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CATHARSIS IN *PHAEDO* AND *REPUBLIC* OF PLATO

The article takes up the topic of mystical motif of catharsis present in Plato's dialogues *Phaedo* and *Republic* as well as their links with the mysticism of the Ancient Greek mysteries. The philosophical catharsis is a result of touching the divine, transcendent Truth.

Keywords: Plato, myth, mystery, mysteries, catharsis, middle platonism

Catharsis is most often associated with Greek tragedy. Its essence lies in the experience of *sacrum*, confronting the sanctity and absoluteness of the divine moral rights (it mostly shows in the tragedies of Aeschylus and Sophocles) (Kitto 1997: 11–94, 115–143; Leski 2006: 180–187, 303–311), that leads to a moral revival sometimes taking the form of a psychic shock, as suggested by Aristotle.¹

In the Orphic mysteries catharsis has a similar meaning, but it is experienced on a deeper level. It is an element of mystical initiations, a result of the mystae facing divinity and experiencing a spiritual unity with God. This is the primary catharsis, if I may refer to it that way, which prepares them for the mystery of death and the final communion with God. However, there is another kind of catharsis, one which could be described as incessant – regarding the Orphic mysteries it is the so-called “Orphic life.”²

The subject of philosophical purification is taken up by Plato in a clearly spiritual and mystical tone mainly in his *Phaedo*, but also in *Republic*. In *Phaedo* he presents the essence of his philosophy and reveals its spiritual, even mystical, meaning. Naturally, he does not disclose here all of its secrets. Mysteriousness will forever remain one of the key attributes of the philosophy of Plato, which in this sense will obviously resemble mysteries with their

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¹ The experience of *sacrum* is still the essence of this “tragic” catharsis, as well as its core. A shock is a result, or a manifestation of this experience, not its essence.

² Plato, *Leg.* 782 C. On Orphic inspiration in the philosophy of Plato: Casel 1980: 96–108 (and other); Jaeger 2000, 146–150; 106; Louth 1987: 1–17; Reale 1993: 447–464; Krokiewicz 1971: 51–69.

initiations shrouded in mystery.³ It is yet another sign of the “mysterality” of the philosophy of Plato. In the same *Phaedo*, however, Plato includes a few thoughts which cast light on his philosophy, and help us, at least to a certain extent, to understand its spiritual meaning; nevertheless, one needs to admit that the way he begins might come as a bit of a shock, a paradox even. There he states:

Other people are likely not to be aware that those who pursue philosophy aright study nothing but dying and being dead.⁴

A bit further on he adds that “philosophers desire death”,⁵ but he answers the question of why death is supposed to be so desired by a philosopher is answered a few lines further on. The real aim of a philosopher and his actual object of longing is not death per se, but instead some secret wisdom hidden behind it, concerning the exploration of the absolute reality. Plato is convinced that it can be explored only after death, if at all, and only by means of our soul, undisturbed by the body and all of its issues. For this reason death is so desired:

...if we are ever to know anything absolutely, we must be free from the body and must behold the actual realities with the eye of the soul alone. And then, as our argument shows, when we are dead we are likely to possess the wisdom which we desire and claim to be enamoured of, but not while we live.⁶

This is related to what Plato called in *Phaedo* his “second voyage in quest of the cause.”⁷ It is a voyage which requires spiritual and intellectual strength, and it can take place without any support from body or its senses. What dominates here is the sapiential and cognitive aspect. The aim is to come to know and understand the metaphysical depth of reality, also the human one. However, just like in the mysteries, eudaemonic accents are noticeable here as well. For the cognition discussed herein, or, more precisely, the wisdom related to it, is the source of human happiness, and, what is more, eternal happiness (thus, like in mysteries), and for the same reasons as this wisdom, it can become complete only after the physical death of the philosopher.⁸ The philosophical context for this reflection is provided by what Plato teaches about the immortal soul. According to his teachings, the soul is expected to be an independent spiritual being, god-like even, with its source and true fatherhood in the metaphysical, that is somewhat supernatural, world.⁹ The soul belongs purposely to the beyond and it directs there its most acute longings and desires.

The same thoughts can be found in the writings of Middle Platonists (such as Alcinous), who put an even greater stress than Plato himself on the fact that the supreme form of

³ Vide: Plato, *Epistulae*, VII 341 C-D; *Phaedrus*, 276 A-D; *Leges*, 968 D.

⁴ Plato, *Phaedo*, 64 A, in: (*Plato in Twelve Volumes* 1966: vol. 1). Text available online at <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/>. Cf. 67 E. Cf. Apuleius, *De Platone et eius dogmate*, II, XXI 251. There is a famous Platonic motif of “melete thanatou” hidden in it.

⁵ Plato, *Phaedo*, 64 B. Cf. 67 E.

⁶ Plato, *Phaedo*, 66 D-E.

⁷ Plato, *Phaedo*, 99 D.

⁸ Plato, *Phaedo*, 81 A; Alcinous, *Didaskalikos*, XXVII 180, 16–22.

⁹ Plato, *Phaedo*. 80 A; 95 C. Alcinous, *Didaskalikos*, XXV 177, 16–178, 46; XXIII 176, 6–15.

happiness and the highest goodness available for a man is to contemplate God;¹⁰ however, these are fully accessible only after death, when the soul of a philosopher has gone to the world of gods, where it can relish in the landscape of “the plain of truth,” mentioned by Plato in *Phaedrus*.¹¹ Nevertheless, philosophers crave the truth while still living as well, and they sacrifice everything in order to find it. Plato writes about this in *Republic*.¹² He takes up the topic of mathematics and its purifying effect on the soul which, as a result, becomes more sensitive to the Truth (Plato mentions an “organ of the soul,” inherently sensitive to this truth, and in Book VII of *Republic* he calls it “the eye of the soul”¹³). Only studies undertaken in order to find the truth have the purifying power, as it is the truth itself which has this purifying power.¹⁴

In *Respublica* (*Republic*) purification is mainly of “scientific” character, while in *Phaedo* it is rather “spiritual” and “moral,” but both dialogues come to the same conclusion – freeing the soul from the bad influence of sensuality: in the former text in a cognitive sense, in the latter – spiritual and moral. It is a crucial element of the philosophy of Plato.¹⁵ If a philosopher purifies himself from his sensuality, in both the cognitive and the spiritual sense, each time he frees his soul from the influence of the body and its issues, that which happens during his physical life. In the philosophy of Plato the same role is played by practical morality, in the sense of a certain level of asceticism and practicing virtues. It is an initial form of the above-mentioned purifications, but an important one, as it conditions a philosopher’s spiritual life to a large extent. However, it is the experience of the Truth, in the sense of spiritual or mystical vision, which plays the most significant, even key role here:

Truth is in fact a purification from all these things, and self-restraint and justice and courage and wisdom itself are a kind of purification.¹⁶

The focus of the philosophical purifications is the spiritual experience of the absolute Truth. Such experiences require great moral and spiritual sensitivity. Plato mentioned this on many occasions and in many dialogues.¹⁷ Philosophical purifications do not serve to fulfil the egoistical desire for eternal happiness; their only purpose is to enable the initiated to learn the Truth, attainable only for pure spirits devoid of all sensual aspects. At the same time, the Truth is the philosopher’s constant companion, as suggested by Plato in the *Phaedo*.¹⁸ He associates philosophical purification with detaching the soul from everything related to carnality and worldly issues, which is a state that may be achieved in full only after one’s death:

¹⁰ Alcinoüs, *Didaskalikos*, XXVII 179, 39–42.

¹¹ Plato, *Phaedrus*, 248 B–C.

¹² Plato, *Resp.* VI 527 D–E. Cf. Alcinoüs, *Didaskalikos*, XXVII 180, 22–25.

¹³ Plato, *Resp.* VII 533 C–D.

¹⁴ Plato, *Phaedo*, 69 B–C, 81 A–B, 82 D; Cf. Alcinoüs, *Didaskalikos*, XXVIII 182, 8–12.

¹⁵ Cf. Albert 1982: 33–45.

¹⁶ Plato, *Phaedo*, 69 C.

¹⁷ Cf. Plato, *Republic*, 485 B – 486 D; 490 C–D; 500 B–D; *Letters*, VII 343 E – 344 B; *Theaetetus*, 173 D – 175C, *op. cit.*, pp. 75–78.

¹⁸ Plato, *Phaedo*, 69 B.

And does not the purification consist in this which has been mentioned long ago in our discourse, in separating, so far as possible, the soul from the body and teaching the soul the habit of collecting and bringing itself together from all parts of the body, and living, so far as it can, both now and hereafter, alone by itself, freed from the body as from fetters?... Well, then, this is what we call death, is it not, a release and separation from the body?... But, as we hold, the true philosophers and they alone are always most eager to release the soul, and just this—the release and separation of the soul from the body—is their study, is it not?

Then, as I said in the beginning, it would be absurd if a man who had been all his life fitting himself to live as nearly in a state of death as he could, should then be disturbed when death came to him. Would it not be absurd?... In fact, then, Simmias, ... the true philosophers practice dying, and death is less terrible to them than to any other men.¹⁹

Therefore, philosophy is for Socrates a means to prepare for death, a form of training, practising dying.²⁰

In this same *Phaedo* Socrates mentions some sort of secret initiation which feels like being possessed of by gods:

And I fancy that those men who established the mysteries were not unenlightened, but in reality had a hidden meaning when they said long ago that whoever goes uninitiated and unsanctified to the other world will lie in the mire, but he who arrives there initiated and purified will dwell with the gods. For as they say in the mysteries, ‘the thyrsus-bearers are many, but the mystics few’; and these mystics are, I believe, those who have been true philosophers. And I in my life have, so far as I could, left nothing undone, and have striven in every way to make myself one of them. But whether I have striven aright and have met with success, I believe I shall know clearly, when I have arrived there, very soon, if it is God’s will²¹.

Philosophical catharsis is a result of touching the divine transcendent Truth. These are the “initiations into perfect mysteries”²², numerous referred to by Plato. However, in the Platonic convention, any pursuit of truth, both in a cognitive and a moral sense, has a purifying effect. It is as if entering the purifying zone of the absolute Truth. Obviously, the complete and ultimate purification of the soul is only possible after it leaves the body, and then admires in some kind of spiritual manner, as expected, the “plain of truth”²³ mentioned in *Phaedrus*. Yet only those who have devoted their lives to seeking the philosophical truth and wisdom shall obtain this honour:

And no one who has not been a philosopher and who is not wholly pure when he departs, is allowed to enter into the communion of the gods, but only the lover of knowledge. It is for this reason, dear Simmias and Cebes, that those who truly love wisdom refrain from all bodily desires and resist them firmly and do not give themselves up to them, not because they fear poverty or loss of property,

¹⁹ Plato, *Phaedo*, 67 C–D.

²⁰ Plato, *Phaedo*, 67 E. Cf.; Plato, *Phaedo*, 64 A, B; 80 E.

²¹ Plato, *Phaedo*, 69 C–D.

²² Plato, *Phaedrus*, 249 B; 249 E; 248 C–D; *Gorg.* 493 B.

²³ Cf. Plato, *Phaedrus*, 248 B. Cf. Alcinous, *Didaskalikos*, XXVII 180, 20–22; Plutarch, *Dialog o miłości erotycznej*, 19 (in: Plutarch, *Moralia*, Warszawa 1977, p. 354).

as most men, in their love of money, do; nor is it because they fear the dishonor or disgrace of wickedness, like the lovers of honor and power, that they refrain from them.²⁴

The allegorical description of the condition of people who pursue this purifying Truth can be found in the “Allegory of the Cave” in Book VII of *Republic*.²⁵ The allegory is interpreted in an interesting way by the aforementioned Alcinous in his *Didaskalikos*.²⁶ Not only does he emphasize the cognitive aspects, but also the ethical ones, which seem to play a major role. In an ethical sense, the image of emerging out of the darkness and stepping into the light is an allegory of moral conversion.²⁷ Apart from that, it is also an allegory of philosophy itself practised in the Platonic manner. Philosophising in this manner means stepping out of the darkness caused by lack of understanding and the darkness of moral ugliness and into the light of understanding and moral beauty.²⁸

It can be said that for Plato finding the Truth and purification become one. Both are, in fact, the same way to God. Therefore, to experience the Truth philosophically means to experience God. It is undoubtedly an experience of a mystical nature, although one anchored, if that is a suitable word, not in a religious cult, but entirely in the human soul and its natural spiritual dispositions. Thereby, the philosophy of Plato does not transform into religion, although it deeply penetrates the spiritual or even mystical sphere of human existence. In its spiritual searches it remains a natural call of the human soul with its longing for the absolute Truth, and, at the same time, a path leading to this Truth, to a certain extent analogical or similar to the path understood as religion and religious cult, although not identical with these. According

²⁴ Plato, *Phaedo*. 82 B–C, in: *Plato in Twelve Volumes* 1966. Text available online at <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/>.

²⁵ Plato, *Resp.* VII 514 A–C.

²⁶ Alcinous, *Didaskalikos*, XXVII 180, 28–35. Cf. Plato, *Resp.* VII 515 C–D.

²⁷ Alcinous, *Didaskalikos*, XXVII 180, 35–36. The motif of conversion can also be found in Plato’s *Republic* – cf. Plato, *Republic*, VII 518 E, 521 C. The symbolic representation of light as an experience of spiritual nature, present therein, can also be found in chapter VI of Plato’s *Republic* in an analogy between goodness and sun; Plato, *Rep.* 508 C – 509 A. Cf. Alcinous, *Didaskalikos*, X 165, 20–26. More on the topic: Pawłowski 2005: 19–38.

²⁸ It is worth noticing the motif of spiritual light present in the Allegory of the Cave – it was very important for Plato and Middle Platonists. Apuleius Madaurensis, a Platonic philosopher contemporary with Alcinous, emphasizes the fact that getting to know God, with regard to his extraordinary metaphysical status, is only accessible through the enlightenment of the soul, or illumination (Apuleius, *De deo Socratis*, III, 124. Cf. *De Platone et eius dogmate*, I, V 190–191; *De mundo*, XXX, 357 (“the eyes of the soul” are mentioned here); also: Pseudo-Apuleius, *Asclepius, sive dialogus Hermetis Trismegisti*, XXIX: God enlightens a man who chases the darkness of sins out of his heart and absorbs the light of truth instead, then succumbs entirely to the charm of God’s intelligence, and thanks to its love he is freed from the part of his nature making his mortal, he starts to live with the hope of future immortality – the translation of *Asclepius* in: Apuleius Madaurensis, *O bogu Sokratesa i inne pisma*, Biblioteka Klasyków Filozofii, PWN, Warszawa 2002). God remains beyond reach for human rational cognition. The only form of getting to know him available for a man is illumination. The image of light shining through the darkness, as if sparks or lightning, can be found, as mentioned above, in Plato’s Letter 7 (Plato, *Epist.* VII, 341). In *Republic*, in Chapter VI, Plato compares the idea of Goodness, which gives the power of cognition, to light and the Sun (Plato, *Resp.* VI 508 C – 509 A). In Chapter VII of *Republic* the motif of light returns again in the context of the Allegory of the Cave and a discourse on dialectics (Ibid., VII 517 B–C). It seems that this spiritual light also has a mystical undertone for Plato (Cf. Albert 1980: 107; Pawłowski 2005: 19–38).

to Eric Dodds, a prominent researcher of Antiquity, it cannot be ruled out that on the basis of *Laws* Plato aimed at creating some state form of religion (Dodds 2002: 178). However, it does not seem to be in accord with the philosophical spirituality of Platonism, immensely existential and personal, thus private and impossible to reduce to any authoritarian forms offered by official, institutional religions. It would be tantamount to capturing the human soul and placing it, once freed from corporal prison, into a much more rigorous cultural prison. Dodds is perfectly aware of the fact that such a state or enforced religiousness would have nothing in common with the mysterious and almost unknowable God as imagined by Plato and described by him in *Timaeus* (Dodds 2002: 179).²⁹

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²⁹ Many scholars have written about the religious and mysterious aspects of the philosophy of Plato. Natorp writes that Plato’s philosophy is permeated with religion: (Natorp 1961: 508, 509). Albert also thinks that the philosophy of Plato is highly religious, and even cult: (Albert 1980: 68). Albert even says that the philosophy of Plato is a continuation of (Fortsetzung) Greek religion and reference is an interrupted relationship with God (Albert 1980: 121). Albert also accentuates the mysterious, especially the Orphic, qualities of Plato’s philosophy. Similar interpretations of Plato are characteristic of others, especially German scholars such as Willi and Fink: (Willi 1944: 61–105) (Willi is convinced that Plato attained the Orphic initiation and it had determined his metaphysical thought); (Fink 1970: 54–56). Jaeger also writes about orphic influence on Plato: (Jaeger 2007: 149). The German Benedictine monk Odo Casel writes on the Orphic mystery and roots of the philosophy of Plato: (Casel 1976: 35–40). The Italian author of a classic work of history of ancient philosophy is convinced that without Orphism the thinking of philosophers such as Pythagoras, Heraclitus, Empedokles, and Plato cannot be explained: (Reale 1993: 448). Similar characteristics in Greek philosophy were seen by Krokiewicz: (Krokiewicz 1971: 7–69; 2000: 52).

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MOTYW OCZYSZCZEŃ W FEDONIE I PAŃSTWIE PLATONA

Oczyszczenie (katharsis) to motyw typowo misteryjny (orficki). W misteriach orfickich oczyszczenia przybierały dwojaką formę. Pierwsze miały charakter ciągły i realizowały się w tzw. „życiu orfickim” (które jest uznawane za pierwszą formę „życia filozoficznego”). Drugie spełniały się poprzez misteryjne wtajemniczenia, których istotę stanowiło duchowe doświadczenie boskości (nadprzyrodzoności). Motyw oczyszczeń w obu tych formułach odnajdujemy w dialogach Platona. Pierwsza przyjmuje formę tzw. „życia filozoficznego”, które praktycznie realizuje ideał *melete thanatu*. Druga spełnia się poprzez dążenie do prawdy, a w punkcie kulminacyjnym przyjmuje postać duchowego doświadczenia prawdy absolutnej, którą okazuje się Bóg. Doświadczenie Prawdy absolutnej jest tu równoważne z misteryjnym wtajemniczeniem w boskość. Filozofia w swym dążeniu do prawdy przybiera na poziomie duchowym formę filozoficznych wtajemniczeń. Tym samym wszelkie dążenie do prawdy w formule platońskiej to niejako wejście w oczyszczające (i zarazem przyciągające) pole Prawdy absolutnej.

Słowa kluczowe: Platon, mit, misteria, katharsis, oczyszczenia, średni platonizm