Reflection on Phaedo by Plato
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Abstract. “Phaedo”, one of the Plato’s dialogues, narrates the day of Socrates’ sentence, composed by the discussions he had with his disciples upon justice and immortality and the process of drinking poison to his last minute. Socrates is the first one in history who chose faith above life. In the western culture, there is no other work can compare with “Phaedo” in regard of its great influence. The trial on Socrates and the description for his last moment remains the foundation of the western ethics.

Overview

“Phaedo”, Plato’s dialogues say, is the conversations Socrates had with friends in Athenian jail the day him being executed. The conversations related to life and death, mainly upon souls. All dialogues are being told by the involver Phaedo to Echecrates.

The reason why Socrates took it easy when facing death is partly due to his gifted courage, but the most part is his philosophy of death. To him, the spirit is far nobler than the flesh. The struggle and desire of the flesh interferes with the inner spirit, however, death can set the spirit free. Socrates believed that, the pure spirit departed from the nasty flesh will ensure the better life in “that world”. In his view, only be separated from the flesh can we “explore the truth of all things[1]” to encounter pure wisdom. And what the real philosophers were looking for was the subject of “to separate the flesh and the spirit and to separate the spirit from the flesh[1]”. Therefore, “Chasing after the real philosophy is learning death and being dead[1]”. However, why there remains life after death? Where is the evidence of spirit’s existence? Such being the case that the opposite of death were life, then when flesh was dead, the spirit would be alive. Therefore, Socrates said it lively and delightfully, “there must be a place for the spirits of the deaths waiting for resurrections[1]”.

Moreover, he pointed out another evidence: Our acquaintances due to the memories of the spirits that we brought before births. The intelligent spirits recall the intelligence in real life to recognize things. Socrates regarded human beings as the combination of spirits and fleshes and the spirit differs from the flesh. He considered that the flesh would rot and disappear but the spirit was invisible, exclusive and eternal. The spirit can only be grasped by sense. Whereas the spirit is invisible, how do we know the existence? Socrates pointed out that the spirit was enchained and affected by the flesh due to the fierce misery and happiness of wisdom and sense. The spirits can only be liberated by philosophy. Correspondingly, Simmias and Philolaos alertly noticed the dilemma of Socrates’ theory. Simmias drew an analogy between “strings and chords” and “flesh and spirit”. If the strings were broken, how could chords remain? At the same time, Philolaos accordingly reflected whether the spirit would be obliterated if anything.

We could see him thinking about the real meaning of the death: What can be counted as death? The disappearance of the flesh or the spirit? Can vegetative being still be regarded as human being while relying on the breathing tube the rest of its/his/hers life? In another word, he is already “dead” with formally living remains. An empty shell without spirit or will as such, should we dump “it” as trash? Maybe our senses are blocked out too much by the worship towards flesh. And all these confusing questions seem to begin with the definition of “human being” or “self”.

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What is Death?

Will we still live after death? This is confusing. Now that we are already aware that the death means the end, why do we still bear the wish to live again after death? It seems like to ask if we will remain after death. Which section on earth we estimate if one is dead? Or which sections? The stop of breath, the death of brain or the necrosis of all cells? Which process on earth makes us believe that dead is on arrival? All the deaths above are defined as the death of flesh. Then the real puzzle is, will it be possible that me being alive after discarding the flesh?

To solve this puzzle, we have to come back to the discussion of the questions” what composed of me” or “what is the essence of me”. Human being is composed by flesh and something else which is commonly called “heart” or “spirit”. It is reckoned as something defines human essence or keeps identity. We can think, talk, obtain emotions because of “heart” or “spirit”; our bodies might be the same of the ship of Theseus would being replaced by every pieces, however, as long as “spirit” exists, me remains me. The problem is: if flesh and soul are in very intimate relation, for example, pains might be the feeling of spirit. During the dying process of the flesh, will spirit correspondingly share the same reaction that to disappear? The another point is that the flesh already obtains the functions or abilities of emotion, consideration, volition and so on and maybe spirit is merely an expression of body function. As for the latter, what puzzles me are: If flesh made by physic materials itself which already acquires functions as such, will computer be able to design the function of obtaining emotions? If it possesses adequate equipment and data, will the infinite combinations among data create the similar emotions that human beings possess? When an utmost developed robot generates the same emotions like human beings, how do we distinguish human beings and a well-designed robot? Even human being can merely be seen as a high-technical robot? We can even presume that: are human beings designed in this method (by god) as well? The third possibility is that the flesh and spirit are completely independent that “heart” or “spirit” can exist independently and this possibility ensures the world after flesh’s death.

If spirit exists, does it have a foothold when lives upon flesh? What if we consider that spirit inside flesh is an illusion given by the surrounding? In dualism, the functional explanation of spirit and physics both acknowledge something surpass the flesh. In this way, which explanation is more convincing?

Regardless of the discussion, people reach the consensus of the extremely significance of the rational and free-will functions which flesh or spirit possesses. We can even draw the conclusion that “it” is the essence of human being.

Self-Awareness

The question of death pushes us to go back to the inner self from serious introspection. Nonetheless, how the self-awareness comes to being?

How can I realize the self-existence more? The sign of human being rational is self-awareness, which is super miraculous.

To see from history of philosophy, we will be aware that self’s existence is defined by others, for example, rationalism view like Hegel. We are able to see others, therefore we could define self’s existence by affirming others’ existence which is exactly the point of Sartre. Another route, by Kojeve, is to define myself by my most direct senses: we could feel hunger, feel pain, feel thirst which are irrational experiences.

Another Skepticism method is, that through examine those skeptical things one by one, we can finally left one most stable point. For instance, Decartes’ “I think therefore I am”, that the “I think” signifies mental activity, and the existence of myself which is no more the one in deep thought but someone being recognized by “I think”. When I close my eyes and think, why I am able to think? When I reflect on the “reflection” subject, I am aware that thinking process because I am there. When I open my eyes and seeing others first, how come I do not directly mistaken others as myself? How do we distinguish self from the others?

I hold the point that it is due to the control. When babies look into the mirror, they would
gradually realize that self can only control itself (children have desire for control since childhood). My autonomy reflected in actions that I can control my action. But why not the toys that he can control be a part of me (direct control?)? I could command my arms so I understand it is a part of my body. But if I can command a cup by arms, why cannot I regard cup as a part of me? Why me in tomorrow and in today is the same me? What is the reason to keep ours self identity? If like Kant said, we were merely the people seeing the world with glasses, then when we look into ourselves, how can we identify the real self?

Who am I?

Echo was once unable to give identification evidence because of the thief. This is really amusing: why my authenticity requires proofs by someone else or a certificate? Even if myself cannot prove myself, is there anyone else can better confirm my identity than myself?

Marx might define that dissimulation. People create themselves a restriction which could be designed by imperfect principles, for example, class contradictions caused by the unreasonable allocation rules. When we come to the self-awareness, we would at least partly realize the meaning of the subject of myself. Human being is unique, how greatness and loneliness it is! Are languages possible to express all I think and deliver to others? I think so not and maybe that is one of the reasons of human’s solitude. We can only assume by direct communication, guided and redeemed by a know-it-all god, which is maybe the setting of another me in the world.

My existence requires reference of the other to locate myself. I cannot explain myself: I can say I am in the main building, on the fifth avenue but I cannot say I am here. I could not come through this question, why? I cannot even directly point out myself. If I need to describe something except from positive definition, we can also go through the opposite: it is not something but just a cup. Between the approval and disapproval, we can find the single element which is this cup. Unfortunately, the description towards it will never end, which is alike the limitation of strategic theory by David Hume that we can only get a assembly instead of the real touch. If we could get the most positive answer, I think in the end we could only gazing at the cup in silence as Buddha’s view, unsayability.

As a verbal sign, why signans can proceed without hindrance? All the languages that we have are like cloud-castle flowing in the air that we have to titter for our luck that such not rigorous language does not come up with big problems.

But this action can only illustrate that I am an subsistent subject. Because action reflects my will, that I exist. “Me” is fulfilling history with actions.

Treat Ones Soul

Generally Speaking, people are grieved facing the death of their relatives and friends. However, Phaedo felt different towards the impending dead Socrates. He said, “If I see a friend dying and my heart must be sorrow, but that’s not true. Look at his appearance and listen to his talking, he has no fear at all and could just graciously waiting for the sentence. I knew he was delighted. So I suppose even if he moves to the residence for the dead, he will still be under the care by god. If anyone feels nice about that place, then when he arrives will be nice as well. Just for this reason, I do not feel the spontaneous mercy at funeral arrangements.” That is exactly the composed and steady attitude Socrates acted in the jail affected everyone presented. Therefore, nobody thought Socrates’ death as ordinary death but regarded it as an entrance to a better world which was the very aspiration of god.

In the passage, there is one description after Socrates unlocked the chain, “My friends, the so-called pleasure is really an oddity! Pleasure is always inexplicably tied to the misery. It appears they are enemies together and nobody can come across them at the same time. Right now, I am precisely in this situation. This leg of mine was once chained with great pain, but by now the misery is gone and pleasure follows.” Due to the chains on his feet in jail, Socrates was always in misery and when later being without it brought him really great pleasure, even the moment being executed. From the standpoint of Socrates, flesh is like chains to soul and whenever being alive, soul is
invariably restrained by flesh. But death brings flesh a chance to leave body, which in another word, departs the sadness and heads for the happiness.

Athenians adored gods. Socrates and attendants adored the existence of souls. They maintained that human beings were composed by visible flesh and invisible souls, which two connected with an intimacy. When soul and flesh coexist, human nature will drive flesh, like mortality is always being submissive and soul is like god who’s always in dominant position. Essentially, soul and flesh are different. The difference is based upon the distinction of visible world and invisible world. In visible world, “prisoners” can see “images” through naked eyes. After the torturous untied diversion, one can see the flames in the cave, and after roughly climbed out of the cave in the end, one can see the crystal clear world under the sun. Process like this is tough and enduring, therefore little can really see the world in sunshine. Correspondingly, we can infer that little souls can see the world and objects demand sensibility and logos. Objects cannot be cognized through sensory, and soul itself has a transformation time.

Consequently, when it comes to death, Socrates said, “We assume death is the departure of soul and flesh; being dead means the soul leaves the body and independently exists and vice versa.” It seems to him that death breaks the bond between soul and flesh: flesh remains in visible world waiting for fixed destiny arrangement but soul goes to the knowable world waiting for fair judgement.

The famous German sinologist, professor Monika Motsch, who once wrote preface for professor Yang Jiang’s translation version of “Phaedo”, wrote in preface, “in ‘Phaedo’, impression given by Socrates is the most lively and impressive. If just for the sake of remaining his life, he could have run to other city-state or promise to keep silence ever since, no more talks on Athenian street. Even for today, his calm before martyrdom and the scenes of his eloquently speaking with disciples are still astonishing and desirable.” “In ‘Phaedo’, Socrates repeatedly called for his inside gods, leading him righteous approaches. We can say that, in the western cultural history, Socrates was the first one found personal conscience. To him, this inner voice is above personage but points to a higher level which is common value of human being. Philosophy is not only the devotion towards intelligence and justice, but also the principle towards united human association and universe. Hence one can see that, philosophy is a never-ending source for happiness, which will conquer mortality.”

Socrates hoped that his death would leave people more than just pain and pity, but more importantly is to waken the pursue for virtue and kindness inside everyone and “get back to the self-recognition and city-state-recognition from pursing fame and wealth in mundane life”, “moralize the young by these and aroused their respect towards philosophic life”. Socrates persuaded his friends when facing the death, “There are words that we still bear in mind. Supposed soul is immortal, we ought to cherish it no matter this life or forever. Since soul does not die, if you want to stay away from sins, you ought to do kind and wise things as much as possible. But achieving this can only on education and training.

Summary

The “me” being alive cannot find authenticity by signans but action can, which is the evidence of my life and will. It seems to me that someone with execution is really alive.

The self-awareness shows that the so-called spirit or heart carries cognitive competence. But whether the spirit is merely a nature function of flesh or alike the relationship of hardware and software that flesh carries spirit, it is open-ended. People are still arguing while reaching the agreement that the spirit has will, which helps us perceive, judge, express since Phaedo.

Socrates made use of his death to present a higher level of personality model to all living things and made them realized their limitation and life deficiency, then reflected on their own heart in mediocrity as to truly knowing themselves. Socrates’ death is more than a bygone by the flesh, however, is the symbol of the whole human beings awaken spirits. In the face of his death, we are supposed to realized that death is an inevitability in one’s life, which is why one should be more concentrated on reflecting how to make use of rest of the life.
References