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The Minotaur in Phaedo's Labyrinth: Philosophy's Necessary Myth

Gregory Convertito

Plato's *Phaedo* is a confusing dialogue. It takes place after the *Apology* and the *Crito*, on Socrates's last night before his execution; Socrates has been waiting in prison for a long time due to an Athenian law barring executions during the annual ritual to celebrate Theseus's mythical victory over the Minotaur. This story of the death of Socrates is embedded in a narration by Phaedo himself, who is relating the story to Echeocrates. Socrates, after discussing the soul, the self, immortality, and death with Simmias and Cebes, Pythagorean acquaintances who have come to visit him, drinks the *φαρμακον* and dies. The myth of the Minotaur—a monster which has the body of a man and the head of a bull—is explicitly invoked in the text, which structurally mirrors this myth. Each has a monster, fourteen characters, and a thread which leads out of a labyrinth. In the myth, Theseus and the others are taken into the labyrinth wherein the Minotaur resides as tribute, as dictated by the Delphic Oracle, and the princess Ariadne gives Theseus a ball of thread to attach to the entrance, so he may find his way out again.

The structure of the *Phaedo*, and its similarity to the myth of the Minotaur, is key in decoding the dialogue itself. This formal structure gives the dialogue meaning through the way in which it frames the content: after all, as Simmias and Cebes mention over and over, many of the explanations and arguments given on the day Socrates drank the *φαρμακον* are unsatisfying. They seem unconvincing. Indeed, the content of the *Phaedo* as a whole seems a failure if its purpose is really to prove something about the nature of the soul and of death (as the dialogue's later baptism with its subtitle "On the Soul" seems to suggest). If we instead consider the formal structure of the dialogue and its relationship to the content, the dialogue is about something entirely different—it is about the nature of philosophical inquiry itself and its relation to myth, in particular, about the possible (and possibly necessary) role which myth plays in philosophy. Before we discuss this structure, we will take note of the following several points about the text. Plato is present only in his own absence: he explicitly mentions (through Phaedo) that he himself was not present (59B). In a way,

we may state that Plato is present in the dialogue *only by a thread*. Moreover, it is important that this dialogue is not set in the present—it is framed as a *story* being *recollected* by Phaedo at the question of Echecrates. This puts the reader in the curious position of having made it out the other side of the dialogue already, of *knowing she will not die*; the reader does not die, the reader (as long as she makes it so far) is present for the end of the dialogue at the beginning.

It appears that, given the similarity to the myth of the Minotaur, the Minotaur running about the *Phaedo* is the strange state of affairs while we live that we have both body and soul, both *σωμα* and *ψυχη*—it is the living person, the person with both physical and mental—the “communion” (65A) of soul and body. The Minotaur is a monster: literally, two different things that do not go together, a bull and a human being. Likewise, as is demonstrated in the *Phaedo*, the body and soul do not go together—they are radically different. The body employs the senses to grasp things, the *ψυχη* employs *λογος* to grasp beings themselves, *τα οντα*. As Socrates states, the body deceives our perception of *τα οντα*, while *λογος* makes *τα οντα* clear (65C).

Given this clear split in the nature of the body versus that of the soul, their communion in what we (often) consider life is monstrous. The *Phaedo* is concerned with this strange duality, and how to make sense of it: it is, after all concerned preeminently with the nature of the self. The first word of the dialogue is “*αυτος*,” Echecrates asks, “You yourself, Phaedo,” were you with Socrates the day he drank the *φαρμακον*? (57A). This sets the discussion for the entire dialogue. The *Phaedo* is concerned with the nature of the self—in many respects the living self—and this includes the duality of body and soul already discussed. That much of the text centers on the notion of *γενεσις* and degeneration, of coming into and out of being, of death and, importantly, the death of the body—whether this is death, whether the soul experiences death—makes sense.

The Minotaur does die in the end. Socrates drinks the poison, and his body fails—the monstrous communion of the two disparate parts of his living self, of his body and soul, comes to an end, comes out of being with the death of his body—is freed from this prison and from his literal imprisonment. Given his various arguments and his closing myth throughout the dialogue, it is implied that his soul does not die. However, his *λογοι* remain after the death of his body in the text of the *Phaedo*—the thread by which Plato as Ariadne remains attached: that which is meant to guide us out of Daedalus’s labyrinth. For the duration

of the dialogue, Socrates points out that the “true” philosopher should not fear death, and is in reality always already practicing it, in the attempt to distance himself from the distortion caused by the body and the senses. He gives the imperative that the “true” philosopher should join him in death as soon as possible (without killing himself) (64B–67E), should fully rid himself of the body so as not to have the *λογος* of the *ψυχη* distorted by the body and the senses which come along with it.

In a way, what is happening in the slaying of the Minotaur during the labyrinthine *Phaedo* is a delimiting of the *αυτος*—the self—a defining of the locus of the *αυτος*, of the experiences one may attribute to oneself, of the experiences (as that of being there when Socrates drank the *φαρμακον*) Phaedo may attribute to his self, to he himself. This again recalls Plato's conspicuous absence, his explicit absence, his presence only through his stated absence from the dialogue. Plato may not attribute to himself this experience of Phaedo, and the thirteen others—or can he? Plato is not present in body, but the story, the *λογος*, of Phaedo relating the story of his own presence (in *σωμα* and *ψυχη*) is related through the written *λογος* of Plato. Plato's bodily absence immediately calls attention to the presence of his authorship. Plato, the true philosopher—and, if he is to be identified with Ariadne, he is an heir of sorts—only is present by the act of *λογος*, an act of the *ψυχη* (quite apart from his stated bodily presence in the audience during the *Apology*).

What appears to be occurring is the delimiting of the concept of *αυτος* to that of the *ψυχη* to the exclusion of the body. This is seen in the various accounts which Socrates gives discussing the immortality of the *ψυχη*—it is the overarching theme of the dialogue. It is an (sometimes implicit and unstated) axiom in most of his accounts that the *ψυχη* is the site of the *αυτος*: in the argument from contraries (70C–71D), the immortality of the soul is (supposedly) demonstrated; in the argument from recollection (74B–E), the existence of the soul apart from embodiment is (supposedly) demonstrated; in the argument from invisibility (79A–80B), the same. Neither of these could convince us that the *αυτος* is not destroyed upon death, does not scatter as smoke with our last breath, if the *αυτος* is not contained within the *ψυχη*, which is the object of these arguments. If the true philosopher is not to fear death because of the accounts Socrates gives regarding the *ψυχη*, the *αυτος* must not exceed the boundaries thereof. The dialogue begins on a discussion of the self, calls notice to the apparent dual nature of the

self, and then attempts to demonstrate that this dual nature is only an appearance: that that which makes us the beings which we are is limited to the *ψυχη*, it is not dual, it is not bodily as well. A dialogue which begins with the question of physical presence comes to answer that physical presence does not matter, the presence of the self, of the *αυτος*, is really a question of the *ψυχη*.

We see the death of the Minotaur, and when the body of Socrates passes, when he himself is finally able to rid himself of the monstrous communion with the body after his long imprisonment, we see a literal death of the Minotaur acted out in drama to accompany this death of the concept in *λογος*. But there is something strange going on, which comes to the fore in the last *μυθος* given by Socrates—that it is a *μυθος* is paramount. Socrates stresses that, even though none of these arguments were convincing to Simmias and Cebes, all present, all who wish to practice philosophy and live the good life, must protect themselves from *μισολογος*, from becoming haters of *λογος*—nothing worse could happen (90E). And then he later offers a myth (108E–114D) as a last attempt at quelling the fears of the “child” (75C) within Simmias and Cebes. What this demonstrates is that Socrates is, in a sense, placing the elimination of this fear before the imperative to *λογος*: a reversal of expected priorities. Indeed, many of the accounts in the text (including those earlier named as “arguments”) sometimes seem more *μυθος* than *λογος* and, early on, Socrates uses the word “*διαμυθολογομεν*” (70B) to describe what will follow—a combination of *μυθος* and *λογος*.

This fits. Socrates believes fear of death inhibits philosophy, not least because the practice of philosophy is nothing but the practice of death. Furthermore, the practice of philosophy is that which comes closest to the truth, the best life to live—as Socrates states in the Apology, the unexamined life is not worth living, i.e. is tantamount to death. If Simmias and Cebes are to get off the ground with philosophy, they cannot fear death. This seems, however, to present the odd paradox that sometimes the practice of philosophy does not begin with *λογος*, but perhaps with *μυθος*. It does, in fact (if this was not already clear), seem that Socrates is explicitly giving Simmias and Cebes the imperative to philosophy; after his myth of the true earth, he states (114E)

Now it would not be fitting for a man of sense to maintain that all this is just as I have described it, but that this or something like it is true...I think he may properly and worthily venture to believe; for the venture is well worth while; and he ought to repeat such things to himself as if they were magic charms, which is the reason why I have been lengthening out the story so long.

Inherent here, too, is the paradox that philosophy may require something besides *λογοι*: the “magic charms” of *μυθοι* such as these.

This, however, lends further credibility to the myth which the Phaedo, overall, appears to be. After all, the dialogue, which is a story and seems to be structured on this myth of the Minotaur, seems far more to be a macrocosm of the structural aspects of the aforementioned myth than any vessel for delivering the arguments on the nature of the self which it contains.. If the text is to be the thread, given by Plato and fastened to the door, which we follow out of this labyrinthine discussion of the *αυτο* occasioned by the death of (the body of) Socrates, it would seem—if we are to take its content seriously—that we must read it, at least in part, as one of these “magic charms.” They let us begin or continue philosophy, they banish, at least temporarily, the fear of death—the fear of death which is irrational given that death does not affect the *αυτο*—which would stand in our way. The Minotaur is killed by the unarmed Theseus with jabs of his fist, without any weapons besides those inherent in his self. The reader is Theseus; in reading and working through the dialogue, he kills the Minotaur of the monstrous communion of body and soul which is, more importantly, the Minotaur of the fear of death—bodily death.

WORKS CITED

Plato. *Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Phaedo, Phaedrus*. Translated by Harold North Fowler.

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