

THE *PHAEDO* ON THE BODY AS “A KIND OF PRISON”
SOME THOMISTIC TRUTHS BEHIND PLATO’S MISTAKE

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“The corruptible body weighs down the soul.”

—Wisdom 9:15

“φθαετὸν γὰρ σῶμα βαρύνει ψυχὴν”

—ΣΟΦΙΑ ΣΟΛΟΜΩΝΤΟΣ

I

People today find fault with Plato for many reasons—most typically, they take offense at his supposedly banishing all poets and poetry from his ideal republic. In contemporary Catholic circles, however, he seems to be most notorious for saying in the *Phaedo* that the body is an “evil”¹ and a “kind of prison” (τινι φρουρῶ)² from which, if we have lived rationally, we are happily released when we die. Aware of the Catholic

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¹ 66b.

² 62b.

faith's insistence on the naturalness of the human body and the goodness of material creation, many contemporary Catholic students of ancient philosophy express nothing but hostility toward Plato on account of his dualism and disparagement of the body.

Plato's understanding of the body-soul relation is, to be sure, philosophically mistaken. Plato is wrong to deny that the body is a natural part of man's substance intended to enable him to realize his good in this world. Nevertheless, one might still ask whether the doctrine laid out in the *Phaedo* really merits the categorical rejection it often receives? Is there nothing worthwhile and important in Plato's teaching on the body and its relation to the perfection of the soul from which we can learn?

To say that there is something significant to learn does not, of course, entail affirming the notion that underlies Plato's disparaging view of human corporeality, namely, the idea that a human being *is* a soul. Throughout the dialogues, Plato wrongly portrays the human soul as a complete rational substance presently handicapped with embodiment, and thus estranged from its true life and activity. As wise as Plato is about many things, this understanding of the body-soul relation is false. Plato is right in thinking that the soul is *subsistent* and has an act which is not the act of a body. But he failed to recognize that the soul is also by nature a *forma corporis*, the first act of an organic body, which is accordingly a natural part of man's substance fitting him for his proper operations in this world.

It is certainly important to grasp this limitation in Plato's understanding. Nevertheless, there is some danger here of throwing out the baby with the bathwater. There are significant truths in Plato's understanding of how our present bodily condition relates to our attainment of our ultimate end. St. Thomas recognized these truths, but if we simply dismiss Plato as a misguided dualist and move on to other topics, we

run the risk of missing out on those truths ourselves, or even falling into their contrary errors.

In this essay, I want to articulate these truths which underlie Plato's mistake, and defend them in the light of St. Thomas' teaching on the matter. It is my hope to show that, even as we rightly reject Plato's dualism, we can still learn a great deal from the *Phaedo* on the human body's precarious relation to man's highest and most perfective activity, and thus to his ultimate happiness.

In attempting to highlight what is insightful in Plato's teaching, I will first present the reasons Plato adduces for his position, and at each stage of his argument, I will introduce St. Thomas' reasoning on these matters in order to manifest the depth of his agreement with Plato.

Now my thesis is this: while Plato is wrong to regard the body as an unnatural and unfortunate accident befalling our soul, as if it were just a "kind of prison," he is right to see our present bodily condition as a consistently distracting and ultimately impotent instrument for attaining what the soul naturally desires the most, which is to say, that highest good in which our happiness consists. In agreeing with Plato about this point, I am not saying that the body is not a good and natural thing. I am also not denying that the body is naturally organized to help man fulfill his specific operations in this life.

What I *am* saying is that the body plays a very humble, and ultimately, as we shall see, a merely receptive, role in attaining and possessing complete human happiness. As an intellectual being, man is a rather paradoxical creature. His natural bodily condition in this life, because it is an organic medium of cognition, is necessarily inadequate for satisfying man's highest natural desire. Thus, if man *does* achieve complete happiness, he will do so because his principal operation, which is knowing, will no longer be dependent upon the body as it now naturally is. In other words, to be ultimately happy, man

must come to possess the object of his beatitude in the same manner as do the separated intellectual substances. As such, one might almost say that Plato gets more right in the *Phaedo* than he gets wrong. To see this, let us turn to his reasoning in the dialogue.

II

Plato states the essence of his position as follows: "So long as we have the body, and the soul is contaminated with such an evil, we shall never attain completely what we desire. And this [thing we desire], we say, is the Truth (τὸ ἀληθές)."³ Here, concisely stated, is Plato's *reason* for thinking ill of the body: We cannot attain to that Truth whose possession completely satisfies human desire so long as this pursuit takes place "with the body" (μετὰ τοῦ σώματος).⁴

There are two aspects to Plato's claim here. First, ultimate human happiness consists in the soul's possession of "the Truth." Second, our present bodily condition is an obstacle to our coming to possess this Truth "completely" in the way that we ultimately desire. So long as our cognition is dependent upon the body, as Plato rightly sees that it always must be in this life, we can never fully attain to this end.

Both of these claims, understood properly, are true. Taken together, they *seem* to entail the conclusion that the body is an unnatural hindrance to human happiness, since a condition which necessarily hinders us from attaining our end would appear to be unnatural to us. This, of course, is Plato's mistake. But before discussing why his conclusion does not follow, we need to appreciate the truth of the two claims from which it seems to follow. Let's examine each of them in turn.

³ 66b.

⁴ 65b.

III

The first claim stands out as one of the most central aspects of Plato's philosophy. Our perfection and yearning for happiness are realized in the soul's rational possession of intelligible Truth. To attain this truth is to see "purely" with the intellect the essential forms of things in themselves. There are two stages to this vision: The first is reason's ascent beyond the sensible to a grasp of the actual essence and being of the sensible particulars we perceive around us.

Thus Plato speaks of the mind grasping "Man itself," or "dog itself," or "justice itself." These are, for Plato, subsisting forms, the true beings, or, as he puts it in the *Phaedrus*, the "reality which really is (οὐσία ὄντως οὐσία), colorless and shapeless and intangible, visible to the intellect only."⁵ Thus, the soul's natural desire to understand "what things are" finds its satisfaction in the grasp of these eternal paradigms in which all sensibles participate.

It was Plato's mistake to conceive of *all* of these forms as separately subsisting. These objects of knowledge are indeed *real intelligibilities* which perfect the mind, and as such do eternally exist super-eminently in the divine Good. But forms like "man itself" and "dog itself" are not separate substances, but rather the intelligible forms of things whose being and intelligibility are inseparable from matter and motion. Nevertheless, Plato is not entirely wrong about positing subsistent intelligibles. As we shall discuss more in a moment, there do actually exist separate and subsistent intelligible forms the rational understanding of which is perfective of the mind to an even greater degree than a complete knowledge of (the forms) of natural things is.

Yet, while the understanding of these separated intelligible truths is, for Plato, a consuming desire of the philosophical

⁵ *Phaedrus* 247c6-d1.

soul, it is not the ultimate goal, and thus not the final satisfaction of human desire. There is, Plato sees, a higher Truth. Just as sensible particulars participate the intelligible truths which Plato calls the forms, so do these intelligible forms themselves participate that Form of Forms which transcends them as their cause. This is the Idea of the Good.

This Good "itself by itself" is the ground of all intelligible truth because it is the cause of the "existence and the essence (το εἶναι τε καὶ τὴν οὐσίαν)"⁶ of everything that is knowable. As such, it is "what provides the truth to the things known and gives the power to the knower."⁷ Thus, "in the knowable the last thing (τελευταία) to be seen, and with considerable effort, is the Idea of the Good; but once seen, it must be concluded that this is the cause in everything of all that is right and beautiful" (πᾶσι πάντων αὕτη ὀρθῶν τε καὶ καλῶν αἰτία).⁸ This is why Plato calls the Idea of the Good "the greatest study" (μέγιστον μάθημα).⁹

In seeing this first, super-eminent Truth, Plato claims, we finally attain "what we completely desire," for this vision unites us to the divine, and makes us as divine as it is possible for a man to be. It is, as he writes in the *Theaetetus*, an "assimilation to God as far as that is possible (ὁμοίωσις θεῶ κατὰ τὸ δυνατόν)" (176b), for the more the soul succeeds in such a contemplative union, the more "deiform" (θεοειδές) and "godlike" (θεοεικέλον) it becomes, as Plato describes it in *Republic VI*.¹⁰

Turning to St. Thomas, it is clear that, like Plato, he also

⁶ *Rep.* 509b7-8.

⁷ *Rep.* 508e1-3.

⁸ *Rep.* 517b8-c2.

⁹ *Rep.* 505a2.

¹⁰ Cf. *Rep.* 500c9-d2: "Keeping company with the divine and the orderly, the philosopher becomes as orderly and divine as possible (κόσμιός τε καὶ θεῖος εἰς τὸ δυνατόν)." St. Augustine thus not unfittingly describes Plato's understanding of human happiness as follows: "Plato determined the final good to be living according to virtue, and he alone is

regards man's complete happiness as naturally consisting in a perfect intellectual vision of the First Truth, who is God. He tells us at the beginning of the *Summa Contra Gentiles* that the ultimate end of the universe is Truth, which is the proper object and good of the intellect. Like Augustine, therefore, St. Thomas defines happiness as "joy in the Truth (*beatitudo est gaudium de veritate*)" (*ST I-II*, 4, 1).

His reasoning behind this conclusion is straightforward. To be happy is something active. It is thus an operation of man. As such, it must be the highest and most perfect operation of which man's nature is capable. This most perfect operation must then be of man's highest power directed toward the highest object of that power. Applying this reasoning to man's faculties, St. Thomas concludes:

[man's] highest power is the intellect whose highest object is the Divine Good, which is the object . . . of the speculative intellect. Consequently, happiness consists principally . . . in the contemplation of Divine things . . . such an operation is most proper to man and most delightful to him." *ST I-II*, 3, 5

Only contemplation of "the Divine Good" can make a rational creature completely happy because "the proper object" of man's most specifying faculty is "the true" (*ST I-II*, 3, 7), and God alone *is* Truth "*per essentiam*." Every other possible object of the intellect is true only by participation, and thus can make man happy only imperfectly.

In the context of explaining why even a contemplative vision of the separated angelic forms does not make man fully happy, Thomas writes:

able to arrive at it who possesses knowledge of and likeness to God, there being no other cause of happiness. Therefore [Plato] does not doubt that to philosophize is to love God, whose nature is incorporeal. Whence it immediately follows that the seeker of wisdom (that is, the philosopher) will only attain happiness when he begins to enjoy God" (*City of God*, VIII, 8).

whatever possesses participated truth, when contemplated, does not make the intellect perfect with its final perfection. Since, however, the disposition of things in being is the same as in truth . . . whatever are beings by participation are true by participation. Angels however have participated being, since of God alone is His Being His essence. . . . Whence it remains that God alone is truth through His essence, and the contemplation of Him makes perfectly happy.¹¹

All knowledge of participated truth is thus perfective and beatifying to the degree that it approximates this first Truth. So as delightful as it would be to see the essence of the most exalted separated angelic forms, human nature would still remain naturally restless until it rested in the vision of that first unparticipated Truth.

I say "naturally restless" because the inclination to see the divine essence is a *natural* desire for our nature's ultimate end. Revelation is not necessary to know this fact or desire this good. That man has a natural desire for such a good follows from the idea that 'truth' is the proper object of man's most perfective faculty, since knowing the truth of something fully requires knowing *what that thing is*, which is to know its essence. Wherefore, St. Thomas points out:

When a man knows an effect, and knows that it has a cause, there *naturally* remains in man the desire to know, about that cause, what it is . . . (italics added).

Applying this to our knowledge of God, St. Thomas continues:

If therefore the human intellect, knowing the essence of some created effect, knows no more of God than that He is; the perfection of that intellect does not yet reach simply the First Cause, but there remains in it the *natural desire* to seek the cause. Wherefore it is not yet perfectly happy.

¹¹ *ST*, I-II, 3, 7.

Consequently, for perfect happiness the intellect needs to reach the very Essence of the First Cause (italics added).

Thus, the divine essence is an object of natural wonder, as Plato himself saw, even though it is not an object obtainable through any principles within human nature.¹²

IV

So at least on a philosophical level, St. Thomas agrees with Plato's account of man's final end and complete happiness. But let us now return our attention to the *second* aspect of Plato's position, his disparagement of the body. Plato's claim is that our sensible body is both a *hindering distraction* and an *impotent instrument* for attaining to that essential Truth in which man's happiness consists.

Socrates introduces this issue in the *Phaedo* when he poses the question: "What about the acquisition itself of wisdom (φρονήσεως)? Is the body a hindrance or not, if it is made to share together in the search for it?" (65a). Answering his own question, Socrates says: "the soul . . . thinks best when none of these things troubles it, neither hearing nor sight, nor pain nor any pleasure, but as far as possible, itself by itself, it takes leave of the body, and avoiding, so far as it can, all association with the body, it reaches out toward being (ὀρέγεται τοῦ ὄντος)" (65c).

Socrates makes reference here to problems involving both the *apprehensive*, as well as the *appetitive*, functions of the sensitive body. Plato sees that both the body's sensations as well as

¹² Even though this desire is natural, human nature does not possess within itself the power to attain this end. For that grace is necessary. Cf. *In Boeth. de Trinitate*, IV, 4: "We are endowed with principles by which we can prepare for that perfect knowledge of separate substances, but not with principles by which to reach it. Even though by his nature man is inclined to his ultimate end, he cannot reach it by nature but only by grace, and this is owing to the loftiness of that end."

its sense appetites constitute a stumbling block to the mind's effort to possess pure wisdom, which is to say, to see the essence of all things in themselves. Thus, we can distinguish two reasons for Plato's disparagement of the body.

First, the appetitive needs and desires of the corruptible body are a consistently hindering distraction to the attainment of Truth, and thus to that operation in which man's happiness principally consists. How so? The body is constantly subject to a two-fold corruption. First, there is the constant task of preserving the body's organic integrity and meeting its physical needs. "The body," Plato writes, "keeps us endlessly busy (ἀσχολίας) on account of its need for sustenance; and moreover, if diseases come upon it they hinder our pursuit of being (τὴν τοῦ ὄντος θήραν)" (66b-c).

If happiness lies in the contemplative "pursuit of being" then the ceaseless task of getting sleep, staving off hunger, maintaining hygiene, keeping warm, fighting disease, and nursing sickness is a profound hindrance and distraction to our highest activity. The fact that the body is in constant need of attention, care, and repair makes it extremely difficult in our present condition to devote oneself to the life of reason. Things like toothaches, headaches, exhaustion, and the inevitable deterioration of the body not only make contemplation rare and difficult, but can even make it impossible in this life, should some defect or infirmity of the body sufficiently damage the organs upon which our intellect is dependent.

According to St. Thomas, this problem is not simply the result of the Fall, but accrues to the body by the very nature of its material composition. He writes in his *Disputed Questions on the Soul*:

That the body is corruptible, that it grows weary, and that it has other defects of this kind are the necessary consequences of the kind of matter the body is. For it is necessary that

any body which is composed of these sorts of contraries be subject to these sorts of defects.¹³

These necessary negative consequences of having a sensitive body, St. Thomas tells us, were held in abeyance before the fall by the praeternatural gifts consequent upon original justice. Deprived of the praeternatural gifts, however, the inherent corruptibility of the body will inevitably have its negative impact on man's ordination to truth.¹⁴

Even more troublesome for our contemplative end is the second problem Plato refers to regarding the body's corruptibility. This is its subjection to appetitive corruption, that is, the consistent unruliness of inordinate passions eclipsing the life of reason and fixating our affections and fears on sensible things. Plato writes: "The body fills us with passions and desires and fears, and all sorts of fancies and foolishness, so that, as they say, it really and truly makes it impossible for us to think at all."¹⁵ In other words, disordered passions fundamentally disorient the soul's desires, enslave it to goods of the body, and thus blind it to its intelligible end. Plato writes:

each pleasure or pain hammers [the soul] as with a nail to the body and rivets it on and makes it corporeal, so that it fancies those things to be true which the body says are true. For because it has the same beliefs and pleasures as the body

¹³ *Quaestiones Disputatae de Anima*, 8.

¹⁴ "In order to provide a remedy for these defects, God, in creating a human being, bestowed on him the assistance of original justice, whereby the body would be wholly under the control of the soul so long as the soul remained subject to God; so that neither death nor suffering nor any other defect would affect a human being unless the soul were first separated from God. But when the soul turned away from God through sin, a human being was deprived of this privilege and is now subject to those defects which are due to the nature of matter." Ibid.

¹⁵ *Phaedo* 66c.

it is compelled to adopt also the same habits and mode of life, and can never depart in purity to the other world.¹⁶

The intensity of bodily pleasures and pains orients the intention of the soul toward the corporeal as toward what is most real, most good, and most beautiful. To the degree that a soul gives way to this, reason progressively loses its ability to see clearly and to order man to his true happiness. Once habitual, vice blinds the mind to its natural, contemplative end. Regarding gluttony and lust, St. Thomas himself says:

[T]hrough these vices, the intention of man is maximally applied to corporeal things (*maxime applicatur ad corporalia*). And as a consequence, the operation of man concerning intelligible things is debilitated. . . . And therefore from lust arises blindness of mind, which almost entirely excludes the knowledge of spiritual goods (*quasi totaliter spiritualium bonorum cognitionem excludit*).¹⁷

Again, this tendency to disorienting passions is not, for St. Thomas, due solely to our sinful condition, although it is certainly aggravated by it. St. Thomas argues that there is something inherent in the very nature of matter that makes it a hazard for a life ordered to our final end. He explains:

The struggle which is in man from desires (*concupiscentiis*) arises also from the necessity of matter; for it was necessary, if man were to have sensation, that he would sense delightful things, and that this desire for delightful things,

¹⁶ *Phaedo* 83d.

¹⁷ *ST* II-II, 15, 3. Cf. also *de Malo* 15, 4: "For it is manifest that when the intention of the soul is vehemently applied to the act of an inferior power, superior powers are debilitated and disordered in their activity. And therefore when in the act of lust, on account of the vehemence of the pleasure, the entire attention of the soul is attracted to the inferior powers, that is, to the concupiscible and the sense of touch, it is necessary that the superior powers, namely, reason and will, suffer defect."

which very often opposes reason, would arise in him as a consequence.¹⁸

The antidote to this harmful tendency now is, of course, the cultivation of those opposing virtues which bestow self-mastery and dispose man to engage in such pleasures only as reason dictates. Thus, "abstinence and chastity," St. Thomas continues, "maximally dispose man to the perfection of intellectual activity."¹⁹ Or as he says in another place, "the more the soul is freed from preoccupation with its body the more fit does it become for understanding higher things. Hence the virtue of temperance, which withdraws the soul from bodily pleasures, is especially fruitful in making men apt in understanding."²⁰

This is, of course, precisely what Plato himself proposes. In order to prepare himself in the best way for the rational ascent to Truth, man must practice asceticism and cultivate bodily purity with respect to the pleasures of food and sex. "For it is not permitted," Socrates says, "that the impure attain the pure."²¹ Thus, so long as the soul is subject to the disordering passions arising from the body, it will be hindered from attaining to that which completely satisfies its desires.

V

So much for the obstacles to our happiness arising from the body's corruptibility. Let us now turn to the second reason Plato gives for why the body hinders us from knowing the essences of things in the way that we naturally desire. This concerns the mode of cognition to which we are necessarily subject while in the body. Specifically, Plato states that *the*

¹⁸ *QDdA*, 8, ad 7.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *SCG* II, 81.

²¹ 67b.

soul cannot possess truth in the way it naturally yearns to so long as the body plays an instrumental role in the cognition of essences.

In this life, our knowledge is inevitably mixed up with sensation and imagination, such that we frequently mistake what we have imagined for what we know, and the accidental for the essential. More than that, our present dependency upon sensible images to call to mind an intelligible form prevents us from ever acquiring a *pure* knowledge of the essence of things, and *a fortiori*, of God. Thus the body, whose sense images we cannot entirely transcend in cognition, is not only an *impotent*, but also a presently *hindering*, instrument for the attainment of what we most deeply desire, which is, as we have seen, a pure vision of intelligible Truth.

Thus, Plato asks in the *Phaedo* referring to the forms, "Did you ever see anything of that kind with your eyes? . . . Or did you ever reach them with any of the bodily senses? I am speaking . . . of the essence (οὐσίας) of everything. Is what is most true (τὸ ἀληθέστατον) of them contemplated by means of the body (διὰ τοῦ σώματος)?" (65d-e)

The obvious answer is "no." "What goodness is" or "what justice is" has no color or shape or sound. One cannot sense it, and thus form an image of it, because it is intelligible. Plato affirms that by penetrating through the senses we can begin to understand "what a thing is," but in this life we will never fully attain to an immediate and pure vision of the essence itself. And this, of course, is the problem. "Nature loves to hide." Given our present bodily condition, we can only get at the essence of things "from the outside." Accordingly, in the *Phaedrus*, Plato describes the way the soul comes to grasp form in a manner that sounds remarkably similar to Aristotle's doctrine of abstraction. He writes:

It is necessary for man to understand (ξυγιέναι) what is said according to form (κατ' εἶδος λεγόμενον), going from many sense-perceptions (ἐκ πολλῶν ἰὸν αἰσθήσεων) to a

one (εἰς ἓν) gathered together by reasoning (λογισμῶ ξυ-
ναιρούμενον). (*Phaedrus* 249b6-c1)

In other words, reason arrives at intelligible form only *through* the experience of many sense-perceptions. This is not exactly the Aristotelian doctrine of abstraction, since Plato (wrongly) holds that the senses are necessary for cognition *only because* of our present accidental habitation of a body, not because this is our natural mode of acquiring knowledge.²²

Nevertheless, because this *is* our present condition, the best we can strive for, according to Plato, is to purify our understanding as much as possible from the sensible images that now awaken us to the reality of intelligible form. Thus, he says:

Would not that man [approximate knowledge] most purely who most of all approaches each thing with reason itself (αὐτῆ τῆ διανοία), not introducing sight into his reasoning, nor dragging any other sensation along with his thinking (μετὰ τοῦ λογισμοῦ) . . . because he feels that [the body's] companionship disturbs the soul and hinders it from attaining truth and wisdom?" 66a

If we take Plato to be speaking about separated intelligible forms, then St. Thomas himself would respond affirmatively to his question, since St. Thomas agrees that we must not have recourse to images in divine science (Cf. *In Boeth. De Trin.*, VI, 2). While our metaphysical knowledge of separated intelligible forms necessarily begins in sensation and imagination, it must end by ridding itself as much as possible of

²² As St. Thomas describes the Platonic position: "The Platonists held that the senses are necessary to the soul for understanding, not per se, as if knowledge is caused in us through sensibles, but per accidens, that is, in as much as through the senses our soul is aroused to recollecting what it knew previously." *QDdA*, 15 This temporary accidental need of the body's sensations for cognition, Thomas continues, "will be removed when the soul will have been separated from its body" (*QDdA*, 15).

sensible images. The source of almost all error in the history of metaphysics, St. Thomas tells us, arose from the failure to do this. He writes:

The occasion of all these errors was that, in thinking of divine things, men were made the victims of their imagination, through which it is not possible to receive anything except the likeness of a body. This is why, in meditating on what is incorporeal, we must stop following the imagination.²³

The important difference here, obviously, between Plato and St. Thomas is that, for St. Thomas, our soul is *naturally* the form of an organic body precisely *in order that* it might enable us to know things. Sensation, for St. Thomas, is not merely something accidentally necessary for knowledge in this life. It is rather the natural means through which the specific kind of intellect we have attains to a knowledge of things. Thus, it is for the very purpose of enabling the mind to arrive at the contemplation of truth, he writes, "that the soul is united to the body."²⁴

Yet, we need to be careful here. That man's body is natural to him is not so much a cause for boasting of the nobility of our corporeality, as it is a reason for acknowledging the weakness and inferiority of our intellect (in comparison with every other created intellect). In other words, that we are the kind of intellect that naturally needs phantasms in order to understand means that we are the lowest and weakest intellectual substance in creation. Speaking strictly in terms of the perfection and nobility of being, it is a superior form of existence to be an incorporeal intellectual substance than to be one which naturally has and needs a body for cognition. Indeed, one of the arguments that St. Thomas gives for why the soul does not pre-exist the body is that no naturally incor-

²³ SCG I, 21.

²⁴ SCG II, 83, [28].

poreal substance would ever willingly choose to be united to, and dependent upon, a body, for this would make its intellect dependent upon phantasms, and thus profoundly diminish its power of understanding.²⁵ This is not to say that having a body is bad or evil, only that it is humble and lowly.

All of which highlights the paradoxical nature of being human. We are naturally endowed with a sensitive body as part of our substance because that is how an intellect such as ours can best attain to a knowledge of the truth of things in this life, and yet we naturally desire and are ordered toward a knowledge of things that our present, phantasm-dependent, manner of knowing cannot yield. St. Thomas writes:

although a soul is more perfect in nature when united to its body, nevertheless on account of its bodily motions and preoccupation with the senses, it is held back (*retinetur*) so it cannot so freely be joined to higher substances in order to receive their influx, as it will be able to after its separation from the body.²⁶

In other words, St. Thomas concedes Plato's point that man's bodily condition, which is to say, his present dependence upon phantasms for knowing, prohibits him from possessing the kind of perfective knowledge which he desires. While "the ultimate perfection for a human soul in the order of natural knowledge," according to St. Thomas, "is to understand separate substances" (*QDdA*, 17, ad 3), man will never be able to achieve this while possessing a body that is instrumental for cognition, for

In the present life, it is absolutely impossible to know the essence of immaterial substances . . . [for] knowledge by way of the sensible is inadequate to enable us to know the essences of immaterial substances. So we conclude that we

²⁵ SCG II, 83, [17].

²⁶ *QDdA*, 15, ad 13.

do not know *what* immaterial forms are, but only *that* they are.²⁷

So according to St. Thomas, Plato is right to view our natural desire to see separated intellectual substances, and ultimately the Divine Good, as presently impossible given our current bodily condition. (However, it does need to be said that man's inability to see the Divine Essence is not due simply to his having a body, but also and principally to the fact that no finite intellect could ever by its own power comprehend the divine nature. Even separated intellects, no matter how exalted, are restless for this ultimate vision and dependent upon grace for it, which is something that Plato, as we shall see, shows only indirect signs of recognizing.)

Nevertheless, whether we are talking about the Divine Essence or the separated angelic forms, our natural desire to see them can be satisfied only *once* we are no longer dependent upon the body for cognition. As St. Thomas says of the knowledge of the separated soul after death: "when a soul will finally have been separated from its body, its sight will not be oriented toward lower things in order to acquire knowledge from them. It will be freed from its body, able to receive an influx from loftier substances without turning to phantasms."²⁸ As a result, Thomas says, "when the soul shall be completely separated from the body, it will be perfectly likened to separate substances in its mode of understanding, and will receive their influx abundantly."²⁹

Accordingly, although "a soul united to a body is in some way more perfect than when separated," nevertheless "with respect to its intellectual activity (*quantum ad actum intelligibilem*) a soul possesses a perfection when it is separated from its body which it cannot possess while united to its body"

²⁷ *In Boeth. de Trinitate*, VI, 3.

²⁸ *QDdA*, 17.

²⁹ *SCG II*, 81.

(*QDdA*, 17, ad 1). (This greater perfection of understanding, it should be noted, will be due to the influx of ideas which the separated soul will receive from the angels, and not from the clarity and distinctness of its own innate intellectual vision, which would remain confused and indistinct about such beings without receiving their light.) Nevertheless, here and now in the body, this is not possible. Neither the Divine Essence, nor the essences of the separated intellectual forms are attainable by the human intellect, despite human nature's ordination toward, and desire for, them.³⁰

Thus, even as St. Thomas corrects Plato and rightly points out that it is naturally good for us to have a body in this life in order to be able to attain what imperfect happiness is possible for us here and now, he is deeply aware of, and sympathetic to, the cognitive inadequacy of man's present bodily condition that led Plato to wish to transcend it.

³⁰ As if this wasn't humbling enough to the aspirations of the human intellect and our desire to understand, it is also the case that even with respect to those essences which our intellect is naturally proportioned to in this life, namely, the essences of material substances, man's understanding can only get at them from the outside, and thus is never fully able to understand these things in themselves. As he famously says in the Prooemium of his conferences on the Apostle's Creed: "Our cognition is so weak that no philosopher ever was able to investigate perfectly the nature of even a fly." (*In Symbolum Apostolorum*, Prooemium). The reason why this is so lies in the nature of our mode of knowing while in the body. Because in this life we can only get at the essences of things through sensible phantasms, St. Thomas explains, "substantial forms are unknown [to us] through themselves." It is not as though we cannot come to know them, "but they become known to us through proper accidents. For frequently," he continues, "substantial differences are taken from accidental differences, in place of substantial forms, which become known through such accidents" (*QD Spir. Creat.* 11, ad 3). Thus we can in this life only know natures through their effects, and never the effects through knowing the natures. Nevertheless, it is naturally desirable to us to know these things in themselves, and not merely from the outside.

VI

The conclusion Plato draws from the two points we have been discussing is, of course, the “mistake” about the body being an accident and a prison. Because (1) man naturally desires to see the essence of things, and ultimately to behold the Divine Good, and because (2) this perfection cannot be achieved, nor this natural desire satisfied, in our present bodily condition, with its distracting corruptibility and its limiting mediation of understanding through sensation, the body, Plato concludes, constitutes an *unnatural* obstacle to the satisfaction of the highest human desire. What necessarily prevents us from attaining our end and perfection is surely not natural to us, therefore the body is a “kind of prison.”

This being so, Plato reasons, the true philosopher, who has continually practiced dying to the sensible in this life, should be of “good hope” (ἀγαθῆς ἐλπίδος — 67c) in the face of death, for only when separated from the body, if anywhere, will the soul’s deepest desire be satisfied. As Socrates says in the *Phaedo*:

Then, when we die, as our argument shows, we will *likely* have the wisdom which we desire and claim to be enamoured of, *but not while we live*. For *if to know purely* (καθαρῶς γνῶναι) *is not possible with the body*, one of two things must follow, either there is nowhere for such knowledge to be acquired (κτῆσασθαι τὸ εἰδέναι) or only when we are dead; for then, itself by itself, the soul will be apart from the body, but not before. 66e

Note that Socrates’ words strikes a tone of hope, and not of presumption, about this intelligible vision. He does not claim to be *certain* that he will come to possess the Truth he has ultimately desired, but given what he has been discussing, he is confident. Thus, he goes on to say:

If these things are true, my friend, I have great hope that when I reach the place to which I am going, *I shall there*,

if anywhere, attain fully to that which has been my chief object in my prior life. 67b

It is worth asking whether this lack of presumption stems from a recognition that the soul must first be judged, or whether seeing the Divine Good is a gift which is God’s alone to give. Whichever it be, Plato is convinced that, if it is to be attained, such a vision can only happen after the soul has transcended its present bodily condition.

What I have been trying to highlight in this paper is that Plato is not wrong about this. So long as the body is instrumental for cognition, *as it naturally is for us in this life*, the soul will never be able to possess the Truth upon which its happiness depends. St. Thomas says:

The higher our mind is elevated to the contemplation of spiritual things, the more is it withdrawn (*abstrahitur*) from sensible things. Now, the final limit to which contemplation can reach is the divine substance. Hence, the mind which sees the divine substance must be completely cut off (*totaliter . . . absolutam*) from the bodily senses, either by death or by ecstasy.³¹

Even though human beings will always remain substances for whom a body is natural, nevertheless, the modality of our corporeality and the way our principal operation relates to the body must undergo a fundamental transformation, if we are to be perfectly happy. This will happen “only after this life,” Thomas says, “when man’s soul is existing immortally; in which state the soul will understand in the way that separate

³¹ SCG, 3, 47. Cf. also St. Thomas’ quote of Augustine in his *Catena Aurea* on Matthew 5:8: “No one seeing God can be alive with the life men have on earth, or with these our bodily senses. Unless one die altogether out of this life, either by totally departing from the body, or so alienated from carnal lusts that he may truly say with the Apostle, “whether in the body or out of the body, I cannot tell,” he is not translated that he should see this vision” (*de Genesi ad Literam*. xii. 26).

substances understand."³² So Plato is right about the soul needing to transcend its present bodily condition in order to achieve happiness. He is further correct to say that the soul must transition into a permanent condition in which it will understand in the manner of a separated intellect.

St. Thomas fully sees the necessity of these two truths if man is to satisfy his deepest natural desire. Thus, after death, the separated soul undergoes a fundamental and permanent change in the way in which its knowing relates to the body. After death, the just soul, even before it receives its glorified body, will finally possess this divinizing beatific vision. And it will possess it by means of a mode of knowing that is entirely independent of the body, for it could not possess it as long as it is so dependent.

This is why, even after it receives its resurrected body, the soul's knowledge of the divine essence, and in it, of the essences of all things, will remain independent of the body, never more needing it in order to see the truth. For the beatified soul, whether with or without its body, "the essence of God itself becomes the intelligible form of the intellect" and this in no way involves the senses. It is on this basis that Thomas concludes that ultimate happiness "does not depend on the body" (*ST*, I-II, 3, 5).

This is not to say that the separated soul will not desire to be reunited to a body. Yet when this happens, its happiness will not be increased "intensively," but "extensively." In other words, the soul will still entirely derive its happiness from God as the object of its delight, but there will now, on the side of the subject, be *all* of the delight. Yet, even after we receive our glorified bodies, they will not *actively* contribute to our *possession* of the object of our happiness. Rather, such beatitude will spill over into the sensible body, which will thus participate in this happiness by receiving it (I-II, 4, 5 & 6).

³² *SCG*, 3, 48.

Only by positing this profound transformation of what corporeality ultimately means for us in the hereafter does St. Thomas hold together these two aspects of human experience which initially appear to be in tension, namely, the naturalness of man's body and the naturalness of man's desire to see the Divine Good. Plato, because he saw man's ultimate happiness as consisting in a vision of the Divine Good, denied the naturalness of the body. Aristotle, because he saw that the body is a natural part of man's substance, held that we could become only imperfectly happy, or as he puts it in the *Ethics*, "happy, but only as men" (1101a21). Only St. Thomas coherently preserves both truths. In doing so, he validates Plato's *reasons* underlying his mistake about the unnaturalness of the body, even as he corrects and transcends his error.

The paradoxical truth of the matter is that the true happiness of a rational animal ultimately depends upon transcending its present bodily condition and coming finally to possess knowledge in the way separated intellects do. If this claim typically engenders skepticism and hostility among those living in a culture largely addicted to the goods of the body, then perhaps the *Phaedo* remains a dialogue from which we still have something to learn.