

# Class Six - Phaedo (Beginning to 84c)

Philosophical Perspectives - Ryan Simonelli

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## 1 Context and Setting of Phaedo

- **Plato:**
  - Thought to be born in 428BC or 427BC, making him 29 or 30 at the time of the death of Socrates.
  - Unlike Socrates, he from a rich and aristocratic family.
  - Socrates was a major influence on Plato, but Plato had other important influences. For instance:
    - \* Pythagoras and the Pythagoreans who had a religious reverence for mathematics.
    - \* Cratylus, a Heraclitean philosopher who thought “everything flows,” is always changing and in flux.
  - Founded the first school of philosophy, the “Academy,” in 387BC, where Aristotle was a student among others.
- **The Phaedo:**
  - From Plato’s “middle period,” after all the dialogues we’ve read so far (*Euthyphro*, *Apology*, *Crito*), around the same time (but shortly before) the *Republic*.
  - Though Socrates is the main figure, dialogues from this period are generally thought to be less properly “Socratic,” and more of Plato using Socrates as a mouthpiece to express his own philosophical views.
  - Plato makes a point to note that he wasn’t there at Socrates’s death, contrasting with the *Apology* where he was. This makes clear that the dialogue is not to understood as a historical report of what Socrates actually said.
  - Though the ostensive aim of the dialogue is to argue for the immortality of the soul, the arguments serve the important secondary task of developing the Platonic theory of forms, one of the most important and enduring ideas in Western Philosophy.
- **Context and Setting:**
  - A report from Phaedo of the day of Socrates’s death, both of the conversations that took place and of the death itself.
  - The main participants of the conversation with Socrates are Cebes and Simmias, two philosophers from Thebes, though several others are present.
  - Socrates aims to justify his hopeful attitude towards death to Cebes and Simmias, presenting several arguments for the immortality of the soul.
    - \* Note the change in position from the *Apology*, where Socrates argued that one might become nothing upon death such that it’s like a dreamless sleep. Of course, it’s possible that Socrates changed his mind in the month or so that he’s been imprisoned, but it’s much more likely that these are just Plato’s views.

## 2 A Preliminary Argument and the Task (63c-70a)

- **A Conditional Claim:** *If* the soul is immortal, then philosophers should embrace death.
- **Philosophy as Aspiring to that Which One Attains Only In Death:**
  - The philosopher is not concerned with the pleasures of the body, but, rather, is concerned with matters of the intellect or soul.

- So, the philosopher “turns away from the body towards the soul,” (64e) so as to be able to grasp truths and not be “deceived by [the body],” (65b).
- The philosopher, then, should aim to free themselves entirely from their body so as to “observe things in themselves by themselves with the soul by itself,” (66e).
- So, only when a philosopher is dead will they “attain that which [they] desire and of which [they] claim to be lovers, namely, wisdom,” (66e).
- **Philosophy as Practice for Death:** “[T]he one aim of those who practice philosophy in the proper manner is to practice for dying and death.”
  - In doing philosophy, one wants to free the soul from the body so as to grasp truth.
  - “[I]t would be ridiculous for a man to train himself in life to life in a state as close to death as possible, and then to resent it when it comes,” (67e).
- **The Question:** But is the antecedent of this conditional true? *Is the soul immortal?* Cebes reports that most people think it is not:
  - “They think that after it has left the body it no longer exists anywhere, but that it is destroyed and dissolved on the day the man dies, as soon as it leaves the body; and that, on leaving it, it is dispersed like breath or smoke, has flown away and gone and is no longer anything anywhere,” (70b).

**The Task:** Socrates will try to show the basic truth of an “ancient theory” according to which, when people die, their souls go to another place—the underworld—and when people are born, their souls come from this place, (70d).

### 3 The Argument from Opposites (the Cyclical Argument) (70e-72d)

- **The Initial Observation:** Things that have an opposite “must necessarily come to be from their opposite and from nowhere else.”
  - When something becomes larger, it comes to be such from being smaller.
  - Likewise, the weaker comes from the stronger, the swifter from the slower, the worse from the better, the sleeping from the awake, and so on.
- **A Further Observation:** In each of these cases, we have two opposites *A* and *B*, there are two processes, one going from *A* to *B* and one going from *B* to *A*.
  - Growing is the process that takes you from being smaller to being bigger and shrinking is the process that takes you from being bigger to smaller.
  - Likewise for getting stronger and weaker, waking up and falling asleep, and so on.
- **Applying This Reasoning:** Living and being dead are opposites, so, just as being dead comes from being alive, being alive comes from being dead, and, just as there’s the process of dying which takes you from being alive to being dead, there’s another process that takes one from being dead to being alive.
- **Conclusion:** There exists “a process of coming from the dead to the living,” so “the souls of the dead must be somewhere whence they can come back again,” (72a).
- **An Implicit Premise:** Like being large or small, or being asleep or awake, being alive or dead is a *state* of a *substance* that persists through these changes in state. Consider the following seemingly analogous argument for a contradictory conclusion:
  - Being existent and non-existent are opposites.
  - Just as there is the process of becoming non-existent—ceasing to be—there is the process of becoming existent—coming to be.
  - So, there must be a place where non-existent things are, prior to existing, from which they undergo the process of coming to be.
  - A contradiction! Non-existent things *aren’t*, so there could be no place where they could be, prior to existing.

**Question:** Is being alive vs. being dead more like being awake vs. being asleep, or more like being existent vs. being non-existent?

## 4 The Argument from Recollection (73a-77a)

- **The Basic Argument:** Cebes (72d) recognizes that there is the following further argument for the claim that souls of the living come from another place where they exist prior to life:
  1. If the theory of recollection (which Socrates (i.e. Plato) has defended elsewhere) is true, then the soul must have existed somewhere before it came to exist in a living body.
  2. The theory of recollection is true.
  3. So, the soul must have existed somewhere before it came to exist in a living body.

Obviously the crucial premise is premise (2). Cebes notes the argument for the theory found in Plato's *Meno*, but Socrates provides another argument here.

- **The Model of Recollection:** Sometimes, when we see an ordinary object, like a lyre or guitar, we "recollect" something or someone else with which that object is associated. For instance, if you're a rock and roll fan, seeing the following guitar:



will likely make you think of Van Halen. In order for this to happen, you have prior knowledge of who Van Halen is.

- **Two Sticks:** Consider the following two sticks:



When you look at these two sticks, you can see that they are (roughly) equal in length. If I give you two stones, you may judge that they are equal in weight. So there is this thing—*equality*—that the lengths of the sticks, the weights of the stones, and several other things partake in.

- **Perfection vs. Deficiency:** Equality itself is *perfect* in a way that the equality of such things as sticks and stones is *deficient*. The equality of sticks *falls short* of equality itself.
  - **An Epistemological Justification:** This premise seems to be based on the idea that things such as sticks and stones can appear to be equal but not be, equality itself never appears to be anything other than equal, (74b-c).
  - **A Metaphysical/Epistemological Principle:** If something is perfectly *X*, then it always appears to be *X* and never non-*X*.
  - **A Potential Argument:** Plato doesn't argue this way, but perhaps he could:
    - \* Insofar as we are capable of determining whether or not something is *X*, where the thing might appear to be *X* but not be *X*, we must have a grasp of *X*-ness itself which serves as a measure for judging whether that thing is *X*.
    - \* If *X*-ness itself could appear to be *X* but not be *X*, we would need another measure—*true X*-ness—to determine whether or not it is *X*, and so on.
    - \* In order to avoid the regress, we should just say that *X*-ness itself both always is *X* and always appears *X*.
  - **An Alternate Metaphysical Justification:** Plato doesn't argue this way, but he could also argue that sticks that we judge to be equal are never *really* equal, only roughly equal.

- \* If you measure the sticks above with a really accurate ruler, they are likely to be off by a millimeter or so.
- \* This is plausibly so with *all* ordinary objects that we judge to be equal—if we get a fine enough measure, we’ll discover that they’re really unequal to some degree.
- \* So we must have a grasp of *true* equality which comes to mind whenever we see things that imperfectly
- **Prior Knowledge is Necessary:** When we see something and realize that thing we see aspires to some reality but falls short of it, we must have some prior knowledge of that other reality to which it aspires, (74e).
- **Knowledge Present in Perception from the Start:** We perceive such things as equal sticks right after birth (75b).
  - **Adding Some Justification:** If we didn’t experience things as equal, or, more generally, as partaking in general forms, experience would be, as William James puts it, a “blossoming, buzzing, confusion” and would do nothing for one.
- **Conclusion:** We have knowledge of equality itself before birth, (75c).
- **Generalizing:** This argument does not just apply to equality, of course, but to the beautiful, the good, the just, the pious, and so on.
- **An Empiricist Presupposition:** This argument supposes that one can have knowledge of things by acquiring that knowledge through experience. Thus, the soul must exist prior to birth in a place where it is able to acquire knowledge of the forms. But why must all knowledge be acquired? Couldn’t knowledge of the forms be *innate*? If it was, we wouldn’t need to posit a process by which the soul acquired knowledge of these forms prior to birth. What do we think Plato would say here?

## 5 The Argument from Affinity (78b-80d)

- **Plato’s Two Realms:** There are “two kinds of existences, the visible and the invisible,”(79a)
  - **The Visible:** Composite, impure, indissoluble, always changing, divine, immortal, (fully) intelligible
  - **The Invisible:** Non-composite, pure, soluble, unchanging, human, mortal, not (fully) intelligible

These things come as a package deal. The explanation of any of these attributes is in reference to the others.

  - For instance, the explanation for the fact that the visible is not really intelligible is that it is always changing, so one cannot get a *grip* on it—it always slips away.
- **The Basic Claim:** Whereas the body belongs to the first kind of existence, the soul belongs to the second kind of existence. Since existences of the second kind are immortal, the soul is immortal.
- **The Main Justification:** The dealings of the body are with the visible, whereas the dealings of the soul (for instance, in philosophical activity), are with the invisible—the forms.
  - Things deal with the kind of existence that they themselves belong to.
  - Recall the characterization of philosophy as an activity in which “turns away from the body” so as to “observe things in themselves by themselves with the soul by itself.”
- **Further Thought:** Those who have philosophized and have purified the soul from the body to some extent will be better off in death (80d-84c).
- **Question:** What do we make of the characterization of philosophy here?
  - The philosopher Thompson Clarke said, of early 20th century philosopher G.E. Moore, “he drags us down from our ivory towers, we reflective, ethereal beings, back to our earthly selves.” Most philosophers these days think of philosophy as much more engaged, “earthly” enterprise. What do we think?