SYMP. 212A2-7: DESIRE FOR THE TRUTH AND DESIRE FOR DEATH AND A GOD-LIKE IMMORTALITY

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1. INTRODUCTION

In a fragment of his lost dialogue Eudemus, the young Aristotle tells an anonymous story in order to support his claim that “the dead are blessed and happy... since they have now become better and greater”. The story says:

“They say that when Midas had caught Silenus he interrogated him after the hunt and asked him what was the best thing for men and what the most desirable of all. Silenus at first would not say anything but maintained an unbroken silence: but when, after using every device, Midas with difficulty induced him to address him, he said under compulsion: ‘Shortlived seed of a toiling spirit and a harsh fortune, why do you force me to say what it is better for you not to know? For a life lived in ignorance of its own ills is most painless. It is quite impossible for the best thing of all to befall men, nor can they share in the nature of what is better. For it is best, for all men and women, not to be born; and second after that—the first thing open to men—is, once born, to die as quickly as possible’.”

The young Aristotle concludes from this: “It is clear that he [i.e. Silenus] meant that the time spent dead is better than that spent alive.”

How could the young Aristotle get this optimistic and happy conclusion from Silenus’ frightening revelation to Midas, which the satyr would have liked better not to make known to the king? How has the young Aristotle not drawn another and completely different conclusion from this story, more in accordance with it, such as that, when we die, “the wind may literally blow [our souls] apart and dis-

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2 Plutarch, Consol. ad Apoll. 115b-e (F 44 R (3)). I follow J. Barnes’ and G. Lawrence’s translation (Barnes, 1984).
perse [them]"\(^3\), and that, in other words, we are nothing but "brief candles"?\(^4\) The answer is that Socrates’ words in the Phaedo have cast, at least temporarily, his spell on the young Aristotle, like another Simmias or Cebes, and convinced him that the swan sings when he dies for extreme happiness and not “in distress, lamenting their death”\(^5\). However, this charm, which turns desperate concern about our complete dissolution into this optimistic conviction of a possibly better existence after death than our present existence, is not just a trick of Plato’s but an assertion that he derives from the idea of \(\phi\lambda\sigma\sigma\phi\iota\alpha\) or love of wisdom itself. From this passion for truth that dominates his life the philosopher derives a hope for a godlike, immortal existence after death and with it for a complete fulfilment of his desire for wisdom. One consequence of this is that the lover of wisdom becomes, at least at first sight paradoxically, a lover of death.

Here I hope to bring some light to the close connection between desire for truth and desire for death as desire for a godlike immortality in Plato’s thought and about how the hope for a better life for the philosopher is derived from this connection. For this purpose I will focus on the passage at Symp. 212a2-7, in order to establish what kind or kinds of immortality Plato refers to there. However, I will first make some distinctions about kinds of immortality that Plato himself clearly makes in the Phaedo and the Symposium, insofar as these distinctions are useful for explaining what the problem is for the interpreter at Symp. 212a2-7 and how different scholars have understood the passage. Finally I will offer a possible way of understanding this passage that contributes, I think, to a better understanding of the relation between the Symposium and the Phaedo and, as a consequence, of the central role assigned to desire in Plato’s conception of man.

2. KINDS OF IMMORTALITY

It is useful, for expositional coherence, to divide Plato’s conception of immortality into two main species: the gods’ immortality, and that of human beings.

\(^3\) Phaed. 77d7-e1. I follow Gallop’s Phaedo and Rowe’s Symposium translations from now on. The lines of the passages are given according to Burnet’s edition of the Greek text.

\(^4\) A similar pessimistic interpretation of this story appears in Nietzsche DGT, I, 3, 12-30. His understanding depends obviously on his rejection of “the God-hypothesis...[together with] any metaphysical postulation of a true world of “being” transcending the world of life and experience [and also on his rejection of]...the related “soul” [hypothesis]” (Honderich, 1995, p. 621), in other words on the rejection of some of Plato’s basic points in the Phaedo. However, Nietzsche’s idea of the “eternal recurrence”, from which he affirms that life endures and flourishes in the aftermath of all disillusionment (Honderich, 1995, p. 251), is based on one of the arguments that Plato develops in the Phaedo in order to demonstrate that the soul is immortal, that is on the argument from \(\pi\alpha\lambda\gamma\gamma\epsilon\nu\varepsilon\sigma\iota\a\) (69e6-72c2).

\(^5\) Phaed. 84e3-85b7.