

Phaedon, or On the Immortality Of the Soul

(1767)

Moses Mendelssohn

ALONG WITH HIS LIFELONG FRIEND GOTTHOLD EPHRAIM LESSING, *the philosopher Moses Mendelssohn (1729-86)—the grandfather of the composer Felix Mendelssohn—was one of the creators of the German Classical period. He was also the virtual founder of modern traditional Judaism.*

As students, Lessing and Mendelssohn studied in the Leibniz archives, an influence which stayed with Mendelssohn throughout his life. Lessing would later model the protagonist of his revolutionary Christian-Jewish-Islamic ecumenical drama NATHAN THE WISE, on the well-known gentle character of his friend Mendelssohn.

Mendelssohn campaigned for the termination of the Jewish ghettos and the entrance of the Jews as equals into German society, efforts which were aided by his first-ever translation of the Pentateuch into German, and the publication of his political treatise JERUSALEM, which argued for religious toleration within the state, and against the control of civil society by religious institutions, based on the idea that religious conscience could not be legislated, and that man's actions must be guided by reason. These arguments formed the basis of the HASKALAH (Jewish Enlightenment) movement in Eastern Europe and the Russian Pale of Settlement, which liberated these Jewish communities from the Hasidic rabbinate degraded by cabalism and superstition. Mendelssohn's influence in Germany and America led to the formation of the Jewish Reform movement, and was felt strongly during the Civil War through the efforts of anti-slavery spokesmen such as Rabbi David Einhorn, who led the fight against those Confederate Jews who were later to form the core of the B'nai B'rith.

Mendelssohn's PHAEDON, OR ON THE IMMORTALITY OF THE SOUL, the work which made him famous throughout Europe as the "German Socrates," was a novel effort at translation and commentary on the PHAEDO of Plato. The work begins as a strict translation of the Platonic dialogue, but rapidly diverges into an independent work, as Mendelssohn supplies arguments of his own and others more convincing, he believed, than those supplied by Plato's Socrates. The selection below, which begins with rejoinders to the ideas of the French Materialists, British Empiricists, and his contemporary Immanuel Kant, shows in its later portions the clear influence of Leibniz's MONADOLGY. It appears at approximately the position of 91b in the Platonic dialogue.

But, my dear Phaedo, Socrates continued, assuming that truth, in and of itself, is not only reliable and immutable but also not entirely incomprehensible to human beings, and supposing that someone, seeing this kind of sham of reasons and counter-reasons canceling one another out, is seduced into blaming, not himself and his own inability, but rather, out of anger, reason

itself, into hating and loathing all rational arguments for the remainder of his life and distancing himself from all truth and knowledge, would not the misfortune of this man be pitiable?

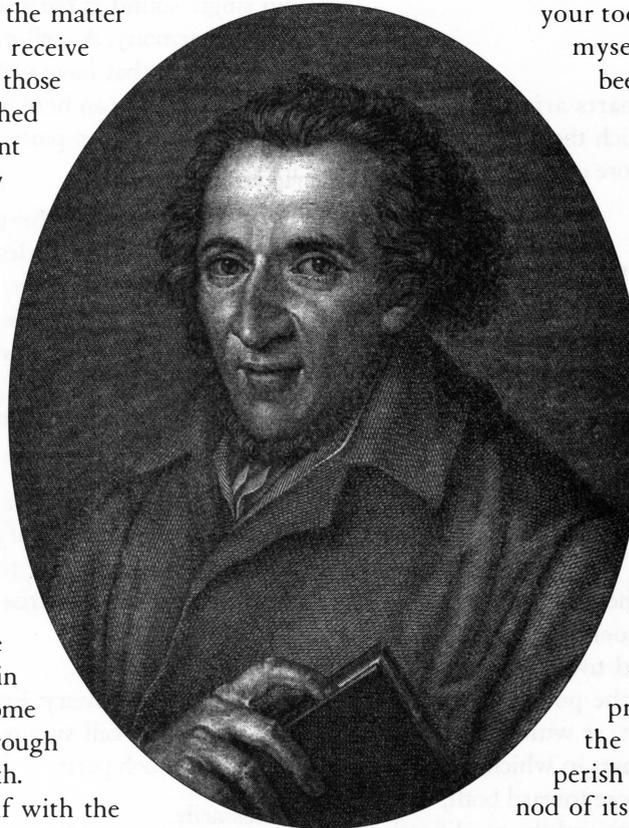
By Jupiter! I answered, very pitiable.

We must, therefore, seek to avoid this error above all,

and to persuade ourselves that the truth itself is not uncertain and wavering, but rather that our reason is often too weak to hold firmly to that truth and master it. Therefore we must redouble our efforts and our courage and ever risk new onslaughts. We are all bound to do that, my friends! You, because of the life before you, and I, on behalf of death. Yes, I have even more of a motive for that, I who may appear to the way of thinking of some common, ignorant people, more addicted to being right than being a lover of the truth. If these people have something doubtful to investigate, they take little trouble about how the matter in itself is constituted if they receive the approval and applause of those present. I shall be distinguished from these people in one point only, that my conveying my opinion to those present is no mere secondary purpose; my greatest concern is to convince myself that my opinions conform to the truth, because I find the greatest advantage in that.

Look, my friends, I draw the following conclusion: If the theory that I put forward is well grounded, then I do well to convince myself; if, however, there is no hope left for the one who is dying, then I gain this at least, that I do not become burdensome to my friends through my complaints before my death.

I sometimes amuse myself with the thought that all those things that would, if true, bring the entire human species true consolation and benefit have, for that very reason, very much probability of being true. When those addicted to doubt object that the theory of God and virtue is merely a political fiction invented for the benefit of human society, then I would like to shout at them, Oh! my friends! invent an instructive concept that is as indispensable to human society, and I wager that it is true. The human species is called to society just as each individual member is called to happiness. Everything that leads to this purpose in a general, secure, and constant way, was indisputably chosen and created by the wisest author of all things as a means to it. These flattering ideas give us extraordinarily much comfort, and show us



Moses Mendelssohn

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the relation between Creator and mankind in the most invigorating light; therefore, I wish nothing more than to convince myself of the truth of these ideas. Yet, it would not be good if my uncertainty on this should last longer. No! I will soon be freed of it.

In this frame of mind, Simmias and Cebes, I turn to your objections. You, my friends, if you want to follow my counsel, look more to the truth than to Socrates. If you find that I remain loyal to the truth, then give me applause; where I do not, then resist without the least consideration so that I do not, from your too good opinion, deceive you and myself, and so part from you like a bee, which leaves its stinger behind.

Well, my friends! Pay attention and remind me if I omit something of your reasons or present something wrongly. Simmias admitted that our faculty of thought were necessarily either created for itself or produced from the composition and development of the body. Correct?

Right!

In the first case, if the soul is, namely, to be considered as an incorporeal being created for itself, then the further series of conclusions is sanctioned, through which we may prove that it does not cease with the body, and absolutely could not perish except through the all-powerful nod of its Creator. Is this admitted or do some among you hesitate?

We all agree willingly.

And that this all-benevolent Creator never destroys a work of his own hands; so far as I can recall, no one has ever doubted that.

No one.

But Simmias is frightened that our ability to perceive and think is possibly not a being created for itself, but rather, like harmony, health, or the life of plants and animals, the property of an artificially formed body; was it not this that concerned you?

Exactly that, my Socrates.

What we want to see then, he said, is whether that which we know of our soul, and can experience whenever we want, renders this concern impossible. What happens in the artificial formation or composition of things? Aren't certain things brought closer together that previously were distant from one another?

Of course.

They were previously in combination with other things, and now they are combined among themselves, and they form the components of the whole that we call *a compound thing*?

Good!

Through this combination of parts arises first of all, depending on the manner in which the components are together, a certain order that is more or less perfect.

Right!

So the powers and the activities of the components will be more or less modified through the composition, accordingly as they are sometimes obstructed by action and reaction, sometimes accelerated, and sometimes changed in their direction. Right?

So it seems.

The creator of such a composition sometimes attends solely to the spatial proximity of the parts, as for example, with the rational order and symmetry in architecture, where nothing other than the order of the spatially proximate parts comes into consideration; sometimes, in contrast, his purpose is directed toward the changed activity of the components and the power of the combined thing that results from that, as with some engines or machines; yes, and there are cases in which we clearly see that the artist directs his purpose toward both, equally toward the ordering of the parts and the modification of their activity.

That is perhaps somewhat seldom true of the human artist, Simmias said, but the Creator of nature seems at all times to have bound these purposes together in the most perfect way.

Excellent, Socrates replied. However, I will not further pursue this secondary thought. Only tell me this, my Simmias. Can a power in the whole be produced by a combination that does not have its basis in the power of the component parts?

How do you mean, Socrates?

If all the material parts, without action or resistance,

were lying together in an inert rest, would artificial ordering and transposition of those parts be able to bring forth in the whole any sort of motion, resistance, or, in general, power?

It seems not, answered Simmias; no active whole can be assembled from inactive parts.

Good! he said. We can thus consider this as a principle. But we also notice that harmony and symmetry can be found in the whole even though each part in itself does not have harmony or symmetry; how does this happen? No single sound is harmonious; and yet many together form a harmony. A well-proportioned building can consist of stones that have neither symmetry nor regularity. Why is it that I can here put together a harmonic whole from inharmonic parts, a highly regular whole from irregular parts?

Oh, replied Simmias, this distinction is obvious. Balance, harmony, regularity, order and so forth cannot be conceived without multiplicity. For they signify the relations of single impressions as they are represented to us, taken together and in comparison one with the other. Thus inherent in these ideas is a joining together, a comparison of manifold impressions that together make up a whole and cannot therefore be the result of the individual parts.

Continue, my dear Simmias! said Socrates with an inner pleasure at the subtlety of his friend. Also tell us this: If each single sound were to make no impression on the ear, would a harmony arise from many such sounds?

Impossible!

And also for symmetry: Every part must affect the eyes if that which we call symmetry is to come into existence from many such parts?

Necessarily.

We thus see here also that there can be no power in the whole for which the basis cannot be found in the parts, and that all the other features that do not flow from the properties of the elements and components, such as order, symmetry, and so forth, are to be sought only in the manner of composition. Are we convinced of this statement, my friend?

Completely.

It would seem, then, that there are two ways of considering any, even the most artificial combination of things: first, the sequence and order of the component parts in time or space, and then, the connection of the original powers and the manner in which they are expressed in

that compound thing. Through the ordering and the position of the parts, the actions of the simple powers will, of course, be limited, qualified, and changed, but there can never be a power or activity obtained whose origin is not to be sought in the fundamental parts. I linger here awhile on these subtle, fundamental considerations, my friends, like a runner who paces himself at different times in order to then hurry forward with increased drive, to swing round the goal and, if the gods grant him fortune and fame, to carry away the victory. Consider with me, Simmias, whether our faculty of sensing and thinking is not a being created for itself, or is it rather a property of things in combination: Must it not either, as with harmony and symmetry, come from a certain position and ordering of parts or, like the power of the compound thing, have its origin in the power of the component parts?

Of course, as we have seen, there is no third possibility conceivable.

Considering harmony, we saw, for example, that each individual sound is not harmonic and that the harmony consists merely in the comparing and contrasting of the different sounds. Right?

Correct!

There is something similar with the symmetry and regularity of a building: It consists in the combination and comparison of many individual, irregular parts.

That cannot be denied.

But is this combining and contrasting anything other than the action of our faculty for thought? And is it to be found anywhere in nature outside of the thinking being?

Simmias did not know what to answer here.

In unthinking nature, Socrates continued, individual sounds follow one another, individual stones are on and next to one another. But where is there harmony, symmetry, or regularity? If no thinking thing is added that brings together the manifold parts, places them side by side, and perceives in this comparison a harmony, then I do not know where to find it; or do you know, dear Simmias, how to seek its trace in mind-less nature?

I must acknowledge my inability, he answered, although I likewise perceive where this is going.

A happy omen! cried Socrates, when the opponent foresees his own downfall. Nevertheless, answer me without discouragement, my friend! For you will have no small part in the victory which we hope to obtain over you

yourself: Can the origin of a thing be explained from its own effects?

In no way.

Order, symmetry, harmony, regularity, in general, all relations that require a combination and comparison of manifolds, are effects of the faculty of thought. Without the addition of the thinking being, without comparing and contrasting the manifold parts, the most regular building is a mere pile of sand, and the voice of the nightingale is no more harmonious than the groaning of the night owl. Indeed, without this action, there is in nature no whole that consists of many parts that exist apart from one another, because each of these parts has its own being, and they must be contrasted with one another, compared, and considered in connection if they are to make up a whole. The faculty of thought, and this alone in all of nature, is able, through an internal activity, to make comparison, combination, and contrast real; therefore, the origin of all things in combination, of numbers, magnitude, symmetry, harmony, and so forth, insofar as they require a comparison and contrast, must be sought only in this faculty of thought. And since this is admitted, this faculty of thought itself, this cause of all comparison and contrast, cannot possibly spring from these its own work, cannot possibly consist in a relation, harmony, symmetry in a whole that is combined from independently existing parts, since all these things presuppose the effects and works of the thinking being and cannot be real except through that.

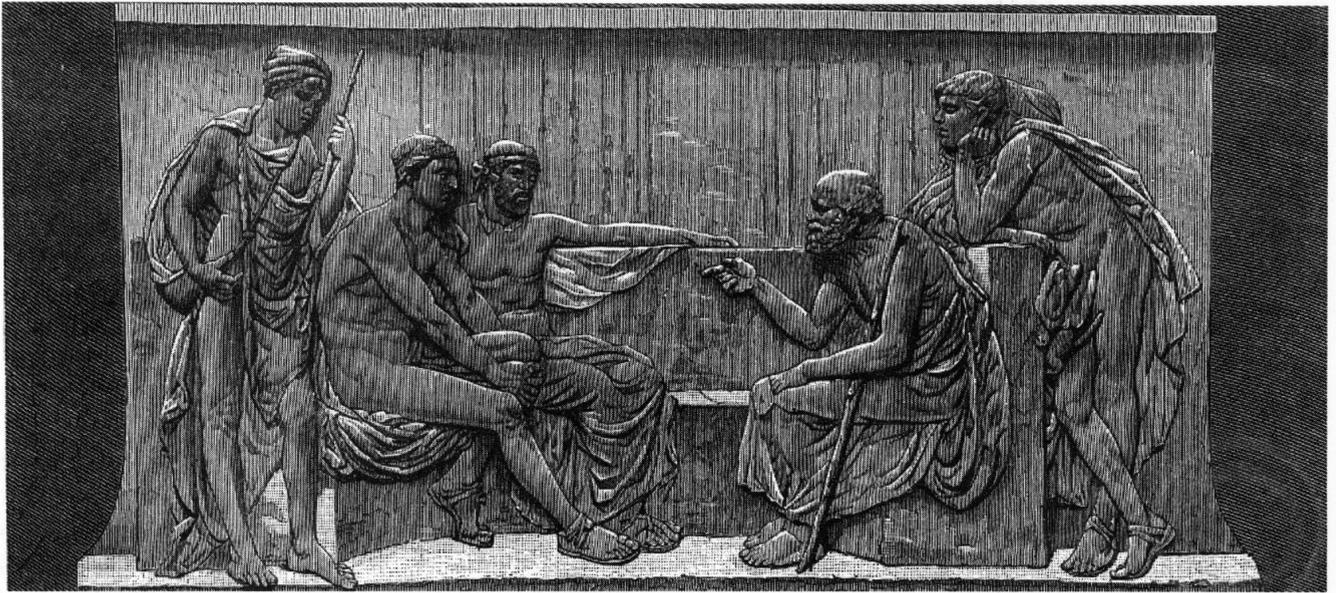
This is very clear, Simmias replied.

Since any whole that consists of parts that are external to one another, presupposes a combination and comparison of these parts, and this combination and comparison must be the work of a faculty of conception, I thus cannot place the origin of this faculty of conception in a whole that consists of such independent parts without allowing a thing to come into existence through its own operations. And not even the mythmakers, as far as I know, have ever dared such an absurdity. No one has placed the origin of a flute in the harmony of its tones or the origin of sunlight in the rainbow.

It seems, my dear Socrates, that the last vestiges of our doubt is now gone.

This deserves, however, particular consideration, he replied, if I do not tire your patience with these thorny investigations.

Venture always! cried Crito, to put patience to this test. You did not spare mine at all when I early today pressed



"Socrates teaching the people in the agora," wood engraving after a nineteenth century relief.

for the comments on a proposal—

—Nothing more of a topic, Socrates said, interrupting him, that is now reliably correct. We have here to investigate things that seem still subject to doubt. Of course, not that our ability to perceive and think is to be sought in the position, formation, order, and harmony of bodily components; this we have rejected as impossible, without moving too closely to either the omnipotence or the wisdom of God. But perhaps this faculty of thought is one of the powers of the compound thing, essentially different from the position and formation of the parts, and yet never found except in compound things? Is this not the single vestige of doubt that we challenge, my dear Simmias?

Of course!

Thus, we wish to take this case, Socrates continued, and assume that our soul is a power of a compound thing. We found that all power of compound things must proceed from the powers of the components. Must, therefore, according to our presupposition, the components not have powers from which the faculty for thought results in compound things?

By all means!

But the powers of these component parts, of what nature and constitution shall we assume them to be? Shall we suppose them to be similar or dissimilar to the activity of thought?

I do not properly understand the question, Simmias

replied.

A single syllable, Socrates said, has in common with the entire discourse that it is perceptible; but the entire discourse has a meaning, the syllable, none. Is that true?

Right!

While, thus, a mere single syllable excites a perceptible but meaningless sensation, there arises from their totality an understandable meaning that acts on our mind. Here, the activity of the whole results from powers of the parts that are dissimilar to it.

That is understandable.

Considering harmony, order, and beauty, we perceived something similar. The pleasure that they cause in the mind springs from the impressions of the components, none of which can cause either pleasure or displeasure.

Good!

There is another example of the activity of the whole being able to arise from the powers of the components that are dissimilar to it.

I concede it.

I do not know whether I do not perhaps go too far, my friend, but I can imagine that all activities of corporeal things could arise from such powers of the primordial stuff that are completely different from them. Colors, for example, can perhaps be resolved into such impressions that are not colored, and motion itself may arise from

original powers that are nothing like motion.

This would require a proof, Simmias said.

It is perhaps not necessary, for now, that we stop here, Socrates said. It is enough that I elucidate through examples what I understand by the words: the power of the whole could arise from the powers of the components that are dissimilar to it. Is that now clear?

Completely!

According to our presupposition, the powers of the components would themselves be either powers of conception, and thus similar to the power of the whole that arises from them, or of a completely different constitution and therefore dissimilar. Is there a third possibility?

Impossible!

But answer me this, my friend. If, from simple powers, a power different from them is produced in the compound thing, where can this difference be found? Except for the thinking being, the powers of the whole are nothing but the individual powers of the simple components as they change and limit one another through action and reaction. The dissimilarity is not found in this direction, and we must once again resort to the thinking being that conceives the powers united and taken together in a different way than it would think of them individually and not united. An example of this can be seen in colors, as well as harmony. Bring two different colors into so small a space that the eye cannot distinguish them; they will still be separate in nature and will remain isolated; but our senses will nevertheless constitute a third color from them that has nothing in common with them. There is a similar situation with taste and, if I am not mistaken, with all our feelings and sensations in general. They cannot, of course, become different in and for themselves through combination and connection than they are individually; but to the thinking being that cannot clearly separate them, they appear to be different than they would be without combination.

This can be granted, Simmias said.

Thus, can the thinking being have its origin in simple powers that do not think?

Impossible, since we saw previously that the capacity for thinking could not have its origin in a whole that consists of many parts.

Quite right! replied Socrates: The assembling of simple powers out of which a dissimilar power of the compound thing is to emerge presupposes a thinking being to which

they will appear differently in combination than they are; therefore, it is impossible that the thinking being should spring from the combination, from this connection. If therefore sensing and thinking, in a word, conception, is to be a power of compound things, mustn't the powers of the components be similar to the power of the whole, and consequently also be powers of conception?

How might it be otherwise since there can be no third possibility?

And the parts of these components, insofar as divisibility can extend, mustn't these also have the same powers of conception?

Incontestably! since every component is in turn a whole that consists of smaller parts, and our arguments can be continued until we come to the fundamental parts that are simple and do not consist of many parts.

Tell me, my dear Simmias! Do we not find in our soul an almost unlimited number of concepts, thoughts, inclinations, and passions that engage us constantly?

Certainly!

Where would these be found in the parts? Either dispersed, some in this one, some in that one, without ever being repeated; or is there at least one among them that would unify and embrace all these thoughts, desires, and aversions, insofar as they are to be found in the soul?

Necessarily one or the other, Simmias answered, and, as it seems to me, the first must be impossible since all conceptions and inclinations of our soul are so intimately joined and unified that they must necessarily be present somewhere undivided.

You rush at me with great strides, my dear Simmias! We would be able neither to remember, nor consider, nor compare, nor think, indeed, we would not even be the person we were a moment ago, if our concepts were distributed among many components and not found somewhere together in their most intimate connection. We must, therefore, at the very least assume a substance that unifies all concepts of the components, and could this substance be composed of parts?

Impossible, otherwise we will need again a composition and comparison by which a whole would be formed from the parts, and we come again to the place from which we started.

It will therefore be simple?

Necessarily.

Also unextended, for that which is extended is divisible and that which is divisible is not simple?

Right!

There is, therefore, in our body at least a single substance that is not extended, not compound, but is simple, that has a power of conception, and unifies all our concepts, desires, and inclinations in itself. What prevents us from calling this substance "soul"?

It is indifferent, my excellent friend, Simmias replied, what name we give it, and all the conclusions that you brought forth for the immortality of the thinking being, are now irrefutable.

Let us now consider this, Socrates interposed: If many such substances were together in a human body, indeed, if we want to consider all fundamental elements of our body as substances of this nature, would my reasons for immortality as a result lose any of their binding character? Or would such an assumption rather necessitate our allowing many rather than one immortal soul, and thus concede more than we required for our purpose? For each of these substances would, as we saw previously, encompass in itself the entire sum of all conceptions, wishes, and desires of the whole man and therefore, as concerns the extent of knowledge, their power could not be more limited than the power of the whole.

Impossible that it should be more limited.

And what about the clarity, truth, certainty, and life of knowledge? If many confused, defective, and uncertain concepts are put together, will a clear, complete, and definite concept be produced?

It seems not.

If a soul is not added that compares them and forms from those a complete knowledge through reflection and consideration, they will not in all eternity cease being many confused, deficient, and uncertain concepts.

Right!

The component parts of the human being have therefore concepts that are just as clear, just as true, just as complete, as the conceptions of the whole; from less clear, less true, etc., nothing can be brought forth through combination that has a greater degree of these perfections.

That is not to be denied.

But doesn't this mean that, instead of one rational spirit that we wish to place in each human body, we assume quite without difficulty a countless quantity of such?

Certainly!

And this quantity of thinking substances itself will not, probably, be all equally perfect; for that sort of useless multiplication does not occur in this well-ordered universe.

The all-highest perfection of its Creator, answered Simmias, allows us to assume that with confidence.

Thus, there will be one among the thinking substances, which we place in the human body, that is the most perfect among them, and it will have consequently the most clear and most enlightened concepts, correct?

Necessarily!

This simple substance that is not extended, possesses the capacity for conception, and is the most perfect among the thinking substances that dwell within me, and that apprehends all concepts of which I am conscious in myself, with the same clarity, truth, and certainty, is this not my soul?

Nothing other, my dear Socrates!

My dear Simmias, now is the time to take a look behind us at the path that we have covered. We presupposed that the faculty for thought is a property of compound things, and then, how wonderful, we bring from this very assumption, through a series of rational arguments, the diametrically opposed proposition, namely, that sensation and thought must necessarily be properties of the simple, not the compound. Is this not a sufficient proof that the former assumption is impossible, contradictory, and thus to be rejected?

No one could doubt this.

Extension and motion, continued Socrates, are able to resolve all that pertains to compound things; extension is the matter, and motion the source, from which change is produced. Both are revealed in the compound in a thousand manifold shapes, and represent in corporeal nature the infinite series of wonderful structures, from the smallest speck of solar dust to the glory of the heavenly spheres that is considered by poets to be the seat of the gods. All agree in their matter being extension and their activity, motion. But to experience perception, comparison, inferring, desiring, wanting, pleasure, and pain demands a completely different capacity from extension and motion, another fundamental matter, other sources of change. Here, a simple fundamental being must conceive much, must grasp together the independently existing, contrast that which exists in a manifold way, and compare that which is different. What is distributed in

the broad space of the corporeal world here is compressed together as in a point to make a whole, and what no longer exists is brought into comparison in the same present moment with that which is yet to be. Here I acknowledge neither extension nor color, neither rest nor motion, neither space nor time, but an internally active being that conceives extension and color, rest and motion, space and time, connects them, divides them, compares, chooses, and is capable of still thousands of capacities that have not the least thing in common with extension and motion. Pleasure and pain, desire and aversion, hope and fear, happiness and misery, are not changes of place of small bits of earthly dust. Modesty, human love, benevolence, the charms of friendship and the sublime feeling of piety are something more than the rush of blood and the pulsing of arteries that they are commonly accompanied by. Things of such a different kind, my dear Simmias, of such different properties, cannot be confused with one another without the most extreme carelessness.

I am completely satisfied, was Simmias' answer.

Yet another comment, the former replied, before I turn to you, my Cebes! The first thing that we know of the body and its properties, is that anything other than the way that it is presented to our senses?

Can you make that somewhat clearer, my dear Socrates!

Extension and motion are conceptions the thinking being forms of that which is real external to himself, correct?

Granted!

We would like to have the most reliable reasons to be assured that things external to us are not otherwise than they normally appear to us. But does not the conception itself always come first, and the assurance that its object is real follow later?

How is it otherwise possible? replied Simmias, since we can be informed of the existence of things external to us only through their impressions on us.

In the sequence of our knowledge, therefore, thinking being always comes first, and extended being follows; we first come to know that concepts, and consequently a conceiving being, are real, and from them we conclude the real existence of body and its properties. We can convince ourselves of this truth because body, as we saw before, forms no whole without the work of the thinking being, and motion itself, without holding together of the past with the present, would not be motion. We may thus consider the subject from whichever side we want, we always first encounter the soul and its works, and then

follows body and its changes. Conceiving always precedes the conceived.

This concept seems productive, my friend, said Cebes.

We can arrange the entire chain of being, Socrates continued, from the infinite to the smallest particle of dust, into three ranks. The first rank conceives, but cannot be conceived by others; this is the unique one, whose perfection transcends all finite concepts. Created spirits and souls make up the second rank: These conceive and can be conceived by others. The corporeal world is the third rank, which can only be conceived by others, but cannot conceive. The objects of this last rank, in the sequence of our knowledge as well as in existence itself, are external to us, and always the last in order since they always presupposed the reality of a conceiving being. Do we want to concede this?

We cannot do otherwise, said Simmias. After what came before, it all must be conceded.

And yet, continued Socrates, human opinion for the most part gets this order backwards. The first thing we believe we are assured of is body and its changes; this controls all our senses so much that we for a long time consider material existence to be the unique one, and everything else as properties of the same.

I am glad, Simmias said, that you yourself, as you so clearly give us to understand, went this perverted way yourself.

Of course, my dear Simmias, replied Socrates. The first opinions of all mortals are similar to one another. This is the Rhodes from which all begin their journey. They wander aimlessly in searching for the truth, up and down among the seas of opinion, until their reason and their reflection, the children of Jupiter, illuminate their sails, and proclaim a happy landing. Reason and reflection lead our soul from sensory impressions of the corporeal world back to its home, into the realm of thinking being, first to its equal, created being that, because of its finitude, can be thought and clearly conceived by others. From this, they lift it to the source of thinking and the thinkable, to that all-conceiving but by all inconceivable being of which we, to our consolation, know enough to realize that everything that is good, beautiful, and perfect in the corporeal world and the world of souls, had its reality from him and is preserved through his omnipotence. For our happiness in this and in the other life, we need no more than to be assured by this truth, touched, and penetrated by it in the deepest intimacy of our heart.

—translated by John Chambless