

24.01 Classics of Western Philosophy

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I. Plato

Lecture 2. The *Phaedo*

Reading: *Phaedo* 57a-72e

1. *Background to the Phaedo.* Socrates spends his final hours with his friends. They discuss the immortality of the soul, a philosophical question of some urgency given the circumstances. We can identify five different arguments, which we'll call the Separation Argument (64a-69e); the Cyclical Argument (70c-72e); the Recollection Argument (72e-77d); the Affinity Argument (78b-84b); and the Final Argument (100b-107c). These arguments are important for what they say not only about the *soul* or self, but also about the *Forms*: the eternal, ideal universals, which particular perceptible things only roughly approximate.

2. *The Separation Argument.* The philosopher has no need to fear death, for to do philosophy is to practice dying: 'all who actually engage in philosophy aright are practicing nothing other than dying and being dead' (64a). Death is the separation of soul and body, and doing philosophy involves separating the soul as much as possible from the body. In understanding or contemplating the Forms, the soul comes to be 'alone by itself as far as possible, disregarding the body': the body is a source of *distraction* from this quest (64d), and the bodily senses (hearing, sight) are a source of *inaccurate* beliefs (65b). Since the body is an obstacle to the achievement of philosophy's goal, in being completely freed of the body through death one will be able to fully achieve the goal of philosophy, namely full knowledge of the Forms (67a, b).

3. *The Forms.* The soul 'strives for *that which is*' (65c); in illustration Socrates speaks of the *just*, the *beautiful*, and the *good* (65d). We never encounter these in their full perfection, but we know what they are, and strive for them. Note the assumption that reality, 'that which is', does *not* include the familiar objects of sense perception. There is an implicit 'knowledge argument' for the existence of the forms. Anything of which we have knowledge must really exist. We have knowledge of things that are not objects of sensory experience. Therefore things that are not objects of sensory experience, i.e. the Forms, exist.

4. *Questions about the Separation Argument.* (i) How plausible is Socrates' definition of 'death'? Does it *assume* the immortality of the soul, i.e. is it question-begging? (ii) Suppose we grant Socrates the definition, and the 'knowledge argument' for the Forms. Would this establish that you don't need the body to think—that you'll do philosophy better when you're dead?

5. *Cebes' objection.* Cebes questions Socrates' definition of death as the separation of body and soul. Perhaps the soul, rather than being separated, is destroyed at death, disappearing like smoke from a fire (70). Socrates responds with a second argument.

6. *The Cyclical Argument.* Socrates cites an 'ancient doctrine' of cyclical rebirth: souls arriving at the world of the dead come from this world, and souls arriving at this world come from the world of the dead (70c). He defends this doctrine. If something comes to be some way, it must have been the opposite way beforehand: if something comes to be smaller, it must have been larger beforehand; if it comes to be just, it must have been unjust beforehand; if it comes to be awake, it must have been asleep before. Socrates sees this as a general principle about the 'becoming' of opposites (see P3). The argument then goes something like this:

P1. If the Cyclical Theory is true, then our souls exist in the world of the dead.

P2. If the living always come from the dead, then the Cyclical Theory is true (70d).

P3. Whatever has an opposite comes to be only from its opposite (70e).

P4. Being dead and being alive are opposites.

C1. Anything which comes to be alive must have been dead beforehand: the living always come from the dead (by P3, P4)

C2. The cyclical theory is true (by P2)

C3. Our souls exist in the world of the dead (by P1)

3. *Supplementary argument.* If the living were to come from another source, everything would be dead (72c). (Compare: if there were no waking, everybody would be asleep.) But not everything is dead. Therefore the living do not come from some other source.

4. *Questions about the Cyclical argument.*

(i) *Is P2 true?* Suppose Socrates were to succeed in establishing that the living always come from the dead: would that establish the Cyclical theory?

(ii) *Is P3 true?* The apparently plausible principle is: when a property, say *F*, is of the kind that has an opposite, say *G*, then something *becomes F* only if it *was G* beforehand. But consider 'being a bachelor', and 'being married': opposite properties, which (let's say) apply only to people of marriageable age. When someone turns 18, they 'become a bachelor'—but not from the opposite state of having been married beforehand.

(iii) *Is P4 true?* Are being dead and being alive opposite properties? Cebes' question, whether the soul is destroyed at death, is not the question of whether the soul acquires some new property at death, namely, *being dead*, but the question of whether the soul *ceases to exist*—i.e. whether being dead is *not a property at all*. Two notions of change, or 'coming to be': *property change*, where an existing thing loses or acquires different properties; and *existence change*, where a thing begins or ceases to exist. Socrates treats dying, and coming alive, as property change, and thus begs the question against Cebes.

Reading for next time: 72e-84b