Synesis, v. 10, n. 2, p. 76-85, ago/dez 2018, ISSN 1984-6754

DOES THE PHAEDO OR PLATONISM IN GENERAL ENTAIL A LIFE-DENYING POSITION?*

O FÉDON OU O PLATONISMO EM GERAL IMPLICAM UMA NEGAÇÃO DA VIDA?

GUILHERME DOMINGUES DA MOTTA**
PONTIFÍCIA UNIVERSIDADE CATÓLICA DO RIO DE JANEIRO, BRASIL

Abstract: The *Phaedo* contains a number of statements which could suggest that Platonism entails a life-denying position. Such an interpretation, however, can only be uphold by reading these statements out of their proper context and also by ignoring a number of elements present in other Platonic dialogues. The first step toward solving this problem is to stress that all such statements concern only the philosopher – a very special figure, whose ultimate model is Socrates. This is a character that has undergone a process of "initiation" in which he acquired the capacity to recognize the existence of the highest objects of knowledge, as well as to enjoy the pleasure of their contemplation. Given that "death" in the *Phaedo* means only the separation of body and soul, then such separation constitutes the attainment of a longed for state of continuous contemplation. It will then be clear that Platonism does not deny life, but rather affirms it, both in its bodily and spiritual dimensions[1].

Keywords: Plato, *Phaedo*, denial of life, pleasure.

Resumo: O *Fédon* contém uma série de asserções que poderiam sugerir que o platonismo está comprometido com a negação da vida. Tal interpretação, porém, só pode ser sustentada quando se leem essas asserções fora de contexto e também quando se ignora uma série de elementos presentes em outros diálogos platônicos. O primeiro passo para resolver esse problema consiste em sublinhar que tais asserções dizem respeito apenas ao filósofo – uma figura especialíssima, cujo paradigma máximo é Sócrates. Esta é uma personagem que passou por um processo de "iniciação" no qual ela adquiriu a capacidade de reconhecer a existência dos objetos de conhecimento mais altos que há e de gozar do prazer de sua contemplação. Dado que "morte" no *Fédon* significa simplesmente a separação de corpo e alma, então tal separação constitui a conquista de um estado de contemplação contínua. Ficará, então, claro que o platonismo não nega a vida, mas, pelo contrário, afirma-a, tanto nas suas dimensões corporais quanto espirituais.

Palavras-chave: Platão, *Fédon*, negação da vida, prazer.

* Artigo recebido em 15/11/2018 e aprovado para publicação pelo Conselho Editorial em 10/12/2018.
** Doutor em Filosofia pela Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro, Brasil. Professor da Universidade Católica de Petrópolis e da Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro. Currículo lattes: http://lattes.cnpq.br/3492225418142984. E-mail: gmotta427@gmail.com
[1] This paper is the modified and translated version of an article issued on Archai, nº 17, may-aug., 2016 and presented on *XI Symposium Platonicum – Plato's* Phaedo , 2016.

Socrates'[2] many statements in the *Phaedo* (64a; 66a-c; 67d; 68a-c; 80d-81a; 95b-c; 118a) which convey the idea that death is preferable to life could lead to the wrong belief – as indeed happened[3] – that Plato's philosophy is committed to a morbid denial of life. In this paper, I will advocate that such an interpretation is deeply flawed and can only be upheld if one systematically removes Socrates' assertions from their natural context.

Aiming at the correct contextualization of Socrates' statements about death in the *Phaedo*, first of all we must bear in mind that they are made by none other than Socrates. This is of utmost importance since Socrates is a very special character, one that was carefully constructed by Plato to be the paradigm of the real philosopher.

A second crucial point is that each and every time Socrates claims that death might be preferable to life, he is clearly talking about the philosopher and not anyone else's life.

Thirdly, it must also be taken into account what Socrates has to say about life and its pleasures; and it is also advisable to consider how Plato depicts Socrates actually experiencing such pleasures.

My aim in this paper is to show that the combined consideration of these three points does at least attenuate the force of Socrates' claims that death might be preferable to life in a way that the view that Platonism is a life-denying philosophy is also challenged.

Given the distinctive way Socrates is portrayed in the *Phaedo*, even if by a huge struck of misfortune all other platonic dialogues were now lost, the *Phaedo* alone could provide us with more than enough information to reconstruct this key platonic figure. *Phaedo*'s Socrates states (69c-d) that he devoted his whole life to philosophy and, as such, he thinks of himself as an initiated (*telesménos*) and someone who is inspired (*bákkhoi*).

The *Symposium* also bears witness to the initiation process that Socrates went through and which finally turned him into who he is. The final part of Diotima's speech in this dialogue (*Smp.* 209e-212c), where the famous "ladder of love" is presented, depicts the process that an initiate in philosophy goes through. Even though this passage does not explicitly mention Socrates, the reference (*Smp.* 207a-c) to the many encounters he claims to have had with the priestess seems to imply that he went through a much similar process,

[2] It is advisable to notice that every time I mention Socrates in this paper I am referring to the character of Plato's dialogues, never the historical man.
[3] A view which, despite its ambiguity regarding Socrates, found a great supporter in Nietzsche (2001; 1999; 1998). See Lane (2001).

having been guided, in fact, by Diotima herself. In sum, Plato seems to want his readers to see Socrates – the very personification of philosophy – as an initiate[4].

If we turn to the *Phaedrus* (249c-253c), we will find the thesis that philosophy is the highest form of inspiration, and that it even takes the shape of a love euphoria which is irresistibly awakened in the face of its proper object. Well, according to what Socrates states about himself in *Phaedo* 69c-d, all that the *Phaedrus* says on philosophy as a kind of love euphoria seems to apply to him, Socrates, as well.

For all that has been said, one thing should already be clear: Socrates is far from being an ordinary man. Quite on the contrary, he is an extraordinary man, *erotic*, atypical, inspired, an initiate prone to long periods of self-absorption[5].

The referred eroticism of Socrates constitutes a key element to understand this fundamental character. In the part of the *Symposium* (209e-212c) where Diotima describes the initiate's ascent toward the Form of Beauty, this initiate is possessed by a unique kind of *éros*, and undergoes a process which the dialogue describes in an exceedingly elliptic fashion.

Diotima's account (*Smp.* 210a) of the erotic ascent is equivalent to the dialectical ascent toward the Form of Beauty: both are driven by *éros* and are dependent on the initiate having a "good guide". In this context, to be driven by *éros* means to be guided by a desire for the highest objects of knowledge, i.e., the Forms, or, in the *Symposium*'s specific case, to be driven by the Form of Beauty. However, the *Symposium* does not specify which process is actually capable of making someone come to desire such objects.

It seems to me that two conditions must be met before one achieves the kind of desire described in Diotima's final and crucial words. Before one even desires to know the Forms, one needs (1) to be aware that they exist and also one must (2) recognize the value of knowing them. But to be aware that such objects exist and to acknowledge their value depend on a previously traveled philosophical path and on the acquisition of a specific ability – *dýnamis* –[6].

That is to say that the *éros* described in Diotima's Greater Mysteries – one that can be correctly called "philosophical *éros*"[7] – depends on the obtainment of a very specific

[4] We can find the characterization of philosophy as a kind of "philosophical mania" which leads to an ecstatic state similar to that of an initiate in *R.* 490a-b, *Phdr.* 249c-253c and *Smp.* 218b. See Macpherran (2006, p. 244-260).
[5] See *Smp.* 175a-d; 220c-d.
[6] See Motta (2013, p. 62-65).
[7] Concerning the word "éros", see Kahn (1996).

dýnamis, one that entails an unstoppable desire for the good discovered in the objects which came to be known and whose value is then acknowledged. This is why the philosophical path is so many times described by Plato as the analogue of an initiation; just like the initiate who undergoes a complete conversion, the one who treads the philosophical path at some point cannot fail to see things from a completely new perspective.

It is only in the *Republic* that we are offered a less elliptic approach to the philosopher's educational process which culminates in that desire. There (*R.* 525a-535a) we are told that this process depends on selecting the appropriate natures and also on extensive training in mathematical disciplines and dialectic. But it is not surprising that the same work (*R.* 518c-d) also treats the obtainment of a philosophical *dýnamis* as a total conversion.

This conversion, which provides the intellect with the ability to effectively "see" objects that it previously could not "see", thus making the soul apt to desire them, is heavily dependent on a philosophical education. It seems correct to assume that at a given moment Socrates went through a process at least analogous to this one, having acquired the "philosophical *éros*" and having irreversibly become an *erotic man*, that is, someone filled with an unstoppable desire for the highest objects of knowledge.

The use of a vocabulary of desire to refer to the practice of philosophy suggests that the proper objects of philosophy, the objects that are perceived only through pure thinking, occupy the summit of the philosopher's hierarchy of values[8].

But there is something else which would not be futile to consider regarding the highest objects of knowledge. On the one hand, such objects occupy the summit of the philosopher's hierarchy of values, but, on the other hand, they constitute a source of pleasure to him. On this particular, in the *Republic* (580d) Plato makes Socrates asserts that if the soul has three parts, there must also be three forms of pleasure (*hedonê*) and of desire (*epithymía*). He also goes on (*R.* 580d-587b) to build an elaborate defense of the idea that the very special pleasure inherent to philosophical life is the greatest there is[9].

Now, as every desire is directed to good, it is only natural for the philosopher's desire to be inclined toward the objects he considers to be among the greatest goods[10] and,

[8] There is much discussion regarding the alleged superiority of the pleasures that stem from philosophical life over all other pleasures. On this issue, see Lefebvre (2011, p. 134-138); Gosling & Taylor (1982, p. 97-128); Santas (2006, p. 318).
[9] On the superiority of intellectual pleasures, see also *Phd.* 114e.
[10] On this point, see also a famous passage of the *Republic* (485d) on the channeling of desires. For an interpretation of this passage, see Kahn (1996, p. 276-281).

as I believe I can now add, the greatest pleasures. But this does not mean that other things which are in some way good and sources of pleasures are not also desired. And among these there are goods which entail sensory pleasures related to "necessary desires"[11].

Given all this, since death in the context of the *Phaedo* (66a-67b) means the separation of body and soul, it amounts to a liberation from the last hindrances to a full and continued enjoyment of the greatest goods[12], namely, the ones related to pure thinking. In that sense, and only in that sense, death would be preferable to life. Even so, it is necessary to point out that this holds good only to those who share with Socrates all the above mentioned features, namely, being a true philosopher – someone who went through a radical conversion that is much like an initiation, having gained the capacity to acknowledge the existence of the highest objects of knowledge and the value inherent in knowing them – and, in addition to that, to be someone who enjoys the greatest of pleasures in philosophical contemplation.

Having made all these specifications, we must add that it would still be a mistake not to consider that the words death and life, in the context of the *Phaedo*, must be understood with an important qualification: "death" signifies, in this case, a *life* of unrestricted thinking, the life of pure contemplation that the soul can enjoy only without the body. And "life" in the sentence "death is preferable to life" also means, of course, life, but a life which is restricted to the enjoyment of bodily goods or lacks the complete fruition of the greatest goods, the goods of the intellect, of which even the philosopher has a limited access during his corporeal existence.

Plato (*R.* 581d-e), however, seems to be quite aware that there are two sides to the philosopher's corporeal life: on the one hand, it means that the bodily needs hinder the higher pleasures of thinking; on the other, it means that an experience of certain bodily pleasures is necessary. And, to the philosopher, the experience of bodily pleasures is often the result of interrupting the enjoyment of the pleasures of pure thinking, which must at some point be disturbed by some more urgent and pedestrian needs .

Therefore it is clear from what Socrates says in the *Phaedo* (114e) and in the *Republic* (580d-587b) that the philosopher would rather have the pleasure which results from intellectual contemplation than the pleasure that comes from satisfying hunger. Thus, when

[11] See *R.* 558d-559d. This is a point that I cannot develop here due to length's constraint.
[12] An interest parallel can be found in *EN* 1177b19-1178a2.

he interrupts a philosophical activity to eat, for instance, he is necessarily exchanging a higher pleasure for a lower one. This does not mean, of course, that he is someone who does not appreciate the bodily pleasures *at all*. Exactly how this applies to Socrates, we shall see very soon.

Clearly, a life of excessive pleasure and devoted to satisfying unnecessary desires is bad both to the philosopher and to the non-philosopher[13]. However, the body is still an undeniable fact, and it entails the existence of pleasures connected to the necessary desires that both philosophers and non-philosophers must necessarily have.

The main difference between the philosopher and an ordinary moderate man is that the latter has never had truly intellectual pleasures, having nothing to compare with the more common necessary bodily pleasures. On the other hand, the philosopher acknowledges the existence of higher pleasures and clearly prefers them, just as he would rather experiment them without any interruptions whatsoever.

It should also be stressed that there is nothing in the Platonic dialogues to possibly suggest that bodily necessary pleasures are *per se* evil. Rather, such pleasures seem to be goods which, if enjoyed in moderation, should even be celebrated, be it by the ordinary man or by the philosopher.

In the *Symposium* (175a) Socrates only arrives at the drinking party's place after a very considerable delay, since, on his way to Agathon's home, he was so intensely taken by some thought that it prevented him from even stirring. When he finally arrives, supper is finishing. It is most likely that he managed to get something to eat there and derived pleasure from it[14], but it is also true that on the top of his priorities was another kind of good or pleasure, since he did not bothered to arrive very late for supper to, instead, linger on his thoughts.

Neither Socrates, by the way he is portrayed, or Plato's dialogues in general, by what they have to say about life, can be seen as contrary to the enjoyment of life. Much on the contrary, both convey, in many respects, an invitation to celebrate life in all its dimensions.

A very good illustration of this attitude of celebration of life and of its pleasures can be seen in the *Republic* when Socrates describes the way of life of the so-called sane city.

[13] See *R.* 559b-c.
[14] On this topic, it should be noted that in the *Symposium* (220a) Alcibiades compliments Socrates for being able to abstain from food with no great effort when the situation calls for it, for instance, in a military campaign; but Alcibiades also points out how Socrates fully enjoyed food in other situations.

> First of all, then, let us consider what will be the manner of life of men thus provided. Will they not make bread and wine and garments and shoes? And they will build themselves houses and carry on their work in summer for the most part unclad and unshod and in winter clothed and shod sufficiently? And for their nourishment they will provide meal from their barley and flour from their wheat, and kneading and cooking these they will serve noble cakes and loaves on some arrangement of reeds or clean leaves, and, reclined on rustic beds strewn with bryony and myrtle, they will feast with their children, drinking of their wine thereto, garlanded and singing hymns to the gods in pleasant fellowship, not begetting offspring beyond their means lest they fall into poverty or war? (*R.* 372a-c)

Glaucon then complains that Socrates made men feast without meat, to which he answers:

> I forgot that they will also have relishes—salt, of course, and olives and cheese and onions and greens, the sort of things they boil in the country, they will boil up together. But for dessert we will serve them figs and chickpeas and beans, and they will toast myrtle-berries and acorns before the fire, washing them down with moderate potations and so, living in peace and health, they will probably die in old age and hand on a like life to their offspring. (*R.* 372c-d)

There is nothing morbid or life-denying in the way the inhabitants of the city described in the *Republic* lead their lives, and the philosophers, by taking part in the city's way of life, will not refrain from enjoying the necessary pleasures which constitute bodily life.

That bodily pleasures will be enjoyed by philosophers until the very last moment they possess bodies is quite clear by what Socrates says in the *Phaedo* (60a-b) at the final moments of his life: he makes comments on the unavoidable pleasure he feels in being unchained, and surely there is not a trace of any attempt of avoiding such pleasure.

The most iconic moment of all is, however, the scene from the *Phaedrus* in which Socrates compliments the eponymous character for the excellent choice of setting for their conversation.

> By Hera, it is a charming resting place. For this plane tree is very spreading and lofty, and the tall and shady willow is very beautiful, and it is in full bloom, so as to make the place most fragrant; then, too, the spring is very pretty as it flows under the plane tree, and its water is very cool, to judge by my foot. And it seems to be a sacred place of some nymphs and of Achelous, judging by the figurines and statues. Then again, if you please, how lovely and perfectly charming the breeziness of the place is! and it

> resounds with the shrill summer music of the chorus of cicadas. But the most delightful thing of all is the grass, as it grows on the gentle slope, thick enough to be just right when you lay your head on it. (*Phdr.* 230b-c)

It is hard not to see in this passage a clear proof that the philosopher, while endowed with a body, will not cease to enjoy the pleasures that necessarily result from his corporeal nature.

When Socrates states in the *Phaedo* (80e-81a) that the philosopher's pure soul is prepared to die since it never kept a voluntary trade with the body[15], he can only be referring to the voluntary search for unnecessary pleasures or even the overestimation of the necessary ones.

When all that is taken into account, to simply accuse Plato of being morbid or life-denying for having put in Socrates' mouth some of the lines contained in the *Phaedo* would amount, in a way, to a spiritual provincialism, for it implies undervaluing or even ignoring the good that is proper to contemplative life and also the pleasure that results from it, despite Plato's great effort to depict it. In addition to that, such an attitude also implies disregarding the uniqueness of the character of Socrates, since the idea that "death is preferable to life" can only be defended for someone like Socrates himself, a true philosopher. Plato is fully aware of how foolish it would be investing on a thesis such as the denial of life *simpliciter*, and the prohibition of suicide contained in the *Phaedo* 61c-62e seems to indicate exactly that.

Given the right context, the philosopher's voluntary detachment from the body does not entail a denial of life, but its affirmation, in that it represents an adjustment to the conditions that are required to the discovery and enjoyment of a dimension of *life* that is not readily available to everyone, but one which needs to be pursued with a kind of desire and force that can only be characterized as deeply vital[16]. This is precisely why Plato chose the word *éros* to name the force that propels the philosopher and makes philosophical life possible.

[15] We find in *Phaedo* 67c-d a passage that must be interpreted in the same fashion.
[16] On this, see Taylor (2001, p. 182).

REFERENCES

BURNET, I. (1903). Plato. *Platonis Opera*. Recognovit brevique adnotatione critica instruxit Ioannes Burnet. Oxford, Oxford University Press.

BYWATER, J. (1894). (ed.) Aristotle. *Ethica Nicomachea*. Oxford, Clarendon Press.

FOWLER, H. N. (1925). Plato. *Parmenides, Philebus, Symposium, Phaedrus*. v. 9. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press. 12 v.

GOSLING, J. C. B.; TAYLOR, C. C. W. (1982). *The Greeks on Pleasure*. New York, Oxford University Press.

KAHN, C. (1996). *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue*: The Philosophical Use of a Literary Form. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

LANE, M. (2001). *Plato's Progeny*: How Plato and Socrates still captivate the modern mind. London, Duckworth.

LEFEBVRE, R. (2011). *Platón, filósofo del placer*. Traducción de Marisa G. Divenosa. Buenos Aires, Biblos.

MACPHERRAN, M. L. (2006). Platonic Religion. In: BENSON, H. H. (Ed.). *A Companion to Plato*. Oxford, Blackwell. p. 244-260.

MOTTA, G. (2013). Eros as a quality of the rational element of the soul. *Proceedings of X Symposium Platonicum - the Symposium*, Pisa, v.1, p. 62-65.

NIETZSCHE, F. (1999). *The Birth of Tragedy and Others Writings*. Edited by Raymond Geuss and Ronald Speirs. Translated by Ronald Speirs. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

_____. (2001). *The Gay Science*: With a Prelude in German Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs. Edited by Bernard Williams. Translated by Josefine Nauckhoff. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

_____. (1998). *Twilight of the Idols*: or How to Philosophize with a Hammer. Translated with an Introduction and Notes by Duncan Large. Oxford, Oxford University Press.

SANTAS, G. (2006). Plato on Pleasure as the Human Good. In: BENSON, H. H. (Ed.). *A Companion to Plato*. Oxford, Blackwell. p. 308-322.

SHOREY, P. (1969). Plato. *Republic*. v. 5 & 6. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press. 12 v.

TAYLOR, A. E. (2001). *Plato*: The man and His work. 4a. ed. New York, Dover Publications.

Universidade Católica de Petrópolis
Centro de Teologia e Humanidades
Rua Benjamin Constant, 213 – Centro – Petrópolis
Tel: (24) 2244-4000
synesis@ucp.br
http://seer.ucp.br/seer/index.php?journal=synesis

MOTTA, Guilherme. Does the Phaedo or Platonism in general entail a life-denying position?. **Synesis**, v. 10, n. 2, 2018. ISSN 1984-6754. Disponível em: http://seer.ucp.br/seer/index.php/synesis/article/view/1598.