WHAT IS A GOD ACCORDING TO PLATO?1

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The main feature that characterizes traditional Greek religion before Plato is the distinction between gods and human beings, or immortals and mortals. Inspired by minority religious beliefs, Plato reacted against this presupposition, and assigned to human beings the goal of assimilating themselves to god.2 This radical reversal, to which the Platonic tradition was to lay claim throughout antiquity, was based on a twofold opposition: first, between intelligible realities and sensible particulars, which participate in the intelligible, and secondly, between soul and body. Soul accounts for the spontaneous movement of a living body, yet it can separate itself from its original body, in order to transfer itself into another one.

Plato maintained the existence of intelligible forms in order to explain how this world, where everything is in constant change, presents enough permanence and stability for human beings to be able to know it, act upon it, and talk about it. In the belief that such stability and permanence were not to be found in the sensible world, Plato therefore postulated the existence of a reality of another kind, that would fulfill these requirements, and explain why, within that which never stops changing, there is something that does not change. In the Phaedo (79b), Socrates admits “that there exist two species of beings: on the one hand, the visible species, and on the other the invisible species.” In fact, these two species of beings are separate. Nevertheless, the separation between the intelligible and the sensible cannot be complete, simply because the existence of the intelligible forms must contribute a solution to

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the paradoxes that sensible particulars never cease generating. Sensible particulars receive their names from intelligible realities. Above all, the sensible can be truly known only through the intermediary of the intelligible.3

Sensible particulars are bodies, which, as is explained in the *Timaeus*, are made up of the four elements, and of them alone: fire, air, water, and earth. Because the body (*sōma*) has come into being, no body is indestructible in itself (*Timaeus* 28a3). Nevertheless, a distinction must be made between the bodies that receive their motion from outside, and those that move spontaneously, because they are endowed with a soul (*psychē*) that can be directed by a higher faculty: the intellect (*nous*). The intellect enables the perception of the intelligible realities, in which sensible particulars participate.

The soul is defined as the self-moving principle of all motion, physical as well as psychic (*Phaedrus* 245c8, *Laws* X, 896e–897a). The immediate consequence of this definition is as follows: we must attribute immortality (*Phaedrus* 245a–d) to the soul as a whole, which, by definition, can have no beginning or end. Particular souls, and namely those of mortal beings (which can transfer into other human bodies, and even into the bodies of animals), are, as we shall see, subject to cycles of 10,000 years, at the end of which they lose the features that characterize them. In the course of the following cycle, they acquire new characteristics.

If we wish to speak of religion in Plato, we must first ask ourselves what Plato understands by “god” (*theos*); that is, by “immortal.” When in the *Phaedrus* (246c–d), he tries to describe what a god is, Plato shows himself to be very prudent. He begins by situating his discourse, not on the level of *logos*, which is based on argued knowledge that makes a claim to truth, but on that of *muthos*, or a story that remains likely; and he concludes by an appeal for benevolence on the part of the divinity, which takes the form of a prayer. There is, however, a definition that will not vary: a god is an immortal living being (*Phaedrus* 246d1).

It follows that, since the intelligible realities (including the Good) are defined as intelligible forms, they cannot be considered as gods. Since they are incorporeal, these intelligible forms cannot have a body, and since they are immutable, they can neither be nor have a soul which, by definition, is a motion that moves itself. In addition, Plato never

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