera, Ares, and Apollo. That such persons are inferior to the “followers” of Zeus is certain. They are not philosophers, perhaps they are deficient intellectually, but they have practised *ὁμοίωσις θεῷ* as far as their inferior potentialities allow.’ Rist suggests that, in the *Republic*, the guardians may be followers of Zeus, the *ἐπίκουροι* of Ares or of Hera, and ‘even the artisans in the Ideal Republic are possibly the followers of some lesser divinity’.

<sup>2</sup> op. cit. p. 100 n. 3.

honour-loving lovers is not based on the distinction between Zeus and the other gods, but on the way couples who are characterised by any of the gods, including Zeus, develop their love and convert it into a way of life. There is no reason why some pairs of lovers whose particular god is, say, Apollo, should not successfully convert their love into a life of true philosophy, while some pairs of lovers under the aegis of Zeus fail to do this and rather convert their love into a life devoted to honour.

The idea that true, philosophic lovers are drawn only from the ranks of persons whose souls are followers of Zeus is not in harmony with the detail or the general run of the argument. If the alternative account of the origin of philosophy is accepted, we have a basic scheme as follows: *ἔρως* is that part of the divinely inspired excitement, felt by the soul on recollecting forms, which is typically concerned with one form in particular, namely beauty, 249d–e. Lovers of beauty, whose memory is strong enough to lift them beyond a beastly response, find in the image of beauty an overwhelming and life-transforming stimulus to further recollections; among these are followers of Zeus and of other gods, 252c–253c. Any of these who pursues the matter properly may adopt a life of philosophy, *ἐὰν . . . εἰς τεταγμένην τε δίαίταν καὶ φιλοσοφίαν νικήσῃ τὰ βελτίω τῆς διανοίας ἀγαρόντα* (256a); that is, presumably, they learn to follow the ascending road of ever increasing abstraction of reality from particulars, variously described in *Rep.* 6–7 and *Symposium* 210a–212a. They will then become the few among the few, those who are capable of being stirred by images of other forms like justice and temperance, 250a–b; and if they can achieve three such lives in succession, they will be the true philosophers of 249a.

Where in this scheme does the philosophic nature of the follower of Zeus fit in? It seems to me that it cannot be accommodated without friction, if *φιλόσοφος τὴν φύσιν* is to bear the full weight that one would expect in the context of the myth, for the reasons expounded above. The friction, slight as it is, would remain whatever word Plato used to denote interest in intellectual activity, although it could perhaps have escaped notice altogether if some less committal word like *φιλομαθής* had been used. For Plato has overlaid his basic account of love and philosophy with a scheme for interpreting character differences, and this overlay is irredeemably, though slightly, incompatible. Being Plato he would not, one assumes, adopt such a course without good reason. To find what this is we should consider how the passage connecting Zeus with philosophy functions in the whole account.

The erotic speeches of the *Phaedrus* are all invitations, attempts to persuade a youth to accept the courtship of an older man. As such they lay stress on how the youth may expect to be treated by the other, and on what of lasting value he may hope to derive from entering the relationship. The angle from which love is discussed in Socrates' second speech is immediately determined by the place of the speech in this sequence, but there is more to it than that. Plato's general view of the nature of love is that it is essentially appetitive, a desire to obtain what one lacks.<sup>4</sup> He needs to explain

<sup>3</sup> G. De Vries, *Commentary on the Phaedrus of Plato* (Amsterdam, 1969), ad loc.; Thompson, ad loc.

<sup>4</sup> 'Appetitive' is hard to improve on. It has what may seem to be weaknesses, suggesting essential affinity with the appetitive part of the tripartite soul, and making the Platonic lover sound self-seeking. This he must of course be, in view of the fundamental analysis of *eros* as lack in *Symposium* 200a ff., and, rightly seen, this is one of the strengths of Plato's theory, if he can satisfactorily explain the procreative and benevolent aspects. Further, *eros* cannot be felt except by a mortal, a compound of body and *psyche*, and as such it is intimately concerned with sexual desires, which in *Republic* 4 Plato confines to the epithymetic part of the *psyche*; all men are 'fertile' both in body and in soul, *Symp.* 206c. This, too, is a strength, provided that some mechanism of sublimation or redirection of energy is available. The term 'appetitive', then, captures some of the paradoxes of *eros*.

how an appetitive drive can at the same time exhibit other characteristics necessary for his theory to give a comprehensive account of the phenomena. In particular he needs to explain how love may be procreative, benevolent and reciprocal. In the *Symposium*, Diotima's speech explores the relationship between the appetitive and the procreative aspects of love, but has little to say of the benevolence of lover towards loved. The *Phaedrus*, on the other hand, while virtually silent on procreation, shows how appetitive *eros* may be both reciprocal and benevolent. It is to explain the benevolence of *eros* that Plato invokes the aid of Zeus.<sup>5</sup>

A full treatment of the origin of the idea that variations of temperament are explicable in terms of the influence of various deities, and where Plato stands in relation to the introduction of the idea to Greece, belongs to a different inquiry<sup>6</sup> from the present one, which is concerned with determining the role the idea has in the *Phaedrus*. People in love, let us say, do feel strongly impelled to promote the welfare of their partner; but in Plato's theory the beloved is the image of beauty which is the true source of the lover's passion. How then, in Plato's theory, is desire for the partner's welfare intelligible? Here the gods come in. The lover cannot make the beloved more beautiful directly – how could he bestow what he himself does not possess? – but he can benefit him by as it were recreating in his relationship with his beloved the conditions under which he responds to the sight of reality. The variety of human characteristics, even when reduced to a restricted range of ideal types, ensures that there is a plurality of ways in which even an unchanging reality may be experienced; for all their uniformity of breeding and upbringing, perhaps the philosopher-kings themselves, when emerging from the cave, react to the true sunlight in different ways. In terms of the *Phaedrus* myth, Plato expresses this fundamental variety of responses by having the souls enjoy their pre-natal glimpse of true being in the company of different gods, each of whom is the personification of one of the several main types of ideal humanity.<sup>7</sup> And now, when the lover sees his beloved, and feels the forgotten response to Beauty itself stirring in him, he reacts in his own characteristic way, the way of his own particular god. Because a god took him to the vision of Beauty in the past, and now the beloved, who images Beauty, and is himself of similar character to the god, is taking him there again, so the lover regards his beloved not only as the embodiment of the Beauty to which he aspires, but as the medium through which he may attain it. The beloved is an image of the guiding god. His presence, then, inspires the lover to marvellous achievements of recovery of the lost experience and of self-knowledge, and the lover in turn can help his beloved, who is after all of the same character as himself, to become more like the god who symbolises the best in their type. It is because the beloved is an image of the god that the lover relates to him as a person, bestowing upon him

<sup>5</sup> *Phaedrus* 252e has of course been used before by scholars to exemplify a 'down-flowing' *eros* into which self-seeking *eros* is transformed, see Rist, op. cit. p. 36, with reference to A. H. Armstrong, *Downside Review* (1961), p. 108. My version is, I believe, closer to Plato's intention in that it distinguishes between the procreative or creative aspects on the one hand, and the benevolent on the other, and also in that it recognises the importance of a range of ideal human types. Thus it follows closely the emphasis of the dialogues.

<sup>6</sup> Despite the difficulty of reconciling Plato's gods with the planets, astrology looks a likely source. According to W. Capelle, *Hermes* 60 (1925), 373 ff., astrological influences before Plato occur in Hippocrates *Regimen* 4. 89 (medical prognosis from dreams), Democritus, DK 55A86 (Babylonian star-triad) and Ctesias in Nicolaus of Damascus fr. 8 ff. (political forecasts).

<sup>7</sup> By 'personification' (and 'symbolises' below) I do not mean to imply that Plato regards his gods as fictions useful for summing up facts of human psychology, and not as existing beings. But Greek gods traditionally have their own individuality besides presiding over important features of human psychology and society, and Plato writes in this tradition.

gratitude amounting to worship, and in his own search to find reality helping his guide to become able to do the same. The affinity of character of lover and beloved, and the theory that this is due to devotion to one and the same god, is absolutely essential if the lover is to benefit the beloved, for in recollecting the forms, experienced as they were in a particular way, he advances in self-knowledge and in likeness to his god. And in doing so he *has* something with which he might endow his beloved, together with a motive for so doing which does not run counter to his 'appetitive' love and does not require that love to change direction and flow back in a mysterious emanation. For the more like the guiding god the beloved becomes, the more clearly is the situation of the pre-natal vision restored, and the more effectively proceeds the two-fold drive towards understanding of self and reality.

The gods, then, are the instruments which Plato uses to explain why, in his theory of appetitive *eros*, the lover feels goodwill for his beloved. With broad strokes, without perhaps much care for detail, Plato simply suggests character differences in the followers of different gods: Ares' followers will be quick to feel dishonour, Zeus' will be capable of wise leadership, Hera's will be kingly. He feels he has done enough to establish his point without going into detail with these gods, and does not even go so far as this with the rest, only one of whom, Apollo, is named. Probably he had no system of character types and related gods worked out in detail, but thought the principle sound enough for the purpose I suggest he had in mind. But Zeus is not simply one of the gods, but the god who above all rules the world wisely, *διακοσμῶν πάντα καὶ ἐπιμελούμενος* (246e), so that when the lover whom Socrates impersonates asserts encouragingly<sup>8</sup> that he and his beloved are followers of Zeus, 250b, and that such a lover will seek someone for his beloved who is *φιλόσοφός τε καὶ ἡγεμονικὸς τὴν φύσιν* (252e), then the friction referred to occurs. If Plato had chosen any other god but Zeus, there would have been no disparity and the two schemes would have fitted without detectable joining.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> The perfect appropriateness of this interpretation of *ἡμεῖς*, 250b, to the rhetorical context renders unnecessary any speculation as to the patron gods of Socrates, Plato or Phaedrus. For the speech is addressed to a handsome youth, as we are reminded both at beginning and at end, and if we might imagine such a one being stirred by the ideas he has heard, no better stimulus could be found to urge him on to a life of philosophic love than the hint that he has shared experiences in the past with his admirer, that he has a natural capacity for philosophy, and that – since a wrong choice costs nine thousand years of senseless wandering, 257a – he is in his first incarnation, and may well have the forms handy for recollection, cf. 248e–249a, 251a.

<sup>9</sup> I wish to express my gratitude to Dr H. Gottschalk of Leeds University for the benefit of his criticism on a draft of this essay.