

**Arguments Against It.** Plato never tried to prove there was such a thing as free will, and apparently never even mentioned it. Consequently, the idea of "Platonic free will" may sound paradoxical to some of us, or it may sound like an attempt to read into Plato an idea which really belonged to later times. Besides that, free will meets with a lot of scepticism today because it implies personal responsibility, and because it appears to be unscientific, even though the belief that all causes must be physical causes is not scientifically provable. I shall therefore begin by looking at the reasons why Plato is believed to be unaware of free will, and then, hopefully show why those who hold such views are mistaken. It could even be the case that Platonism could be the philosophy of free will more than any other ones, for reasons I shall examine later on.

Some of the problems with free will in Plato have to do with words and their literal meanings: it appears, for example, that his word "voluntary" must apply only to the soul's search for eternal truths and values, while the "involuntary" must be taken to mean a preference for things which belong to the material world. This interpretation is related to a belief that the will automatically falls into line with the judgement of the intelligence, from whence we get Socrates' maxim that no one does wrong willingly.

This kind of thinking implies that one must be drawn by one out of two sources of attraction without any neutral ground on which they could be weighed together. One may therefore be taken over by a higher appetite or by a

lower one, and that would account for all of our acts of will. The assumption made here, that we are confronted by two different orders of reality, or cosmic forces, is developed in detail in the *Timaeus*, along with the idea that either of these two powers can be "persuaded" by the other. I shall make use of this dialogue because it concerns the relations between reason and necessity, both in the universe and in ourselves, in a way which has relevance to free will.

Nevertheless, the *Timaeus* makes no actual reference to self-determination, that is to say, to the idea that preferences could be generated from within the self, and because of this omission Aristotle arrived at a more materialistic view of the will: in the *de Anima* he says that "the object of appetite produces movement," and that the combination of appetite and practical thought are "productive of movement in space." He clearly identified the will itself with appetite. In this case, the will could only be a natural phenomenon, since its only function would be that of making the connection between stimulus and response, and at the same time, the soul could only be moved from without, and could not originate movement, almost as though it were a material object.

This view can be supported by appeal to the fact that the Greek word for free will, *autexousia*, does not occur in Plato's works, as it only came into general use about four hundred years after Plato's time. For this reason alone, some would argue that reading free will into Plato must be anachronistic.

**The Counter-Arguments.** I would apply two criticisms to this position: firstly, the use of an idea is not the same thing as the use of it in full self-awareness. For example, mathematicians never had the symbol for Pi until the Eighteenth Century, but that did not mean that they had not been working out circular areas for the previous two thousand years. Another example is the Principle of Plenitude, which was only given that name in the Twentieth Century by Lovejoy, despite the fact that before then it had been in continuous use by Platonists ever since Plato himself. Consequently, the absence of free will terminology does not prove that Plato did not believe in it.

My second criticism is that a very selective reading of Plato is at work here, which is clearly revealed towards the end of the *Timaeus*, where it is said that "As regards motions, *the best is that produced by oneself in oneself*, since it is most nearly akin to the movement of thought in the universe." (89A) This is clearly not compatible with the Aristotelian ideas of soul and will, which ignore the idea of intrinsic self-motion, despite its importance in Platonic thought. Plato also says that self-motion is "the causation that belongs to the intelligent nature" (46D-E), in contrast with natural causes, which always produce their effects blindly and at random, e.g. fire can warm the house or burn it down, and walls can equally well protect us or imprison us.

This idea of self-generated motion is the basis of one of Plato's main arguments for the immortality of the

soul, which he gives in the *Phaedrus*. (245C-E). What is always self-moving must be immortal, because it can always make good the effects of natural attrition. That would be enough to put it outside the natural order, in which material entities such as wind, water, and solid objects move only until the motion imparted to them has been used up. In a word, nature is *entropic*, as it always runs down, by dissipating all inputs of energy and ordered structure, both in its parts and as a whole system.

By contrast with that, the self-moved entity is distinguished from everything else in the world by its independence and self-sufficiency. That is what Plato attributes to the soul. From this it follows that the self-moving soul must be separable from its body, because the body cannot share this property of the soul. The soul nevertheless has its own equivalent of this movement from outside, even though it acts without necessity. This is because self-motion alone does not decide the purposes for which it is used, and it is here that appetite or appetency becomes relevant. While appetite cannot cause motion, it can determine its direction.

If appetite could really cause motion, it would only be necessary to have an appetite in order to be transported to its object. But the real world is not like that. No natural inclination, however strong, can ensure that one will do anything about it; objects of appetency are very numerous and varied, and therefore their effects on the will can easily cancel each other out. Appetite or appetency therefore *occasions* particular instances of

motion without causing the motion itself.

If we can say that the soul is self-moving, how far is this idea of motion meant literally? When we will to move ourselves, we do in fact move in a literal sense, but that is the *effect* of the soul's self-motion, not the thing itself. So what examples do we have of movement in a non-material entity? There is but one realistic possibility here, namely, the movement of the will. In other words, the continuous self-motion would then mean a continuous flow of volition or will-to-action. If it is to be continuous, it must continue, despite appearances, when the will seems passive, because in such cases, one must be willing the continuation of what was willed previously.

Here we encounter the idea of the soul as a substance, according to a classic definition of a substance as "being combined with the power of action." But if the flow of volition is automatic, the presence of intelligence in its operations is not, and this adds another dimension to the question of its freedom. Could we be willing freely while willing an impossibility? We could, but only in the trivial sense that one is free to make the attempt, but not if freedom implies an ability to secure some kind of value. This issue is the one which connects free will with intelligence.

For Plato, the self-moving soul is in any case the most intelligent cause of motion, simply because its will is capable of some degree of connection with the soul's intelligence. Consequently, the extent of *the will's* intelligence can in practice vary extremely. Free will must be *effectively* joined to the intelligence in

order to have any personal significance, and it should be noted that one's ability to connect with intelligence and to use it depends on there being free will, and not vice-versa. This is because any claim that "X is true" must require a strictly objective act of will which is not reducible to natural causes if it is to be valid. For example, statements which result from a mental illness, or which are affected by strong self-interest, cannot be accepted at face value as true, and likewise if they are part of an ideological programme aimed at getting power.

Consequently, true statements can only deserve the name when truth itself determines one's mental processes. In this case, it follows that if there were no free will, and natural causes ruled everything, there would be no such thing as intelligence or truth either. This issue is also relevant for the immortality of the soul, since immortality requires that the soul itself be free from the limits of nature. Thus free will, truth and immortality are all closely connected.

**Free Will in the *Timaeus*.** Bearing the idea of the soul's self-motion in mind, we can now reconsider the *Timaeus* as a possible source for the idea of free will. The *Timaeus* presents the alternatives of being determined either by reason or by physical necessity, and states that the relationship between these two powers was present in the universe even before we were created. Once we are created this relationship exists for a second time in our own constitution. The alternatives of being determined by either reason or by physical necessity are thus imposed on us from within. However, before going further,

we need to take a critical look at the word "determined" in this context, because it does not mean the same thing in these two cases.

On the one hand, determination by necessity is always negative, as it implies limitation of action, or obstruction of progress; determination by reason, however, opens the way to the greatest number of possibilities, not least because reason discriminates between real possibilities and false ones, and does not obstruct us except where we would be bound to fail. Thus one determination closes doors, while the other opens them.

It is significant for the present purpose that Plato affirms the possibility that either reason or necessity may over-rule the other. In the creation of the world, it is necessity which is over-ruled or "persuaded" by reason; on the other hand, when souls come to birth in this world it is the other way round, as their share of reason is invaded or suppressed by physical necessity. Their mental functions corresponding to those of the circulations of the universe are badly disrupted, and the newly born soul suffers, as Plato puts it:

" . . . a strong and widespread commotion, and joining with that perpetually streaming current in stirring and violently shaking the circuits of the soul, they completely hampered the revolution of the Same by flowing counter to it and stopped it from going on its way and governing." (43C-D)

This is inevitable, if only because at birth the senses start to function before any other faculty, but the significance of these ideas for the present purpose is that they show that the predominance of either of these

two powers over the other is never pre-determined or governed by fate, in any given part of the world or within any rational being, and that is precisely what is needed for free will to be possible. In all realms, necessity dominating reason results in disorder, conflict and confusion, and depletion of unity and power, whereas reason dominating necessity results in new possibilities, beyond anything that necessity alone could bring about.

This view of Plato's meaning is supported elsewhere in his writings, as in the myth in Book X of the *Republic*, where each soul in the over-world, or the world of the spirit, makes its choice of life there, before its birth here in this world. The interpretation to the effect that this text does in fact mean free will and personal responsibility is supported by Plotinus in this manner:

" . . . that very choice in the over-world is in fact an allegorical statement of the soul's tendency and temperament, a total character which it must express wherever it operates . . . the real determination lies with the souls, who adapt the allotted conditions to their own particular quality." (Enn. III, 4, 5).

The soul's choice of life, then, is determined by its unique individuality, and on this basis alone all lives are chosen. Even though we cannot remember making such choices, we nevertheless keep on re-affirming them or extending them, day by day. With power assigned to human wills, then, Plato is able to conclude that God is free from responsibility for what happens when lives have been chosen. To complete this argument, he affirms in the same passage that "virtue has no master," which implies that even the worst choice of life can be remedied if one wants it to be. This choice of virtue both presupposes free will and reinforces it.



The soul's share of reason results from its participation in the composition of the universe. It is a small instance of the universal reason or Logos which created the world, and from this it follows that we have the privilege of being able to complete the process of our own creation, as we rectify the disorder suffered by our reason at birth. By doing this we also retrace in microcosm the way in which the world was created, and the predominance of reason in the individual person which results from this development will then match its predominance in the macrocosm.

This development brings with it a kind of power and freedom which, in its fullest extent was envisaged by Plato not so much in human beings, but in the souls of the stars and planets. It results in a *rational* necessity, which is stronger than the purely natural kind: "And of all necessitation, that which comes from a soul endowed with intelligence is by far the mightiest, seeing she imposes her law as a sovereign who is subject to none." (*Epinomis* 982B-D)

This applies to the universal reason, or absolute Logos, but the lesson it holds for ourselves is that our rational will can become even stronger than fate and all its mindless forces and errant causes, if we act in unison with Providence, and with what Plato called the higher preference. It would follow from this that the freedom of the will means that it can accede to natural causes without being *compelled* to do so, because it has a causal power which is wholly its own. This is the so-

called "uncaused cause" which decides which among the natural causes one should accept, and which not. This transcendence of the natural level is that of the Platonic Forms, which are both the ideal patterns of things and their causes.

***Freedom Beyond Being.*** That might have been a suitable place to conclude, but in fact I still have not referred to the ultimate principle of free will, and its importance is such that I must mention it, if only so as to make known its existence. Platonism comprehends a range of realities so wide that it extends even beyond being. This was brought to our notice by Tim Addey in his paper *Knowing Oneself, Knowing One's Divinity*, at a previous conference, where he traced the origin of all our individual natures to the primal and divine powers which share in the transcendence of the One or the Good (these terms are interchangeable). Besides that, there is a presumption that we are so constituted that each of us contains a reflection of the One. That idea is unproven, although it is arguable, and if it is true, it implies that we must all be attracted to the Good, as like is attracted to like.

But as things are, we all know that there are vast numbers of other objects of voluntary desire, so why make an issue of that one? The answer to that is that one cannot will or desire anything without willing the good that results from it. Even crimes are committed on the grounds that the proceeds of the crime are good in themselves.

There are three implications of this inbuilt primacy of the Good, namely, (1) that all possible acts of will are orientated to the Good; (2) that the Good or the One, and its equivalent in ourselves, both transcend being; and (3) that the operations of free will therefore must also transcend being, since they connect the Good with its own image. Conversely, the realm of natural causes-and-effects never transcends being, whence the free will, in its essential nature, must be exempt from all external natural forces.

That, then, as briefly as possible, is my reason for claiming that Platonism deserves to be regarded as the philosophy of free will, above all others.