No Nudes: Plato's Sketches of the Soul

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How are we to think what it is to be a human being? Can we strip the human naked and peer at its form or *eidos?* Unfortunately, secretive *anthropos* resists this inspection, just as Theodorus in Plato's *Theaetetus* resists Socrates' suggestion that he metaphorically strip to wrestle in speech and show his naked *eidos* (162b), and as the Queen of Gyges jealously guards her *eidos* in Herodotus's tale.[1] If we are to discern the nature of the soul, we must have recourse to a path more circuitous than direct intuition. Plato's treatment of the soul—a treatment that stubbornly refuses to shortcut the use of images—offers such a path.

In the *Phaedrus*, the titular character asks Socrates what he makes of traditional Greek tales or *mythoi*, in particular the story according to which Boreas carries away a young girl from the banks of the very stream that he and Phaedrus wade in. Does he follow the recent trend to reject the fabulous quality of such tales, reformulating them in a naturalistic light? Socrates replies:

> Although in some ways I find such explanations ingenious, Phaedrus, it's also true that they're the work of a clever, hard-working, not altogether fortunate man, if only because after these explanations he will then have to correct the mistaken beliefs about the shape of Horse Centaurs, and after that the Chimera. Then mobs of Gorgon-like creatures, Pegasuses and other monsters will flood over him, not to mention other marvelously imagined oddities. All those non-believers employing some boorish sophistication will make everything conform to probability, and they will also need a great deal of free time. But for me there's no such leisure. And, my dear friend, the reason is this: I am still not able to "know myself," as the Delphic oracle enjoins, and it seems laughable for me to think about other things when I am still ignorant about myself… For me, the question is whether I happen to be some sort of beast even more complex in form and more tumultuous than the hundred-headed Typhon, or whether I am something simpler and gentler, having by nature a share of the divine and un-Typhonic. (229c–e)

1 *Histories* 1.8–12. The noun *eidos* comes from the Greek verb "to see," and literally means the "look" of a thing. In idiomatic speech, *eidos* could refer to one's body or, by extension, to the physical beauty of a person. It is Plato's most standard term for his famous "forms."

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Socrates most explicitly ascribes his refusal to "make everything conform to probability" to a simple matter of time management, but he also subtly indicates that these tales should be left intact precisely so that we can have recourse to them in coming to self-understanding. He immediately goes on to pose the question of his own soul by using this mythic imagery: is his soul bestial and monstrous, or is it simple, possessing a divine nature? This psychological and anthropological turn explains why Socrates, in responding to Phaedrus's question centered on a divinity, changes the focus to the monstrous: he deliberately sets up the motif, often found throughout the Platonic dialogues, of the human soul as precariously perched between the bestial/monstrous and the divine. In the Phaedrus we are generally left without a direct gaze upon the forms and at best have to make do with images that help us recollect originals (250a–d). Lacking the immediacy of a direct gaze upon the human form or soul, we need to have stories of gods and monsters if we are to understand ourselves. These stories and images may be our own inventions, yet they still cast light upon our selves—perhaps precisely because they are *our* inventions.

In other words, if we do anthropomorphize the gods (and beasts as well), then these anthropomorphic gods and beasts should be able to show us something of *anthropos*, perhaps in a purer form. We give a lion, for example, human nobility, and then use it, in turn, to understand human strength and spiritedness.[2] The mirrors we make show us our own reflection. This may sound like a merely circular procedure, but the results prove its utility. Images are made on the model of the original, but can then manifestly illumine the original, as is seen even in a simple caricature. Once one sees a caricature, one's vision of the original is often changed forever: not because one's vision is now distorted, but because it is able to penetrate to see more deeply what was already there.

There would appear to be two ways to *see* a soul: as everyday experience makes clear, we can see the soul in action (including the action of speech); but we can also see it in a uniquely poetic mode, that is, in images. Plato's dialogues show the soul in both ways, the one playing off and augmenting the other. So, for example, we are introduced to Thrasymachus in the *Republic* through the image of a wolf (336d, 336b), and then see him in action throughout the rest of book 1 as intellectually fierce, cruel, and aggressive. Perhaps we get yet another look at him later in the image of the soul that is a mixture of Chimera, Scylla, Cerberus, a lion, and a human, all wrapped up in a human exterior (588c–e). This is the soul in its most graphic manifestation; one thinks by way of comparison of the animalistic souls and beings in hell in the paintings of Hieronymus Bosch. This kind of image gives Plato's reflections of the soul a greater *practical* weight; we see the ugliness of Thrasymachus's soul, and are thus propelled away from it. Plato's *De Anima*, it seems, is everywhere in his writings, as a result of his use of the dialogue form and love of images.

Following a distinction laid down by the Eleatic Stranger in Plato's *Sophist*, there are two types of images: the "eikastic" image, which maintains

2 See *Republic* 341b–c, 588d–589b, 620a–b; and *Iliad* 11.238–40, 17.106–13, 18.316–22.

the proportions of that which it images; and the "phantastic" image, which distorts the original, accounting for human perspective, so as to make for a more beautiful viewing (a technique that is especially prominent in sculpture and architecture) (235d–236c). Plato's use of the most extravagant creatures to illumine the soul shows that he prefers phantastic images for this purpose. One can readily understand why he would do so: if the human is too difficult to see directly, then an image that maintains the original proportions would likely suffer from the same problem. We can't seem to find quite the right ground from which to look upon the human head-on, and thus stand in need of phantastic images. These phantastics, however, do not all serve merely to re-create the beauty of the original. When one distorts the original proportions, one can thereby make something either more or less beautiful than the original, as gods and beasts would seem to be more and less beautiful than the human. Is Socrates' soul that of a Typhon-like monster, or that of a simple, divine nature? One supposes that it is not exactly either, and yet it is nonetheless revealing to ask this question of a human soul.

In what way is it revealing? Here it seems best to return to the analogy of the caricature. Caricature, of course, easily gets a bad name, and we often contrast the caricature with a more faithful representation. Nonetheless, it is generally recognized, at least in practice, that there is more to caricature than distortion and simplification. (Or if it is distortion, it is, strangely enough, a distortion that clarifies.) Might not a person want his caricature drawn precisely so that he might see what he, in some sense, *really* looks like? Just looking in a mirror is usually not the best way to see oneself truly; one becomes so used to one's own face that one cannot sharply discern its features. Platonic images rest on the premise that the same inurement occurs with regard to soul as with regard to body. These images then maintain the balance between familiarity and novelty that is required to provoke a renewed vision of the soul.

There is perhaps another reason why Plato stretches the soul between the poles of the bestial and the divine. The difficulty of knowing the human soul is only compounded by the fact that *the* soul (in the singular) does not seem to exist and we find ourselves instead trying to make sense of soul-*types*. The soul is too variable a thing to be grasped by a fixed definition and instead needs a more flexible articulation, such as a manifold of images is suited to provide.

The real source of problems in this regard, then, is our tendency to prefer simplistic, one-sided evaluations of things. We want to know, "Is the human a good, beautiful, noble being, or rather a bad, ugly, base being?" (In Platonic terms, we ask, "Is the human soul divine, or bestial?") As it happens, however, the truth of life and the truth of humanity is that there is no simple, one-sided truth of them. Life is a mixture; humanity is a mixture. There is good and there is bad, beauty and ugliness, nobility and baseness. Everyday life is full of both: small acts of decency and petty acts of malice; and the extremes of life are full of both: vile acts of murder and noble acts of sacrifice. What could be more obvious, even banal? Yet

we always tend to forget it and find ourselves looking for some hidden answer that expunges the antitheses. This tendency is manifest in an obvious way in popular thought in the form of the old battle between cynicism and optimism; but even refined philosophic and religious thought are far from being untouched by the desire for a sweeping answer to the human question. This becomes clear enough if one looks, by way of example, to the battle in modern philosophy between those who wish, with Hobbes, to explain the higher phenomena of human life completely in terms of the lower, and those who with romantic naiveté counter by asserting the essential goodness of human nature.

Plato's imagistic account of *anthropos* helps us moderate these battles: it prevents us from forming that one, hard, fast look (*eidos*) of the human, and instead commits us to multiple and various *eidē*. Plato asks the question as to whether the human soul is bestial or divine, but he always keeps both options on the table. The soul seems to remain stretched in this tension; the question remains a question. In the *Republic*, Socrates says that all earthly beings are mixtures, beautiful as viewed from one angle, and ugly as viewed from another (479a–b). *Anthropos* would seem to be just such a mixture. Imagistically highlighting the spectrum from the bestial to the divine keeps us constantly mindful of this fact.

On a more general level, imagistic or mythic thinking provides an alternative, or better, a complementary approach, to eidetic or formal thinking. Eidetic thinking generally seeks to isolate and purify, to grasp each thing as exactly what it is, "itself by itself." Images and myths, contrariwise, allow for blending, merging, and mixing. To employ Hegelian terminology for a moment, one could say that eidetics is based on the simple principle of identity, while imagistic thinking respects the fact that there can be a sort of identity even in difference. Human and philosophic understanding would seem to need both; and it is perhaps because Plato puts such a focus on eidetics that he must continually have recourse to image and myth as well.

Does the poetic philosophy of Plato have roots deeper in Greek thinking? In fact, one finds something similar in Homer's *Iliad*. Two seemingly conflicting types of description appear to be at play there: animal-based imagery and divine language, both applied to the heroes. The warriors are lions, boars, dogs, and steeds, but *also* divine, deiform, and godlike.[3] And while the Homeric gods, as desiring and spirited beings, are not as far removed from the sphere of the animal as they seem to be for Plato, nonetheless they certainly represent something high and noble in a way that stands against the merely animal. Consider, for example, the clear division and hierarchical relation of man, beast, and god present in the opening lines of the poem, where Homer says, "Sing, goddess, of the wrath… [that] made men themselves to be the spoil for dogs and birds of every kind, bringing the will of Zeus to fulfillment" (1.1–5). Yet similes comparing the human to both the bestial and the divine are applied within

3 Instances abound of both types of language. See, for example, 6.504–14, 22.22–24, 11.548–62, and 13.197–202 for animal images; and 1.7, 3.310, 6.517, and 20.493 for divine language.

the same context, for the very same acts of war; in one striking passage, Aias is described as *isotheos* (godlike) and then immediately as a lion (11.472–86). For Homer, then, it is not simply that we are like animals in some respects and like gods in others; we seem to be like both of them even in the same respect! This position may bring us uncomfortably close to a contradiction, but that is surely better than a simplification. Wouldn't it falsify the human soul as it was involved in the Trojan War to describe it as *either* bestial *or* divine? There was rather an ambiguous mixture, and it is surely to Homer's credit to have reflected this very real tension.

Looking ahead from Plato to Aristotle, one finds a similar sort of tension at work. On the one hand, Aristotle, encouraging us in book 10 of the *Nicomachean Ethics* to see the contemplative activity of *nous* or intellect as something sublime and worthy, claims that *nous* is the most divine part of ourselves (1177b27). On the other hand, Aristotle does not want to make the contemplative life seem disconnected from and thus irrelevant to human beings, and so he also claims that the intellect is most of all the human being, most of all one's very self (1178a8; see also 1168b32–1169a4). Thus, just as we never quite learn whether the shepherd representative of reason in one of Socrates' images of the soul is human or divine (*Republic* 588a–589e), we find within a few sentences in the *Ethics* intellect designated as both the most divine and the most human part of ourselves. That this tension is very real is made manifest when Aristotle goes on to contrast the divine life of contemplation with a merely human life (1177b32, 1178a10).

Which is it, Aristotle? Is the life of the mind human in a way that we as human beings should care about it, or is it divine in a way that is to be set against a merely human way of life? That this language leads Aristotle into such a dilemma suggests that the language is quite important to him; he does not sacrifice it despite the problems it raises. Indeed, one might wonder whether this very tension reveals something about the experience of what it is to be human, especially as a philosopher. The philosopher may invariably be torn about the meaning of his life as a whole: at times, philosophy will seem all-encompassing and definitive of life itself; at other times, philosophy must necessarily seem partial, as non-intellectual prerogatives are asserted in their full rights.[4] If this strife cannot be fully eliminated, then perhaps the best one can do is to present both perspectives, each with its own forcefulness.

We all recollect well enough that Plato's Socrates leaves us with the Delphic injunction to self-knowledge. In a post-Augustinian world this injunction can easily sound like a call for a move toward interiority, but, significantly, it turns Socrates outward instead, toward images. The self is found from without itself, at least as a stage along the path to self-knowledge. The self is found not in eliminating our stories, but in appropriating them in the proper way. What we read in these stories are our very selves. Perhaps the Platonic image of the soul is an *eidos* of its own, in the root sense of

4 See Burger, "Aristotle's 'Exclusive' Account of Happiness," 97–98n49. Relevant also is the claim by DeMarco that "the dialectical aspects [of Aristotle's treatment] *are* the features of things in their true dimensions." ("Plato's Ghost," 158.)

"look." It is not a literal look, nor a head-on look, but a phantastic look, that nonetheless can be truer relative to us, that is, better able than the literal to reveal the thing that is human being. Perhaps we cannot gaze on the naked human *eidos*, but, as the adage goes, clothes make the man, and thus *reveal* the man. The Platonic sketchbook is filled with these fully clothed models, so in the end, who needs nudes?

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