

The Festive and the Workaday in Plato's Phaedrus

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Introduction

Bernd Jager has elaborated, compellingly and brilliantly, a distinction between the workaday world, structured by barriers to be removed, obstacles to be overcome, in an effort at technical mastery of the environment, and the festive world, structured by thresholds to be left in place and respected, as opening onto the genuinely inhabitable, personal domain. Jager has also dwelt at length on the transition from the one world to the other and has demonstrated how necessary it is, for the psychological health of an individual, to be able to live alternately in each world. I here propose to see how Jager's categories play out in Plato's *Phaedrus*. I will focus on two myths presented there by Socrates, the one of the winged soul and the myth of the cicadas.

The Festive and the Workaday

Before turning to Plato, we need to be sure about Jager's basic distinction. It is crucial to see it as, so to speak, an intentional and not a physical one. The barrier and the threshold are not determined by their physical constitution. A wall is not ipso facto a barrier, and a doorway is not necessarily a threshold. Nor is the difference between the mundane and festive worlds a simple matter of time or space. For example, Jager would no doubt agree that a politician attending a county fair merely to canvass for votes is indeed physically present at a festival, but has not at all entered the festive world. Likewise, movers of household goods do indeed come in through the doorway to gain access to the furniture of the moving family, but they do not cross a threshold in Jager's sense. Nor does that sense consist in the mere change from work to "relaxation and leisure activities."¹

Perhaps Jager's most telling characterization of the intentionality involved in crossing a threshold and entering the festive world is this: It is to place ourselves "before a door to which we have no key and that can be opened only from the other side and by an *other*."² Thus the threshold is a place—any place—where one's attitude radically changes: from attending to practical problems, which can be solved by one's own "wit and force and resolution,"³ to an openness for what Jager describes as the "ontological mystery of the Sabbath,"⁴ i.e., what might be called the theoretical or contemplative mystery—the wonder that something has disclosed itself to us at all.

In Platonic terms, the distinction between the two worlds is that between things and Ideas, the changing and the unchanging, the world here and the other world there, the human city and the divine heaven. Socrates is constantly attempting to open up the distinction between the two worlds and to lead the gaze of his interlocutors from the one to the other. Socrates is constantly concerned with the movement of the soul across this threshold, and the *Phaedrus*, with its image of the winged soul, is the dialogue in which the soul's motion is most at issue.

Also very close to Jager's distinction is the one Heidegger draws, in his little book *Gelassenheit*, between calculative and contemplative thought. That is not a distinction between the *objects* to which thinking is directed; it is not that there are certain things we calculate about and certain other things which are the necessary objects of contemplation. Heidegger makes it clear that calculation and contemplation are different global attitudes toward the same things. Most basically, calculation is practical—in the sense in which a “calculating” person is practical: He is involved with things and with other people only for the sake of furthering his own ends. Con-templation, on the other hand, is theoretical—in the sense of the activity carried out precisely in a temple, namely, a sacred place reserved for observing auguries, for finding the divine vestige in things. To contemplate, to cross a threshold, to enter the festive world, is to come from our own work in beings and see the divine at work in them. We can work on things, we can remove obstacles, only if things are already unconcealed to us. But the fact that things are unconcealed to us at all is not primarily our own accomplishment. For Heidegger, the divine work is precisely this bestowing of unconcealment; that is the door which can be opened only from the other side. The “hospitable presence of the gods,”⁵ their showing themselves to us, or, in other terms, our being endowed with an understanding of what it means to be in general, is the prime reason beings are accessible to us. To contemplate is to be in wonder at this bestowal of the unconcealment of things, to appreciate it, rejoice in it. It is thus to pass from the workaday to the genuinely festive, from the human to the divine, from the door that is opened *by* us to the door that is opened *to* us. It is to enter “a festive world in which both presence and sustenance are *offered*, rather than won through labor or conquered through violence.”⁶

Let us now turn to Plato to see how this general understanding of Jager's categories plays out concretely in the *Phaedrus*.

The Opening Scene of the Phaedrus

The *Phaedrus* begins in the way almost all the Platonic dialogues do, namely, with a precursory revelation of the central issue of the dialogue as a whole. In this case, the issue is the motion of the soul: Where is it going and where does it come from? Socrates will eventually answer his own question when he presents, later in the dialogue, a myth of the soul in its ultimate destiny and origin. But that answer makes sense only in the context

invoked by the opening scene, and that context shows the motion of the soul to be a matter of crossing thresholds:

Socrates: O dear Phaedrus, whither now and whence?

Phaedrus: I was with Lysias, O Socrates, the son of Cephalus. Now I am going for an amble outside the walls. For I have spent a long time sitting, indeed all morning, and I am persuaded by our mutual friend, Acumenus, who says it is more refreshing to meander on country lanes than to tread the public thoroughfares.

Socrates: He says well, my good friend. But Lysias, it seems, must be in town?

Phaedrus: Yes, visiting Epicrates, whose house, which used to belong to Morychus, is near the Olympieum.⁷

We need to attend to this opening scene in detail, but let us first recall the general movement of the *Phaedrus*. The only characters in it are Socrates and the young, beautiful Phaedrus. They meet by accident on a threshold, i.e., at one of the gates of the walls of Athens. It is toward noon on a hot summer's day. Phaedrus is going outside the walls for a walk, and Socrates accompanies him. Socrates is barefoot as usual, and so is Phaedrus. The two walk in the country and wade in the shallow Ilissus. They eventually cross the river and recline in the shade of a sycamore. They enjoy each other's company, and they make speeches: at first on erotic matters and then on speech itself. When the heat has subsided later in the day, they decide to leave. Socrates says a prayer to Pan and to the other gods of the place, a prayer to which Phaedrus adds his voice. Then they recross the river and head back up to Athens.

Let us now examine the first scene with due care. The opening question posed by Socrates is a conventional Greek greeting: whereto and wherefrom? That is, where are *you* going and where have you been? Phaedrus takes the question in the conventional sense and answers accordingly: *I* have been in the city, and I have got fatigued with the business there; so I am now going for a walk beyond the city in order to refresh myself. Specifically, Phaedrus indicates that he has been sitting a long while; he has been confined and cramped. He is saying, perhaps somewhat disingenuously, that he simply needs to stretch and move about.

Phaedrus responds in the way typical of Socrates' interlocutors. They neglect what might be universal in the question and instead provide the particular. Phaedrus takes the question to be about his own particular circumstances. At that level, we can pose the same question to Socrates himself. The scene is a city gate. The obvious question is this: What is Socrates doing there? Where is he going, and where did he come from? Socrates is famous for not leaving the city. Yet he meets Phaedrus precisely at the gate; he does not walk from town

with Phaedrus. And Socrates is not likely to loiter about the gate waiting for friends to happen by. If Socrates meets Phaedrus at this place, it can be, apparently, only because Socrates is coming from the other direction. Socrates must be returning to Athens from someplace beyond the walls.

There was indeed one notable occasion on which Socrates left the city and walked down to the Piraeus. It is the occasion recollected by Socrates the following day and recounted in the *Republic*. Socrates had “descended yesterday”⁸ to the Piraeus in order to attend a festival, one in honor of the goddess Bendis. His way back up to Athens is obstructed by some friends there who impose on him to stay. His friends promise him entertainment (watching a torch race of young men on horseback) and a banquet. Instead of these, however, Socrates gets involved in conversation and remains at the house of Cephalus speaking the entire night through. When the discussion ends the next morning, Socrates starts out for Athens. Evidently his return is obstructed again, and he reaches only as far as the gate, where Phaedrus leads him back down across the river.

It is Cephalus' son Lysias who is visiting Athens; Phaedrus was with him all morning. To be sure, in the *Republic*, Socrates mentions that he saw Lysias at the Piraeus when he first arrived at Cephalus' house.⁹ Yet Lysias takes no part in the discussions and is not mentioned again. Cephalus himself only speaks to Socrates for a few moments and then bequeaths his argument to his older son Polemarchus. The decrepit old Cephalus immediately departs, and we can suppose that the younger son Lysias assists him. Lysias does not find it important enough to return, which accords with Socrates' later characterization of him in the *Phaedrus* as non-philosophical,¹⁰ in contrast to his brother Polemarchus who does participate in the discussion. Presumably, Lysias walks to Athens before nightfall. The festival of Bendis is on the 19th of the month of Thargelion, i.e., close to the summer solstice, and Lysias would have plenty of daylight to walk the six miles up to Athens.

If Lysias had just arrived the evening before, while Socrates was still at the Piraeus, it would explain why, in the *Phaedrus*, Socrates is at first uninformed that Lysias is in town. Socrates, with a reputation as a busybody, is not likely to be unaware that a personage such as Lysias is visiting the city—unless Socrates was not in Athens himself when Lysias arrived. Furthermore, if Socrates had known, he would have been present to hear Lysias. In fact, Socrates is so eager to hear Lysias' discourse that he is willing to follow Phaedrus all over Attica, as long as Phaedrus (who has the scroll of the speech) promises to read it to him.

The mention of Epicrates' house also ties the *Phaedrus* to the *Republic*. This house is said to be located near the Olympieum, i.e., near the temple to Olympian Zeus on the southeast side of Athens. The closest city gate in that direction is the same one that leads down to the Piraeus; just beyond the gate is the Ilissus. If Phaedrus left that house with the intention of

going beyond the walls, he would then naturally make for the same gate Socrates would use in returning to the city.

The evidence thus suggests that the *Phaedrus* begins with the two characters meeting at a threshold but crossing it in opposite directions. The entire question of the dialogue is then embodied in this meeting: Will Socrates and Phaedrus each go their separate ways, and, if not, which way will prevail? More essentially, which way ought to prevail, and why? That the decision concerning these matters is not a casual affair can be seen in the fact that the threshold at issue is a genuine one in Jäger's sense. It is a place of crossing between the workaday and the festive world. In general, the city represents the former. It is the everyday habitat of humans, the place of their usual, practical, calculative concerns. The domain beyond the walls represents a transcendence of the merely human and the workaday, a time and place for festive reveling, contemplation, communing with the divine.

Socrates is returning from the festive to the everyday. He is literally returning from the festival of Bendis and has spent the entire night in a form of contemplation, namely, philosophic dialogue. Socrates now needs to attend to practical affairs. He has nourished his soul, and he now needs to attend to his body. He was deprived of the promised banquet, and he has not slept.

Phaedrus is in the opposite condition. He has been busy with human, all too human, affairs. He has been learning, from one of the illustrious orators of the day, trick arguments to seduce boys. He says he is fatigued from sitting and needs to go for a walk. But he actually walks very little with Socrates. After a short stroll, the two recline on the ground and remain there throughout the afternoon. At the end, Socrates says they have "descended"¹¹ (καταβάντε, the same word that begins the *Republic*) to the rivulet of the nymphs and the haunt of the muses and have spent their time reveling¹² (πεπαίσθω, lit., "playing like children," παιζ). In other words, they entered the festive world and the domain of the gods. Accordingly, it is spiritual refreshment that Phaedrus needed and received.

The decision made at the start of the dialogue, and reflected on in the actual dialogue that follows, is thus a crossing of the threshold in the direction of the festive. That will in some sense prove to be the proper whither of the soul. Socrates does not return to Athens, to food and sleep; instead, he allows Phaedrus to lead him back out into the countryside. He makes no attempt to lead Phaedrus back to the city.

On the one hand, the philosopher is the person who is most aware of the proper rights of the workaday world. On the other hand, he gives the appearance of hubris, of being able to remain in the festive world, of being above the ordinary concerns of the practical world. For example, Socrates went down to the Piraeus in the company of Glaucon, one of Plato's brothers. Glaucon was a central participant in the discussion throughout the night. At its end, Socrates exhorts him to heed the myth just told and to make a good ascent. If this means the ascent back up to Athens, Socrates the philosopher is reminding Glaucon to

remember the body and not think he is pure spirit. Indeed, the myth Socrates tells at the end of the *Republic* precisely concerns the mystery of embodiment. Yet it seems Glaucon does not return to Athens with Socrates. When Socrates, the next day, back in Athens, is recollecting the entire conversation at the Piraeus, he is not telling it to Glaucon, for he speaks of Glaucon in the third person. Presumably, then, Glaucon does not walk back to Athens but, instead, goes to sleep there at Cephalus' house. Nor is it the only time Socrates leaves his companions asleep after an all-nighter. The events recorded in the *Symposium* go on all night and end the next morning, with only Socrates and the two playwrights still awake. Aristophanes and Agathon eventually drop off, and Socrates leaves to spend the day in his usual pursuits. Does the philosopher not need sleep as do other men?

Regarding food, can the philosopher, more than other men, neglect to nourish his body? At the Piraeus, Socrates was promised a banquet, but none was delivered. The next day he spends in the countryside, conversing with Phaedrus. When the two of them return to Athens in the evening, Socrates' banquet must still be postponed, for he is busy recollecting all the events of the *Republic*. Presumably the recollection takes as long as the original events, and so Socrates goes at least two days without food or sleep.

No doubt the most significant reference to food in the life of Socrates occurs during his trial. After being found guilty of charges that amount to hubris, Socrates proposes a penalty of free meals. This proposal struck the dikasts as so hubristic that a good many of those who voted him innocent then voted to put him to death. Yet the proposal is perhaps Socrates' ironic way of expressing humility instead of hubris. Perhaps it is his way of acknowledging that he is a man as are other men and that he is not a god able to feast on Ideas alone.

The issues raised in the opening scene of the *Phaedrus* are taken up and "resolved" especially in the course of Socrates' telling of a story about the soul. Let us now turn to that story in an attempt to clarify these questions: What is the proper motion of the soul with regard to the crossing between the workaday and the festive world? Does the philosopher necessarily appear hubristic in this regard? And is his appearance of hubris mere semblance, or is it something else?

The Myth of the Winged Soul

Socrates' myth of the soul in the *Phaedrus* is a recollection, one that harkens all the way back to the origin of the soul or, rather, to the origin of the separation of divine and human souls and the embodiment of the latter. It also looks ahead to the ultimate destiny of the human soul. Socrates thereby answers the question he himself posed at the beginning of the dialogue, and his answer is universally applicable, unlike Phaedrus' reference to his own particular circumstances.

According to Socrates, every soul in its original state dwells in heaven, borne aloft there by its wings. Some souls (i.e., human, not divine) lose their wings, fall to earth, and in falling attach themselves to a mortal body. Their task is to regrow their wings and return to heaven. Thus the ultimate whence and whither of the human soul is heaven. More specifically, the occasion of embodiment is a heavenly banquet, and the destiny of the soul is to return to that banquet. Human souls do not regain their wings merely by dying, by “shuffling off this mortal coil,” but, instead, by feasting at a certain kind of earthly banquet, one that approximates the heavenly banquet. The wings of the soul need their proper nourishment; that applies to all souls, both the divine and the human, and the nourishment is the same for all. The only difference is that human souls on earth must partake of this nourishment indirectly, by mediation, whereas the gods have direct access to it.

Socrates draws his basic image of the soul here from that thing most evidently designed for motion, the chariot. Specifically, Socrates says the soul is like the “conjunction of powers in a winged yoke of horses and its winged driver.”¹³ All souls are like that, and what distinguishes the human from the divine soul is merely the circumstance that in the latter case the driver and horses are all “good and of good ancestry”¹⁴ whereas, in the former, there is one good horse and one that is “the opposite and of the opposite parentage.”¹⁵ Therefore, “with us, the driving is necessarily difficult and troublesome.”¹⁶

The main activity of souls, in their primal state, is to process through heaven. The gods lead the way, and other souls follow as best and as closely as they can. As they process, the gods “care for and regulate”¹⁷ all that is soulless. Thus, even the gods have their workaday world. And their festive world as well: At times, the souls need refreshment, and then they go to their “feast and banquet.”¹⁸ They climb up the steep path to the top of the heavens, and they feed by gazing out at the “hyper-heavenly place” (ὑπερουράνιος τόπος),¹⁹ where Being itself and all the Ideas reside.

It is at this banquet that the divine and human souls separate. The souls of the gods, with their well-matched horses, easily make the ascent to the feast and gaze directly at the Ideas, the true pasturage for the wings of the soul. It is indeed the sight of the Ideas that provides the one nourishment proper to all souls. Human souls, however, on account of the unruly horse, struggle to get the merest glimpse. The upward path is difficult, the bad horse is heavy and wild, and there is much confusion among the horde of human souls. They collide into and trample one another, with the result that their wings get broken. No longer able to soar upward, these souls fall, undergo earthly embodiment, and take up a human life.

The sort of human life depends entirely on how much of the Ideas the particular human soul has glimpsed. The soul that has seen the most is by a law of necessity assigned to lead the life of a philosopher, namely, a “man who is a lover of wisdom and beauty and who is also inspired by the muses and is erotic.”²⁰ Socrates lists in order eight other kinds of human life, meted out to souls which have seen less and less of the Ideas. The souls that have

partaken least of the heavenly banquet, but still managed to see something, are destined to become sophists and, finally, tyrants.

According to Socrates, it takes human souls ten thousand years to regrow their wings and return to the heavenly procession. He does not say whether or not these souls will then be able to participate more fully in the divine feast, so as to keep their wings nourished and remain in heaven. Presumably, not all of them will; perhaps the philosophical souls will prove an exception.

The ten thousand years are divided into ten equal periods. Each consists of a human life lived on earth, followed by the soul's going to a place of reward or punishment for the remainder of the thousand years. Then the soul *chooses for itself* its next sort of life on earth. After ten such periods, the soul returns to the place from which it descended.

There is one exception to the long length of time required to regain wings: the soul of the philosopher. If such a soul chooses the philosophical life for three successive periods, it receives its wings at once. And so Socrates says that it returns to heaven after only three thousand years. But Socrates seems to be forgetting that a soul does not *choose* until it has already completed its first human life, the one allotted to it by necessity. Therefore Socrates must be referring to a soul that has already lived one philosophical life and has completed the first thousand-year period. If such a soul then *chooses* the philosophical life for the next three periods, it regains its wings. Thus it returns to heaven four thousand years after it fell from there, having lived one philosophical life as assigned to it and three freely chosen ones.

In any case, the philosophical soul is privileged, and we need to ask why. Basically, it is because the philosopher on earth dwells as much as possible in the festive world and as little as possible in the workaday one. In Socrates' own terms:

It is a matter of justice that the philosopher alone has a soul that becomes winged. For it always, or as much as possible, attends in memory to those very things the contemplation of which is proper to god. A man who takes up reminders in the right way is always entering into the perfect mysteries, and he alone becomes really perfect. He shuns the usual human pursuits and attends only to what is divine. The many thereby admonish him for his eccentricity, since it is concealed to them that he is possessed by god.²¹

Let us work through the issues in this passage by beginning with Socrates' reference to memory and reminders. What is the connection between memory and the gods, between reminders and the Ideas? Socrates had already, the night before in the Piraeus, emphasized how necessary it is for the philosopher to have a "good memory."²² Indeed he chooses Glaucon to be his interlocutor, at the high point of the discussion, precisely because, of all

those gathered there around Socrates, Glaucon proved to have the best memory. In the present case, the connection has to do with Socrates' characterization of the philosophical life, the one assigned to the human soul which beheld the most in heaven, as an erotic love of beauty.

In his story of the winged soul, Socrates kept mentioning that human souls here on earth once enjoyed some glimpse of the Ideas in heaven. We are now, however, further removed from the Ideas and need mediation—in the form of reminders of them. Indeed all the things of our world do manifest to some small degree the Ideas. For example, a triangle drawn on paper gives us some intimation of the Idea of a triangle; two equal sticks the Idea of equality, etc. Nevertheless, the Ideas do not shine very brightly in the things of our world. Most of the Ideas lack radiance. They do not gleam very well through their images in our world. Therefore most things of our world allow us only a very inadequate grasp of the Ideas, nothing we could feast on.

There is, however, one Idea that does have special radiance. Even in that hyper-heavenly place, it shines the brightest. It is the “most blessed of those mysteries,”²³ the “most brilliant of those joys.”²⁴ It outshines all the other Ideas and is the easiest to get a glimpse of, both when our souls were following in the train of the gods in the mythic past and also here on earth. This one Idea does shine more or less adequately in our visible world. Through the visible images of this Idea we can gain a relatively adequate look at the original, the Idea itself.

The special Idea is beauty. Beauty itself has such great radiance that it shines through visible beautiful things strongly enough to allow us to recall what we saw at the heavenly banquet. To put it another way, visible beauties are inhabited so intimately by the Idea of beauty that they partake of its radiance and reflect beauty itself back to us. It is clear that beautiful things originate in beauty itself and lead back to beauty itself. The Idea is manifestly the whence and whither of beautiful things. Accordingly, the philosopher, by being a lover of beauty, is always attending in memory to the things proper to the gods, namely the Ideas. That is why it is with justice that the philosopher's soul is privileged in regaining its wings.

Just as not all the Ideas are equally radiant, so also, among beautiful things, not all equally partake in the Idea of beauty. Of visible things, it is especially, for Socrates, human bodies that are beautiful and have radiance (φαίδρος). The very first words of the dialogue, Socrates' invocation of the beautiful *Phaedrus* (Φαίδρος), thereby acquire particular significance. Those first three words, if translated very literally, say: “O beloved radiant one!” At play, right from the beginning, is thus the role of a beautiful companion in leading the soul to the nourishment proper to its wings. Accordingly, the question Socrates poses can be taken in this sense: “Where do you as radiant image lead, and where is your original?” The single answer to both parts of the question is: the hyper-heavenly place. As a

radiant youth, Phaedrus is a reminder of the Idea of beauty, which is the original that shines in him.

Socrates said that the reminders must be taken up in the right way. It is not enough merely to behold the beautiful body. The proper response is required, in order to enter into the perfect mysteries and joys. That response is love. Nor is it enough to love from a distance. Thus Socrates says that “the proper love of beauty, the love tinged with divine madness, is erotic.”²⁵ The philosopher, as already characterized by Socrates, is precisely the one who possesses this inspired, erotic love. That makes philosophy a decidedly interpersonal affair.

The beloved companion is, in Jager's terms, the host welcoming a guest across a threshold, a genuine threshold that opens onto the festive world. The “other” that opens this door is thereby a genuinely human other. Socrates expresses the same, though in a very veiled way, when he describes the guest in the presence of the host as follows:

As soon as he regards the beautiful one here on earth, he is reminded of true beauty, begins to sprout his wings, and becomes eager to take to those wings and fly up, even before he has the power. Like a bird, he gazes upward and loses all care for what is below. That is the cause he is judged to be mad.²⁶

Socrates had already mentioned that a person in such a state will shun the usual human pursuits as much as possible and will thereby be judged mad by the many. For Socrates, of course, this madness is in fact divine inspiration and the greatest blessing. In this later passage, Socrates adds a reference to birds. What does that signify?

In the first place, it is obviously not true that birds simply gaze upward and are careless of what is below. It could even be said that birds fly up precisely in order to gaze better at what lies below. Soaring birds are entirely nourished by what lies below them, not by what is up in the air.

There are very few references to birds in the Platonic text, and even fewer that say anything substantive about them. In the *Laws*, however, we do find something like a general view of birds. There the Athenian, in order to dissuade mankind from “promiscuous Venery,”²⁷ holds birds up as an example to emulate:

Birds, though they generate large broods, as do many other animals, live undefiled and chaste bachelors and virgins until they reach the age of begetting and then, when they do come of age, pair off according to their own liking, the male with the female, and the female with the male, and thereafter they live piously and justly and remain ever steadfastly faithful to their first contract of love. And people should surely be better than any wild creatures.²⁸

This is no doubt weak ornithology, and it is most difficult to decide what the Athenian could mean by piety and justice among birds. But what is clear is that lovebirds are being taken as the paradigm. If it is also lovebirds that Socrates means in the *Phaedrus*, then the passage there is intelligible. Lovebirds are always gazing upward, not in the spatial sense, but in the way a human lover “looks up” to the beloved. Likewise, lovebirds are not careless of what is below in the spatial sense, but, rather, in the sense that anything else besides the beloved is “beneath” the lover, unworthy of attention. Lovebirds, both human and avian, are notoriously wrapped up in each other, and nothing beyond their little heaven exists for them. Outside onlookers then consider them insane.

Thus what Socrates is saying in the *Phaedrus* is that among humans the beloved leads the lover into a radically different world from the everyday one. It is a festive world, where nothing matters except the self-manifestation of the lovers to each other. It is a world, in Jager's terms, the ultimate dream of which is “an absolute revelation of self and other.”²⁹

The question is whether the philosopher can attain this dream of absolute revelation. Just as important is the question of the extent to which the philosopher can pursue this revelation and not stop to dream at all. To what extent can the philosopher dwell in the festive world and be careless of workaday pursuits? Can the philosopher contemplate constantly, never sleep, and feed on Ideas alone? These questions will all be brought home by the myth of the cicadas which Socrates is about to tell.

The Lover and the Beloved

Socrates concludes his discourse on the winged soul by indicating the reciprocity between human lovebirds. Each allows the other's wings to grow, for the lover is “a mirror in which the beloved sees himself.”³⁰ The beauty of the beloved is thus a source of recollection, not only for the lover, but also for the beloved himself.

Socrates now characterizes beauty as a “flowing stream.”³¹ At first, it floods in upon the lover as he beholds the beautiful beloved, but then, when the lover is filled, some of that stream overflows outside, and

just as the wind or an echo leaps from what is smooth and solid and is borne back to the place from which it began, so the stream of beauty returns to the beautiful one, entering through the eyes, for this is the natural way to reach the soul, and stimulates the roots of the feathers, waters those roots, and hastens the growth of the wings.³²

Both the lover and the beloved partake, mediately, of the heavenly banquet, both feast on the Idea of beauty, and so Socrates concludes that “because of their love, they are ‘birds of

a feather”³³, ὁμόπτεροι, i.e., “alike in wings,” equally nourished in soul, equally able to fly up.

In view of the equality between the lover and the beloved, it could be said that they lead each other across the threshold and into the festive world. In the dramatic context of the opening of the dialogue, that means neither Socrates nor Phaedrus is the absolute originator of the walk outside the walls. Socrates is returning to the city, and his sight of Phaedrus motivates him to change his steps. But we must also suppose that Phaedrus' sight of Socrates, or, rather, his sight of his own beauty as overflowing back from Socrates, is part of his motive to pass through the gate in the first place. This is expressed dramatically by Socrates' playful chiding of Phaedrus just as they start out. Phaedrus had said he was going beyond the walls because he was looking for refreshment from fatigue. But Socrates voices the suspicion that the actual reason is Phaedrus' desire for an audience to practice on, i.e., to practice in quiet the speech he had just heard from Lysias. When Phaedrus saw Socrates, i.e., a man who loved him, the motive changed, however. Now, according to Socrates, Phaedrus desired “a companion in Corybantic rites” (συγκορυβαντιῶντα).³⁴ Needless to say, these rites have nothing to do with speech-making and everything to do with love. Thus Socrates motivated Phaedrus beyond the walls in the genuine sense—that is, changed his motive from one that concerned mere workaday speech-making to one that concerned the festive world of beauty and love—as much as Phaedrus motivated him.

The reciprocity between lover and beloved also seems to mean that both the philosopher and his beautiful companion are privileged from having to wait ten thousand years before returning to the heavenly procession. Socrates says of both of them: “When they die they are winged and light in weight, having been victors in one of three contests that are truly Olympian.”³⁵ Presumably, the only thing that could weigh down a soul after death is the heavy, unruly horse. So these souls have tamed that horse and thinned it down. That must be the first of the Olympian contests. The others would occur in the next two chosen lives on earth. Yet Socrates is possibly referring to something else, since he said earlier that the philosopher's wings are restored only after all three lives, i.e., after three thousand years.

However that may be, it would appear that in the end both philosophical lover and beloved are secure from falling back down from heaven and entering a new cycle of embodiment and death. For Socrates says about such a pair: “It is the law that they will never again be made to go into the darkness of earth but will be happy, living in radiance, side by side in the procession.”³⁶

The fate of a beautiful one who is not truly loved is, however, very different. Thus it is not beauty by itself that is privileged; the privilege derives from its association with the philosopher, the one who can mirror it back to the other, who merely possesses it. It is the *sight* of beauty, whether directly or mirrored, that nourishes the soul. According to Socrates, a beautiful one not loved by a philosopher “will wander about the earth for nine

thousand years and in the end will be turned aside under the earth, deprived of all intelligence (νοῦς).³⁷

Here Socrates is apparently forgetting what he said earlier, to the effect that *all* souls in the end regain their wings and return to heaven. And he is forgetting that it takes *ten* thousand years. Furthermore, Socrates had indicated that νοῦς, which he called the pilot of the soul, would primarily be that part which regains its wings. Indeed a soul without νοῦς is just two horses without a driver, which contradicts Socrates' earlier characterization of *all* souls.

In any case, as the dialogue continues it is fitting, in view of the reciprocity of lover and beloved, that Phaedrus becomes inspired by Socrates, the beautiful beloved by the ugly lover, rather than vice versa. Just after finishing his story of the winged soul, Socrates asks Phaedrus whether or not they should continue their conversation.³⁸ We can assume that Socrates is feeling the effects of his hunger and lack of sleep. It is Phaedrus who is now inspired, i.e., enthusiastic about remaining in the festive world: "You ask if we should continue? But what else could it be said that life is for, if it is not for the sake of such pleasures?"³⁹

Socrates agrees to continue the discussion, but first he calls attention to the cicadas looking down on them.⁴⁰ It is appropriate that Socrates becomes aware of the cicadas at this point, when he is apparently becoming forgetful and drowsy and feeling the urgings of the heavy, unruly horse for food and sleep. The reason is that the muses have bestowed on the cicadas a most appealing gift: freedom from the need to eat and sleep!

The Myth of the Cicadas

At first, Socrates' motive in continuing the discussion with Phaedrus is simply to avoid appearing ridiculous to the cicadas:

If these cicadas see that we, just like the many at midday, are not conversing but, instead, are napping, having fallen victim to their soothing song on account of our own drowsiness, they would with justice laugh at us and would suppose we were slaves who had stumbled upon their haunts and were sleeping around a fountain in the middle of the day like sheep.⁴¹

On the other hand, according to Socrates, if the cicadas find Phaedrus and himself conversing, then perhaps, out of "admiration" (ἀγασθέντες),⁴² these cicadas will share the gift they have received from the muses and can in turn bestow on men. Phaedrus professes ignorance of this gift, and so Socrates tells the story:

It is said that the cicadas were once human beings, living at a time prior to the birth of the muses. When the muses were born, and song appeared on earth, some of the people were so enraptured with pleasure that they kept on singing, without a care for food or drink; and so they died, though entirely oblivious of the fact. From these people, the order of cicadas afterwards sprang up and received this privilege from the muses, namely that of not needing to eat anything at all from the moment of birth; instead, they never stop singing, going without food and without drink, until they die, after which they hurry to the muses and report to them concerning who honors which of them here on earth.⁴³

This myth raises many questions, especially in its connection—or, rather, lack of connection—with the earlier story of the winged soul. In the first place, we wonder about these men who remain oblivious of (ἐλάνθον, “in hiddenness from”) their own death. They were so caught up in singing that all else was concealed to them, including the fact that they had died. If such a thing is possible, it is surely an instance of the most extreme immersion in the festive world. Indeed it is so extreme that we do not know whether to laugh at these people or cry. They behaved ridiculously, forgetting their own bodies, but there is also a touch of tragedy in the hubris of placing oneself on the level of the divine muses. Most of all, we wonder if, and when, these men did discover they had died. It seems they could not have gone on singing after death. Even if they spend the remainder of the thousand years in heaven, they had no body, since Socrates makes it clear that embodiment occurs when souls fall from heaven. And how could there be singing without bodies? Indeed, from Socrates' description of the heavenly procession, it seems to be a silent one. On the other hand, if, after death, the souls of these men experience silence, how could they not have realized they were dead?

Furthermore, how did the cicadas arise from (ἐξ ὧν φύεται, “grow out of,” “spring from”) these men? According to the myth of the winged souls, humans can indeed, for their second life on earth, choose to inhabit a lower animal form. But that is clearly not the case here, for it is not what Socrates expresses, and it would mean a thousand-year gap between the death of these men and the appearance of the cicadas, whereas they are said to have appeared μετ' ἐκεῖνο, “right afterwards.” Indeed, there seems to be no way to understand, in terms of the myth of the winged soul, the generation of the cicadas from the souls of dead men.

Finally, how could there have been men living prior to the birth of the muses? Although the muses are not explicitly mentioned as following Zeus in the primal procession in heaven, they would seem to be included in the “whole army of gods and daimons”⁴⁴ who are in his train. Moreover, when human souls by a law of necessity are assigned to their first life on earth, one of those lives has to do with music and another with poetry,⁴⁵ so the muses must already have been born.

By all the evidence, therefore, the myth of the cicadas is entirely incompatible with the myth of the winged soul. In other words, Socrates has forgotten all about the earlier myth in telling this one. We noticed that Socrates was becoming more and more forgetful of the details as the story of the winged soul progressed, and now he has forgotten it all.

It is not just a matter of Socrates telling two incompatible and unrelated myths. In the first place, these myths are not already extant, popular ones; they are Socrates' own inventions. For example, Phaedrus had never heard the story of the cicadas. Furthermore, Socrates takes that latter story seriously and connects it to his own life. He genuinely desires the gifts the cicadas can bestow, not only the freedom from bodily needs but also the good report to the muses. He makes specific mention of the favor to be obtained from the muse of philosophy.⁴⁶ Thus the myth of the cicadas touches Socrates' philosophical soul, which he takes with the utmost seriousness. Socrates finally tells Phaedrus that it is "for the sake of many things"⁴⁷ that they should continue their conversation and not let the cicadas find them napping.

Thus Socrates' forgetting is not a deliberate putting aside of one thing and taking up of another. The myth of the winged soul remains in effect throughout the *Phaedrus*. Socrates desires the admiration of the cicadas for the sake of the wings of his soul. He has simply forgotten all, or almost all, of what he had said about the soul. His forgetting thereby takes on a distinctive character. He has been talking about the soul, all souls, his own included. What we see progressively taking place, and now reaching a peak, is thus Socrates' self-forgetfulness.

Comedy

Self-forgetfulness, or self-ignorance, has a special significance in the Platonic dialogues. It is the "very essence of the laughable" (τὸ γελοῖον φύσιν ἔχει).⁴⁸ A display of self-forgetting, in the dialogues, is always a sign that a comedy is underway. Furthermore, Platonic comedy always takes a very definite form; it is an attempt to outdo the comic portrait of Socrates in Aristophanes' *Clouds*.

In the *Clouds*, Socrates is satirized as dwelling literally in the clouds, being so unearthly that he can float in the air. It is the usual slander against philosophers, namely that they are harmless eccentrics with no feet on the ground, lost in abstraction.

Platonic comedy raises this view of philosophy to an even higher level. If Aristophanes makes the philosopher as unsubstantial as a cloud, Plato will portray him as altogether disembodied. Plato exaggerates so much that it becomes obvious that it is an exaggeration. What we call "platonic love" is a classic case of such exaggeration (even if not everyone gets the joke).

In the *Phaedrus*, the same sort of exaggeration is going on. Socrates becomes more and more forgetful and more and more disembodied. This especially takes the form of his appearing to be able to dwell entirely and constantly in the festive world. He acts as if he can keep abstaining from food and sleep and the workaday world. Finally, he wants the gift of the cicadas—to be able to sing and sing and have no bodily needs whatsoever.

Dramatically, his return to the city was already blocked by Phaedrus, and we wonder if he will actually go back to Athens at the end of the day. He will certainly not go to eat and sleep, for he has to recollect the entire conversation recorded in the *Republic*. Indeed at the end of the *Phaedrus*, Socrates says he is going to his “darling”⁴⁹ Isocrates with a message from the gods of the place, namely that Isocrates should turn from his usual pursuits to something “more divine.”⁵⁰ Thus even if Socrates returns to Athens in the spatial sense, he might not be leaving the festive world.

Conclusion: Whither “and” Whence

A Platonic comedy is so exaggerated that it becomes obvious an impossible viewpoint is being expressed. For example, if Socrates speaks of people who died without knowing it, or of the ability to live a life full of singing, but without food or drink, then we know we are being warned against surpassing our proper human limits and committing hubris. And in the *Phaedrus*, it is the hubris of entering the festive world and thinking we do not ever need to leave it. In other words, it is the hubris of feasting on Ideas alone, celebrating the gift of Being to the disregard of beings, contemplating and never calculating, attending to the soul and neglecting the body, floating in the clouds with no foot on earth, thinking we can attain the “absolute revelation of the other,” or even thinking we can spend all our time trying to attain it.

Bernd Jager also warns against this same hubris: “It is precisely madness and loss of our humanity that imprisons us in one attitude or the other and that prevents us from making the shift back and forth between the world of work and the world of celebration.”⁵¹ Jager speaks directly, in theoretical treatises and not in dramatic dialogues. But he is no less eloquent than Plato in expressing the truth that, while the workaday perspective is nothing without the festive, genuinely human perspective, the reverse also holds:

We could apply this same criterion to human perspectives and maintain that a completely isolated and therefore totalitarian perspective ceases by virtue of that fact to be a point of view upon the world and becomes instead a kind of blindness and madness.⁵²

To return, in the end, to Socrates' original question about the whither and the whence, we could say that for both Plato and Jager it would be a tragedy, it would be less than human,

to remain imprisoned in the workaday world, and a comedy, an instance of self-forgetfulness and hubris, to believe one can dwell always in the festive world. Thus we see that Socrates' question at the city gate (ποῖ δὴ καὶ πòθεν;) is not a *hysteron proteron*. The order is correct, for a whence does always follow the whither. The properly Socratic meaning of the question is therefore: "Whither now, *which is to say*, whence in the future?" The genuinely human whither is always a future whence.

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Endnotes

¹ Jager, B. (1997). Concerning the festive and the mundane. *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology*, 28, p. 230.

² Jager, B. (1998). Human subjectivity and the law of the threshold: Phenomenological and humanistic perspectives. In R. Valle (Ed.), *Phenomenological inquiry in psychology: Existential and transpersonal dimensions*. New York: Plenum Press, p. 107.

³ Jager, B. (1996). The obstacle and the threshold: Two fundamental metaphors governing the natural and the human sciences. *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology*, 27, p. 38.

⁴ Jager. Concerning the festive and the mundane. *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology*, pp. 199 & 213-223.

⁵ As Jager would say; cf. Jager, B. (1999). Metabletics and the art of psychotherapy. In B. Jager, B. Mook, M. Sipiora, & J. H. van den Berg (Eds.), *Metabletics: J. H. van den Berg's historical phenomenology* (pp. 1-20). Pittsburgh, PA: The Simon Silverman Phenomenology Center, p. 1.

⁶ Jager. The obstacle and the threshold. *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology*, p. 44.

⁷ *Phaedrus*, 227A-B.

⁸ *Republic*, 327A.

⁹ *Republic*, 328B.

¹⁰ *Phaedrus*, 257B.

¹¹ *Phaedrus*, 278B.

¹² *Phaedrus*, 278B.

¹³ *Phaedrus*, 246A.

¹⁴ *Phaedrus*, 246A.

¹⁵ *Phaedrus*, 246B.

¹⁶ *Phaedrus*, 246B.

¹⁷ *Phaedrus*, 246E.

¹⁸ *Phaedrus*, 247A.

¹⁹ *Phaedrus*, 247C.

²⁰ *Phaedrus*, 248D.

²¹ *Phaedrus*, 249C-D.

²² *Republic*, 486D.

²³ *Phaedrus*, 250C.

²⁴ *Phaedrus*, 250D.

²⁵ *Phaedrus*, 249E.

²⁶ *Phaedrus*, 249D.

²⁷ *Laws*, 840E.

²⁸ *Laws*, 840D.

²⁹ Jager. Human subjectivity and the law of the threshold. In Valle (Ed.), *Phenomenological inquiry in psychology*, p. 98.

³⁰ *Phaedrus*, 255D.

³¹ *Phaedrus*, 255C.

³² *Phaedrus*, 255C-D.

³³ *Phaedrus*, 256D.

³⁴ *Phaedrus*, 228C.

³⁵ *Phaedrus*, 256B.

³⁶ *Phaedrus*, 256D.

³⁷ *Phaedrus*, 257A.

³⁸ *Phaedrus*, 258D.

³⁹ *Phaedrus*, 258E.

⁴⁰ *Phaedrus*, 258E.

⁴¹ *Phaedrus*, 259A.

⁴² *Phaedrus*, 259B.

⁴³ *Phaedrus*, 259B-C.

⁴⁴ *Phaedrus*, 247A.

⁴⁵ *Phaedrus*, 248D.

⁴⁶ *Phaedrus*, 259D.

⁴⁷ *Phaedrus*, 259D.

⁴⁸ *Philebus*, 48C.

⁴⁹ *Phaedrus*, 279B.

⁵⁰ *Phaedrus*, 279A.

⁵¹ Jager. Human subjectivity and the law of the threshold. In Valle (Ed.), *Phenomenological inquiry in psychology*, p. 94.

⁵² Jager. The obstacle and the threshold. *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology*, p. 35.