

## **Bogdan Bogdanov: In *Phaedo* the dialogue begins hesitantly**

It makes sense to try and work in a way that gives the person a pleasure from what they are doing. Education nowadays, while trying to be comprehensive, is so structured that students are never allowed the time for intensive reading, to read deep into ONE text – which is why I want our course to break away from regular programmes, which somehow happen to be insurmountably piled up with detail and the time is given up to some all-encompassing system but the student is never allowed space to scrupulously and slowly explore specific texts at his own pace. Bear in mind the fact that we are still far from this option – when we do things, to be able to do them with pleasure. Of course, Plato, among other things, deals with what precisely “pleasure” is; he has his own opinion, we have our own - different from his, but be that as it may, doing things with sufficient tenderness and joy increases the likelihood of achieving good results. What I intend to achieve with this course is training based on one text and one author. This type of training is not done widely, but we are doing it here. We are trying to show with our course by defining a list of set texts – and we read nothing but those texts – we try to read them as they are – at the same time alongside our reading, nothing prevents us from acquiring external knowledge, however, systematically – because everything, each text, by being this particular text, implies certain contextual knowledge. That is why I mention issues from the context, which you need to accumulate.

We are going to read Plato’s *Phaedo* – we shall read one dialogue and having read and interpreted it, we shall enter the complex situation of trying to make maximum sense of this text as a text, rather than as anything else. This is what education is all about – to face a task and, unlike uneducated people who tend to obliterate the details with the type of abstract generalities they call “the most important”, to actually explore every detail in depth. Studying details is not easy – a lot of background knowledge is needed, a sharp eye is a must to spot differences and similarities, structures which do not immediately throw themselves to the eye unless comprehension skills exist. In this sense our reading will be preparatory, propaedeutic, i.e. a *sui generis* training for another type of knowledge which we do not even know what it might be yet. However, our major task with reading *Phaedo* is to abide by the details of the text.

In *Phaedo* the writer makes it crystal clear what is going on, what it is all about and how each part connects with the next one. We have in our hands a celebrated text that has been read for centuries, a text that is perfectly connected in coherence. The significant difference between one text and another is their coherence. The human being, without any exception, even the dimmest, the least educated reader seeks out connectedness – without specifying that coherence is what attracts them. In *Phaedo* we have a coherence that is guaranteed, and in its great connectedness we, modern people find things that are odd, to say the least – uninteresting. Because we do not have such a grounding – to understand things in this way. It takes persistence to discern that Plato’s *Phaedo* deals with the issue of death, or more abstractly – with the forthcoming non-existence.

In *Phaedo* the dialogue begins hesitantly – whether it is about one thing or another, but it very soon transpires that it is about his friends at his bedside on his last day on Earth, gathered to bid their final farewell and at dusk he is to take the poison, and Socrates delves into the topic and little by little, from one word to another he launches the thesis that death is something genuinely natural, in a secured existence of the soul which goes on, and this should make the soul rejoice, because it is truly free, as has been said in other dialogues of Plato's, although Plato has also construed the soul differently elsewhere. As the soul inhabits something like a prison – he says that in *Crito* and in *Gorgias* – it is happy to be freed from this prison, to be whatever it is, to be liberated from the burden of the body, which did not allow the soul to think and comprehend, to discern. Because – as Socrates puts it very clearly – the only pleasure a true man, i.e. a philosopher, can have is to understand things in their depth. Of course, words are not good enough here – I can just as well say 'essence', Plato uses such a concept, which is presented descriptively, with two words in ancient Greek, but only beyond life, in the real life after death is genuine cognition possible. I use the word 'cognition' because we understand it, but it does not exist in *Phaedo*. What is mentioned is knowledge and knowing, nevertheless, what we hold as a very valuable concept via a tradition coming from German idealist philosophy, the so-called cognition – only after death can the soul attain knowledge really and to experience genuine pleasure, which is a pleasure of the highest order. So, we have this situation where we get to the topic of death, to the topic about the soul being immortal and indestructible and then comes the long and central dialogue in which, in effect, Socrates develops – as we would say – four arguments, or as others prefer – three arguments about the immortality of the soul. He argues with his opponents in the dialogue, he develops an argument, the opponents give their counter-arguments, he refutes them, one after the other, carefully, until finally they all come round and agree: "yes, it has been proven that the soul is immortal and indestructible" and that, in effect, real philosophy is nothing other than the practice of dying. And this is the first problem in the text, they all get upset and say: "ok, if true philosophy is the practice of death, why, then, can the philosopher not put an end to his life himself". Socrates explains why, gives arguments that this need not happen, but should it happen, the philosopher should rejoice and stay calm. One way or another, in the end he gives a long persuasive speech in the actual dialogue, but no one is convinced and quite naturally, as befits human beings, they all feel sad as the hour of taking the poison draws near. They start crying, but he tells them: "hey, why are you doing this, didn't I just send away the women to prevent them from crying here, but now it is you who cry". Crito cannot possibly understand – says Plato – that I will not be the one who in a while will see me dead. We have here a very clear definition of what Man is; however, other dialogues by Plato give different definitions.

As I am telling you the story with so much pathos, it touches you, because each and every one of you - irrespective of whether you may have come to think of – has some idea what Man is. This is a very powerful idea, and it is the opposite of Socrates' idea – we never begin to construe our body as separate from ourselves. But Socrates says that – "it is not me, it is my soul..." – and he says what will happen to it when it is released from the prison of the body. It has a long time to live and a lot more will happen to it and a lot more knowledge will it acquire. That is why he tries to convince his audience, Socrates does. You will see with what

beauty this has been said and done; and even the material world – because the body is material – and the material world itself is built like this: there are low places which are filthy and impure, and there are places which are higher and they get cleaner and cleaner. And there, in the empyrean, there are such places which are material but so to say – less material than the place at the bottom of the sea. We shall read this passage, it is wonderful, really beautiful, but we must not read uncritically. Contrarily, we may think that it is beautiful for a diver to get deep down and watch from there – but Socrates tells us that everything down there is filthy and the higher you go, the cleaner it gets – i.e. there is the idea that between the material world and the immaterial, the soul, which is the very essence of existence, this immaterial soul which has no body and that is why it can understand and learn, while we, who have a body, are unable to do so because in the noise of the body there are beautiful passages which can be taken out and considered truthful, but the noise of the body is indeed so big and it gets in our way while we are doing our job, which may not be so philosophical, heaven forbid what would happen if we were dealing with philosophy.

We speak of body and soul, but have we ever considered relating this opposition to the world at large. And to the Universe? No way! The modern man lives in civil societies, which are like big rooms, and he is in there – he cares little about anything outside – let Outer Space be the concern of philologists and cosmologists, this is their job, we do not care about Cosmos. Here, in *Phaedo*, we have no such person, he does not live in a room, he lives straight in an open world, that is why it is so easy for him to connect his understanding with the whole world – and you will see the description Socrates has made of the World and the Underworld. Plato in his *Republic* and in one more dialogue describes the underworld, and the descriptions are so different that a whole new science can be developed about it – about the contradictions which Plato makes in his descriptions of the underworld. These are no contradictions – says Plato – I am speaking now, at this time things are as they are, at this particular moment, the moment of this dialogue. There is no such thing which is true in general. He does not suggest that truth is elusive.

Beware that this is the most difficult thing about thinking – not to be distracted by something which is the same, but to look for that which is different. We either think about the very same thing and say: “This is the same thing, do not bother me with this, let us get to the main thing” or “this is nothing to do with it, a completely different matter” – these are the two verbal acts that surface in conversations, no matter what the topic may be.

Learn from those bothersome people the type of patience that a man needs to read long texts carefully, because we rush to interesting texts and interesting people, but the benefit we can derive from uninteresting and bothersome people is big. I have learnt this from Plato himself, because there is one dialogue where Socrates is asked: “how can you live with a bane, such as Xanthippe”, because she is known to have been harsh, and his reply is this: “the benefit of putting up with such a wife is immense”. He must be right.