A Delicacy in Plato's Phaedo
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III. *Medical Silence on Contagion*

Recently our suggestion in *CQ* 29 (1979), 296–300 about the silence of medical writers in the ancient world on contagion has been questioned.[5] We are somewhat unjustly accused of claiming to be the first to note T's primacy in making a written record of it: but against this see loc. cit. 295 n. 52. Nor did we claim that T was alone in his awareness of contagion: we cited historians and poets and agreed that lay people believed in it, merely pointing out that no ancient medical writers mention it.[6] This was clearly due to a dogmatic belief in the miasma theory. We pointed out that this silence could hardly be explained as due to the theoretical nature of the treatises or by the suggestion that they were concerned 'not with the epidemic illnesses but with the pathology of the individual' – since one work is specifically devoted to *Epidemics* and there are many references to them elsewhere in the Corpus, whilst awareness of the risk of contagion is surely highly relevant to the pathology of the individual. It clearly would have been more helpful to warn people of the danger of human contact than to recommend them to seek better airs or to abstain from exercise so as to breathe in less bad air. Nor does it help defenders of the Hippocratic School to argue that nothing in the Corpus is actually inconsistent with knowledge of contagion,[7] since failure to mention a fact so vital both for knowledge and for survival is surely incomprehensible. The absence of such a statement, even in parts of the Corpus now lost, is confirmed by the silence of Galen and later writers. Even a famous Arab doctor, well versed in classical scientific writings (but probably not in Thucydides) discovered contagion for himself during a plague in Spain in the late Middle Ages.[8] Finally, as we noted, the distinguished scientist William Harvey who, like all doctors up to the 17th century, was brought up on Hippocrates and Galen, broke out by his discovery of the circulation of the blood but was still loyal enough to attack Fracostoro's *De Contagione*. All these doctors must have regarded contagion as a popular superstition like the Evil Eye or colds from draughts. In the Plague of London (1666) Judges still carried posies against evil airs, as immortalized in a nursery rhyme.

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[5] J. Solomon, *Maia* 37 (1985), 121–3. His suggestion that the miasma theory is more scientific than T's careful study of the disease is hard to swallow, unless it is held that any theory is better than none. All scientists may at times have to make intuitive jumps but these have to be tested against evidence and abandoned if they fail. Even if doctors discounted the inferences made by laymen (and recorded by T) from experience in Athens, it is surprising that the miasma theory was not abandoned when at the siege of Potidaea during the Plague the besiegers were beset by it while the besieged were unaffected. They shared the same air, but were separated by a wall. It should be noted that doctors also ignored T's clear report of acquired immunity – a phenomenon which was only officially recognised by them in the 18th century.

[6] The one possible passage in the Hippocratic Corpus which is adduced was discussed by Dr Poole and myself (loc. cit. 298 with nn. 55–6).

[7] Cf. S. Hornblower, *The Greek World 479–323 B.C.* (London, 1983), p. 303 n. 3.

[8] Cf. *The Legacy of Islam*, ed. Arnold and Guillaume (Oxford, 1931), p. 340.

A DELICACY IN PLATO'S *PHAEDO*

Plato's striking figure of the 'child in us' at *Phaedo* 77e5 takes on an added lustre when viewed in the light of the theory of explanation Socrates develops between 100b1 and 105c7.

Socrates' theory aims to explain why certain objects have certain properties: why

something is beautiful (ἐστὶ...καλόν, 100c4) or tall (100e5–6), or when a body will be sick (νοσήσει, 105c3) or alive (ζῶν ἔσται, 105c9–10). Explanation is called for, Socrates thinks, when an object has a property its title to which is insecure, in the sense (to judge from 102b8–c8) that the object's having the property is not guaranteed by its being what it is. Thus Socrates wants an explanation, for example, of a person's being tall (102c1–9) or – the case of especial interest in the *Phaedo* – of a body's being alive.

On Socrates' theory, the explanation for an object's having a property, when it has it only insecurely, is provided by something *in* the object whose title to the property *is* secure. A person's being tall, for example, is explained by reference to the tall *in* the person, which will not admit shortness (102d6–8), and a body's being alive is explained by the presence *in* it of soul, which will not admit death, life's opposite (105c9–d11). In these cases, what begins as a property of an object – a person's tallness, or a body's life – emerges, on Socrates' analysis, as really the property of something *in* that object – the tall, or soul.

Phaedo 77d–e anticipates this pattern of explanation on the level of imagery. There, Socrates pokes fun at Simmias and Cebes for rejecting his earlier arguments for the immortality of the soul, saying they 'have the children's fear (δεδιέναι τὸ τῶν παίδων) that, when the soul leaves the body, the wind will disperse and scatter it, particularly if one happens to die not in calm weather but in a high wind' (77d7–e2). Cebes laughs at this, and says in answer, 'Assume that we are afraid, Socrates, and try to change our view. Or rather, don't assume that *we* are afraid; perhaps, though, there is a child in us who fears such things. Try to persuade him not to fear death as if it were a hobgoblin' (77e3–7). Uncertain as to whether he and Simmias really have the fear, then, Cebes refers the fear, not to himself and Simmias, but to something *in* them. And, since the fear in question is a children's fear, that something must be a child.

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DILUTION OF OARCREWS WITH PRISONERS OF WAR

At 10.17.6–16 Polybius relates how Scipio seized the opportunity offered by his capture of New Carthage in 209 B.C. to increase his fleet of quinqueremes by half as much again. There is a briefer passage on the same subject in Livy 26.47.1–3.

Polybius says that the total number of prisoners taken was nearly ten thousand, from whom Scipio separated two groups: first citizens, men and women with their young children, and secondly craftsmen. He freed the former, and made the latter, numbering about 2000, public slaves of Rome. In Livy's account women and children are not mentioned; the prisoners are said to be ten thousand free men. As in Polybius, the citizens are said to have been set at liberty and the two thousand craftsmen made public slaves. In Polybius Scipio is said to have selected from all those not in the first two groups 'the strongest, the fittest looking and the youngest and mixed them up with his own crews. And making the whole body of oarsmen (ναῦται) half as many again as before he succeeded in manning the captured ships as well as his own ὥστε τοὺς ἄνδρας ἑκάστῳ σκάφει βραχύ τι λείπειν τοῦ διπλασίους εἶναι τοὺς ὑπάρχοντας τῶν προγενομένων, for the captured ships were eighteen in number and the original ships thirty-five'. The corresponding passage in Livy is as follows: 'the remaining multitude [*multitudinem*, a word suggesting a larger number than the two former groups together] of young inhabitants[1] and of strong slaves he handed over to the fleet

[1] *incolae*, presumably neither citizens nor slaves.