

Plutarch

Platonic Questions (selections)

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QUESTION I

What is the Reason that God bade Socrates to act the Midwife's Part to Others, but charged Himself not to generate; as he says in *Theaetetus* [149b]?

1. For he would never have used the name of God in such a merry, jesting manner, though Plato in that book makes Socrates several times to talk with great boasting and arrogance, as he does now. "There are many, dear friend, so affected towards me, that they are ready even to bite me, when I offer to cure them of the least madness. For they will not be persuaded that I do it out of good-will, because they are ignorant that no God bears ill-will to man, and that therefore I wish ill to no man; but I cannot allow myself either to stand in a lie or to stifle the truth." [*Theaetetus*, 151c] Whether therefore did he style his own nature, which was of a very strong and pregnant wit, by the name of God, — as Menander says, "For our mind is God," and as Heraclitus, "Man's genius is a Deity"? Or did some divine cause or some Daemon or other impart this way of philosophizing to Socrates, whereby always interrogating others, he cleared them of pride, error, and ignorance, and of being troublesome both to themselves and to others? For about that time there happened to be in Greece several sophisters; to these some young men paid great sums of money, for which they purchased a strong opinion of learning and wisdom, and of being stout disputants; but this sort of disputation spent much time in trifling squabbings, which were of no credit or profit. Now Socrates, using an argumentative discourse by way of a purgative remedy, procured belief and authority to what he said, because in refuting others he himself affirmed nothing; and he the sooner gained upon people, because he seemed rather to be inquisitive after the truth as well as they, than to maintain his own opinion.

2. Now, however useful a thing judgment is, it is mightily impeached by the begetting of a man's own fancies. For the lover is blinded with the thing loved; and nothing of a man's own is so beloved as is the opinion and discourse which he has begotten. And the distribution of children, said to be the justest, in respect of discourses is the unjustest; for there a man must take his own, but here a man must choose the best, though it be another man's. Therefore he that has children of his own, is a worse judge of other men's; it being true, as the sophister said well, "The Eleans would be the most proper judges of the Olympic games, were no Eleans gamesters." So he that would judge of disputations cannot be just, if he

either seeks the bays for himself, or is himself antagonist to either of the antagonists. For as the Grecian captains, when they were to decide by their suffrages who had behaved himself the best, every man of them voted for himself; so there is not a philosopher of them all but would do the like, besides those that acknowledge, like Socrates, that they can say nothing that is their own; and these only are the pure uncorrupt judges of the truth. For as the air in the ears, unless it be still and void of noise in itself, without any sound or buzzing, does not exactly take sounds; so the philosophical judgment in disputations, if it be disturbed and obstreperous within, is hardly comprehensive of what is said without. For our familiar and inbred opinion will not admit that which is at variance with itself, as the number of sects and parties proves, of which philosophy – if she deals with them in the best manner – must hold one to be right, and all the others to be at war with the truth in their opinions.

3. Furthermore, if men can comprehend and know nothing, God did justly interdict Socrates the procreation of false and unstable discourses, which are like wind-eggs, and bid him convince others who were of any other opinion. And reasoning, which rids us of the greatest of evils, error and vanity of mind, is none of the least benefit to us; “For God has not granted this to the Esculapians.” [*Theognis*, vs. 432.] Nor did Socrates give physic to the body; indeed he purged the mind of secret corruption. But if there be any knowledge of the truth, and if the truth be one, he has as much that learns it of him that invented it, as the inventor himself. Now he the most easily attains the truth, that is persuaded he has it not; and he chooses best, just as he that has no children of his own adopts the best. Mark this well, that poetry, mathematics, oratory, and sophistry, which are the things the Deity forbade Socrates to generate, are of no value; and that of the sole wisdom about what is divine and intelligible (which Socrates called amiable and eligible for itself), there is neither generation nor invention by man, but reminiscence. Wherefore Socrates taught nothing, but suggesting principles of doubt, as birth-pains, to young men, he excited and at the same time confirmed the innate notions. This he called his Art of Midwifery, which did not (as others professed) extrinsically confer intelligence upon his auditors; but demonstrated it to be innate, yet imperfect and confused, and in want of a nurse to feed and strengthen it.

QUESTION II

Why does he call the Supreme God Father and Maker of all Things? [*Timaeus*, 28c].

1. Is it because he is (as Homer calls him) of created Gods and men the Father, and of brutes and things that have no soul the maker? If Chrysippus may be credited, he is not properly styled the father of the afterbirth who supplied the seed, although it springs from the seed. Or has he figuratively called the maker of the world the father of it? In his Convivium he calls Phaedrus the father of the amatorious discourse which he had introduced; and so in his Phaedrus [261a] he calls him “father of noble children,” when he had been the occasion of many excellent discourses about philosophical matters. Or is there any difference between a father and a maker? Or between procreation and making? For as what is procreated is also made, but not the contrary; so he that procreated did also make, for the procreation of an animal is the making of it. Now the work of a maker – as of a builder, a weaver, a musical-instrument maker, or a statuary – is altogether distinct and separate from its author; but the principle and power of the procreator is implanted in the progeny, and contains his nature, the progeny being a piece pulled off the procreator. Since therefore the world is neither like a piece of potter’s work nor joiner’s work, but there is a great share of life and divinity in it, which God from himself communicated to and mixed with matter, God may properly be called Father of the world – since it has life in it – and also the maker of it.

2. And since these things come very near to Plato’s opinion, consider, I pray, whether there may not be some probability in them. Whereas the world consists of two parts, body and soul, God indeed made not the body; but matter being provided, he formed and fitted it, binding up and confining what was

infinite within proper limits and figures. But the soul, partaking of mind, reason, and harmony, was not only the work of God, but part of him: not only made by him, but begot by him.

QUESTION III

In the Republic [Book VI, 509d-511e], he supposes the universe, as one line, to be cut into two unequal sections; again he cuts each of these sections in two after the same proportion, and supposes the two sections first made to constitute the two genera of things sensible and things intelligible in the universe. The first represents the genus of intelligibles, comprehending in the first subdivision the primitive forms or ideas, in the second the mathematics. Of sensibles, the first subdivision comprehends solid bodies, the second comprehends the images and representations of them. Moreover, to every one of these four he has assigned its proper judicatory faculty; – to the first, reason; to the mathematics, the understanding; to sensibles, belief; to images and likenesses, conjecture.

But what does he mean by Dividing the Universe into Unequal Parts? And which of the Sections, the Intelligible or the Sensible, is the greater? For in this he has not explained himself.

1. At first sight it will appear that the sensible is the greater portion. For the essence of intelligibles being indivisible, and in the same respect ever the same, is contracted into a little, and pure; but an essence divisible and pervading bodies constitutes the sensible part. Now what is immaterial is limited; but body in respect of matter is infinite and unlimited, and it becomes sensible only when it is defined by partaking of the intelligible. Besides, as every sensible has many images, shadows, and representations, and from one and the same original several copies may be taken both by nature and art; so the latter must needs exceed the former in number, according to Plato, who makes things intelligible to be patterns or ideas of things sensible, like the originals of images and reflections. Further, Plato derives the knowledge of ideas from body by abstraction and cutting away, leading us by various steps in mathematical discipline from arithmetic to geometry, thence to astronomy, and setting harmony above them all. For things become geometrical by the accession of magnitude to quantity; solid, by the accession of profundity to magnitude; astronomical, by the accession of motion to solidity; harmonical, by the accession of sound to motion. Abstract then sound from moving bodies, motion from solids, profundity from superficies, magnitude from quantity, we are then come to pure intelligible ideas, which have no distinction among themselves in respect of the one single intelligible essence. For unity makes no number, unless joined by the infinite binary; then it makes a number. And thence we proceed to points, thence to lines, from them to superficies, and profundities, and bodies, and to the qualities of the bodies so and so qualified. Now the reason is the only judicatory faculty of intelligibles; and the understanding is the reason in the mathematics, where intelligibles appear as by reflection in mirrors. But as to the knowledge of bodies, because of their multitude, Nature has given us five powers or distinctions of senses; nor are all bodies discerned by them, many escaping sense by reason of their smallness. And though every one of us consists of a body and soul, yet the hegemonic and intellectual faculty is small, being hid in the huge mass of flesh. And the case is the same in the universe, as to sensible and intelligible. For intelligibles are the principles of bodily things, but every thing is greater than the principle whence it came.

2. Yet, on the contrary, some will say that, by comparing sensibles with intelligibles, we match things mortal with divine, in some measure; for God is in intelligibles. Besides, the thing contained is ever less than the containing, and the nature of the universe contains the sensible in the intelligible. For God, having placed the soul in the middle, hath extended it through all, and hath covered it all round with bodies. The soul is invisible, and cannot be perceived by any of the senses, as Plato says in his Book of Laws; therefore every man must die, but the world shall never die. For mortality and dissolution

surround every one of our vital faculties. The case is quite otherwise in the world; for the corporeal part, contained in the middle by the more noble and unalterable principle, is ever preserved. And a body is said to be without parts and indivisible for its minuteness; but what is incorporeal and intelligible is so, as being simple and sincere, and void of all firmness and difference. Besides, it were folly to think to judge of incorporeal things by corporeal. The present, or now, is said to be without parts and indivisible, since it is everywhere and no part of the world is void of it. But all affections and actions, and all corruptions and generations in the world, are contained by this *now*. But the mind is judge only of what is intelligible, as the sight is of light, by reason of its simplicity and similitude. But bodies, having several differences and diversities, are comprehended, some by one judicatory faculty, others by another, as by several organs. Yet they do not well who despise the intelligible and intelligent faculty in us; for being great, it comprehends all sensibles, and attains to things divine. The most important thing he himself teaches in his Banquet, where he shows us how we should use amatorious matters, turning our minds from sensible goods to things discernible only by the reason, that we ought not to be enslaved by the beauty of any body, study, or learning, but laying aside such pusillanimity, should turn to the vast ocean of beauty [*Symposium*, 210d].

QUESTION IV

What is the Reason that, though Plato always says that the Soul is Ancienter than the Body, and that it is the Cause and Principle of its Rise, yet he likewise says, that neither could the Soul exist without the Body, nor the Reason without the Soul, but the Soul in the Body and the Reason in the Soul? For so the Body will seem to be and not to be, because it both exists with the Soul, and is begot by the Soul.

Perhaps what we have often said is true; *viz.*, that the soul without reason and the body without form did mutually ever coexist, and neither of them had generation or beginning. But after the soul did partake of reason and harmony, and being through consent made wise, it wrought a change in matter, and being stronger than the other's motions, it drew and converted these motions to itself. So the body of the world drew its original from the soul, and became conformable and like to it. For the soul did not make the Nature of the body out of itself, or out of nothing; but it wrought an orderly and pliable body out of one disorderly and formless. Just as if a man should say that the virtue of the seed is with the body, and yet that the body of the fig-tree or olive-tree was made of the seed, he would not be much out; for the body, its innate motion and mutation proceeding from the seed, grew up and became what it is. So, when formless and indefinite matter was once formed by the inbeing soul, it received such a form and disposition.

QUESTION VI

How comes it to pass that in Phaedrus it is said, that the Nature of a Wing, by which any thing that is Heavy is carried upwards, participates most of the Body of God? [246d]

Is it because the discourse is of love, and love is of beauty inherent in a body? Now beauty, by similitude to things divine, moves and reminds the soul. Or it may be (without too much curiosity) he may be understood in plain meaning, to wit, that the several faculties of the soul being employed about bodies, the power of reasoning and understanding partakes most about divine and heavenly things; which he did not impertinently call a wing, it raising the soul from mean and mortal things to things above.

QUESTION VIII

What means Timaeus, [42d] when he says that Souls are dispersed into the Earth, the Moon, and into other Instruments of Time?

1. Does the earth move like the sun, moon, and five planets, which for their motions he calls organs or instruments of time? Or is the earth fixed to the axis of the universe; yet not so built as to remain immovable, but to turn and wheel about, as Aristarchus and Seleucus have shown since; Aristarchus only supposing it, Seleucus positively asserting it? Theophrastus writes how that Plato, when he grew old, repented him that he had placed the earth in the middle of the universe, which was not its place.

2. Or is this contradictory to Plato's opinion elsewhere, and in the Greek instead of χρόνου should it be written χρόνω, taking the dative case instead of the genitive, so that the stars will not be said to be instruments, but the bodies of animals? So Aristotle has defined the soul to be "the actual being of a natural organic body, having the power of life." [cf. Aristotle, *de Anima*, II. 1] The sense then must be this, that souls are dispersed into meet organical bodies in time. But this is far besides his opinion. For it is not once, but several times, that he calls the stars instruments of time; as when he says, the sun was made, as well as other planets, for the distinction and conservation of the numbers of time.

3. It is therefore most proper to understand the earth to be here an instrument of time; not that the earth is moved, as the stars are; but that, they being carried about it, it standing still makes sunset and sunrising, by which the first measures of time, nights and days, are circumscribed. Wherefore he called it the infallible guard and artificer of night and day. For the gnomons of dials are instruments and measures of time, not in being moved with the shadows, but in standing still; they being like the earth in intercepting the light of the sun when it is down, — as Empedocles says that the earth makes night by intercepting light. This therefore may be Plato's meaning.

4. And so much the rather might we consider whether the sun is not absurdly and without probability said to be made for the distinction of time, with the moon and the rest of the planets. For as in other respects the dignity of the sun is great; so by Plato in his Republic [Book VI, 508-509] the sun is called the king and lord of the whole sensible nature, as the Chief Good is of the intelligible. For it is said to be the offspring of Good, it giving both generation and appearance to things visible; as it is from Good that things intelligible both are and are understood. But that this God, having such a nature and so great power, should be only an instrument of time, and a sure measure of the difference that happens among the eight orbs, as they are slow or swift in motion, seems neither decent nor highly rational. It must therefore be said to such as are startled at these things, that it is their ignorance to think that time is the measure of motion in respect of sooner or later, as Aristotle calls it; or quantity in motion, as Speusippus; or an interval of motion and nothing more, as some of the Stoics define it, by an accident, not comprehending its essence and power, which Pindar has not ineptly expressed in these words: Time, who surpasses all in the seats of the blest. Pythagoras also, when he was asked what time was, answered, it was the soul of this world. For time is no affection or accident of motion, but the cause, power, and principle of that symmetry and order that confines all created beings, by which the animated nature of the universe is moved. Or rather, this order and symmetry itself — so far as it is motion — is called time. For this,

Walking by still and silent ways,

Mortal affairs with justice guides. [Euripides, *Troad*. 887]

According to the ancients, the essence of the soul is a number moving itself. Therefore Plato says that time and heaven were coexistent, but that motion was before heaven had being. But time was not. For then there neither was order, nor measure, nor determination; but indefinite motion, as it were, the

formless and rude matter of time. . . . But when matter was informed with figures, and motion with circutions, from that came the world, from this time. Both are representations of God; the world, of his essence; time, of his eternity in the form of motion, as the world is God in creation. Therefore they say heaven and motion, being bred together, will perish together, if ever they do perish. For nothing is generated without time, nor is any thing intelligible without eternity; if this is to endure for ever, and that never to die when once bred. Time therefore, having a necessary connection and affinity with heaven, cannot be called simple motion, but (as it were) motion in order having terms and periods; whereof since the sun is prefect and overseer, to determine, moderate, produce, and observe changes and seasons, which (according to Heraclitus) produce all things, he is coadjutor to the governing and chief God, not in trivial things, but in the greatest and most momentous affairs.

QUESTION IX

Since Plato in his Commonwealth, discoursing of the faculties of the soul, has very well compared the symphony of reason and of the irascible and the concupiscent faculties to the harmony of the middle, lowest, and highest chord,* some men may properly ask this question: —

Did Plato place the Rational or the Irascible Faculty in the Middle? For he is not Clear in the Point.

1. Indeed, according to the natural order of the parts, the place of the irascible faculty must be in the middle, and of the rational in the highest, which the Greeks call hypate. For they of old called the chief and supreme ὑπατος. So Xenocrates calls Jove, in respect of immutable things, ὑπατος (or *highest*), in respect of sublunary things νεάτος (or *lowest*.) And long before him, Homer calls the chief God ὑπατος κρείόντων, *Highest of Rulers*. And Nature has of due given the highest place to what is most excellent, having placed reason as a steersman in the head, and the concupiscent faculty at a distance, last of all and lowest. And the lowest place they call νεάτη, as the names of the dead, νέστεροι and ἔνεροι, do show. And some say, that the south wind, inasmuch as it blows from a low and obscure place, is called νότος. Now since the concupiscent faculty stands in the same opposition to reason in which the lowest stands to the highest and the last to the first, it is not possible for the reason to be uppermost and first, and yet for any other part to be the one called ὑπατος (or *highest*). For they that ascribe the power of the middle to it, as the ruling power, are ignorant how they deprive it of a higher power, namely, of the highest, which is competent neither to the irascible nor to the concupiscent faculty; since it is the nature of them both to be governed by and obsequious to reason, and the nature of neither of them to govern and lead it. And the most natural place of the irascible faculty seems to be in the middle of the other two. For it is the nature of reason to govern, and of the irascible faculty both to govern and be governed, since it is obsequious to reason, and commands the concupiscent faculty when this is disobedient to reason. And as in letters the semi-vowels are middling between mutes and vowels, having something more than those and less than these; so in the soul of man, the irascible faculty is not purely passive, but hath often an imagination of good mixed with the irrational appetite of revenge. Plato himself, after he had compared the soul to a pair of horses and a charioteer, likened (as every one knows) the rational faculty to the charioteer, and the concupiscent to one of the horses, which was resty and unmanageable altogether, bristly about the ears, deaf and disobedient both to whip and spur; and the irascible he makes for the most part very obsequious to the bridle of reason, and assistant to it. As therefore in a chariot, the middling one in virtue and power is not the charioteer, but that one of the horses which is worse than his guider and yet better than his fellow; so in the soul, Plato gives the middle place not to the principal part, but to that faculty which has less of reason than the principal part and more than the third. This order also observes the analogy of the symphonies, i.e. the relation of the irascible to the rational (which

is placed as hypate) forming the diatessaron (or fourth), that of the irascible to the concupiscent (or nete) forming the diapente (or fifth), and that of the rational to the concupiscent (as hypate to nete) forming an octave or diapason. But should you place the rational in the middle, you would make the irascible farther from the concupiscent; though some of the philosophers have taken the irascible and the concupiscent faculty for the selfsame, by reason of their likeness.

2. But it may be ridiculous to describe the first, middle, and last by their place; since we see hypate highest in the harp, lowest in the pipe; and wheresoever you place the mese in the harp, provided it is tunable, it sounds more acute than hypate, and more grave than nete. Nor does the eye possess the same place in all animals; but wherever it is placed, it is natural for it to see. So a pedagogue, though he goes not foremost but follows behind, is said to lead (ἄγειν), as the general of the Trojan army,

Now in the front, now in the rear was seen,
And kept command; [*Iliad*, xi. 64]

but wherever he was, he was first and chief in power. So the faculties of the soul are not to be ranged by mere force in order of place or name, but according to their power and analogy. For that in the body of man reason is in the highest place, is accidental. But it holds the chief and highest power, as mese to hypate, in respect of the concupiscent; as mese to nete, in respect of the irascible; insomuch as it depresses and heightens, – and in fine makes a harmony, – by abating what is too much and by not suffering them to flatten and grow dull. For what is moderate and symmetrical is defined by mediocrity. Still more is it the object of the rational faculty to reduce the passions to moderation, which is called sacred, as effecting a harmony of the extremes with reason, and through reason with each other. For in chariots the best of the beasts is not in the middle; nor is the skill of driving to be placed as an extreme, but it is a mediocrity between the inequality of the swiftness and the slowness of the horses. So the force of reason takes up the passions irrationally moved, and reducing them to measure, constitutes a mediocrity betwixt too much and too little.