

Plato's *Phaedo*



Setting: Phaedo, friend of Socrates and witness to his execution, relates the details of Socrates' final hours to a group of Pythagoreans, focusing on Socrates' conversation with two other Pythagoreans, Simmias and Cebes, about the immortality of the soul.

Relevant tenets of Pythagoreanism

1. The immortality of the soul.
2. Transmigration of the soul from one body to another (i.e., reincarnation).
3. The fundamentally mathematical nature of reality as evidenced, e.g., in musical harmonics.
4. Salvation from the cycle of birth and death comes by pure intellectual reflection. The body is a hindrance.
5. Asceticism. Vegetarianism (but *no beans!*) Reproduction is bad.

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Philosophy as preparation for death (59d-69c)

- Soc. asks Cebes to tell a friend that “if he is wise” he will “follow me as soon as possible.” (61b)
 - Is Soc. suggesting that he should commit *suicide*?
 - Is he suggesting that death is a *good* thing?
- Is suicide okay?
 - Soc.: It would be “astonishing” if it were so simple that it was “never, as with everything else, better at certain times and for certain people to die than to live.” (62a)
 - The [Pythagorean] mysteries say that we “are in a kind of prison” from which “one must not free oneself or run away.” (62b)
 - Soc.: This is an “impressive” doctrine, “not easy to understand,” [i.e., this is weird and implausible]
 - A better idea: Our lives belong to the gods, and so we don’t have the right to end them of our own accord. (62b-c)

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- Is death a good thing?
 - Cebes: It seems not. If we belong to the gods, who are good and wise masters, why would we want to leave their service? (62d-e)
 - Soc.: I believe I will go to other wise and good gods and to men who have died who are better than those here (63b).
 - Soc.: “[A] man who has truly spent his life in philosophy is probably right to be of good cheer in the face of death and to be very hopeful that after death he will gain the great blessings yonder.” (63e-64a)
 - Soc.: “[T]he aim of those who practice philosophy in the proper manner is to practice for dying and death.” (64a)
- What is death?
 - It is the separation of the soul from the body. (64c)

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- What should the philosopher's attitude toward the body be?
 - Note: Socrates is drawing out *Simmias*' beliefs. These are not necessarily his own.
 - The true philosopher “despises” bodily pleasures (64d).
 - He “tries to free the soul's association with the body as much as possible.” (65a) The body is “an evil” (66b).
 - The body is an “obstacle” in the soul's quest for knowledge.
 - cf. Simmias at 65b (also, 66e)
 - Problem: This is *self-refuting*.
 - Plato is not as down on the body as Simmias. He later argues that ordinary observations can help us “recollect” the Forms.
 - The Forms are grasped by reason, not the body.
 - “the Just itself,” “the Beautiful,” “the Good,” “the Equal,” etc.
 - In Plato's view, to every general concept there corresponds a “Form,” a transcendent, intrinsically intelligible paradigm (an ideal) in which the instances of the concept “participate.”

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The immortality of the soul (69e-80c)

- The argument from opposites (70d-72e)
 - All things that come to be, come to be from their opposites (71a).
 - What does this mean?
 - Simply that all change presupposes transition from a non-X state to an X state.
 - “Between ... pairs of opposites there are two processes: from the one to the other and then again from the other to the first.” (71b)
 - Hence, if death and life are opposites, “they come to be from one another” (71c).

Is this convincing?

- Obj. 1: Why must there be processes in *both* directions?
- Obj. 2: Death and life are *not* opposites. They are *contraries*, not *contradictories*. The opposite of *living* is *either dead or non-existent*.

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- The argument from recollection (72e-77a)
 - Background: The *Meno* (80d-86c)
 - Dilemma: “A man cannot search ... for what he knows—since he knows it, there is no need to search—nor for what he does not know, for he does not know what to look for.” (80e)
 - Soc.: This a “debater’s argument,” i.e., it’s a trick. How so?
 - The first alternative is true only if “knows” entails having *all relevant information*.
 - The second is true only if “does not know” entails having *no relevant information whatsoever*.
 - We can solve the dilemma by supposing that we start out in a state of *partial* information.
 - Socrates’s proposal: “As the soul is immortal, has been born often, and has seen all things here and in the underworld, there is nothing which it has not learned; so it is in no way surprising that it can recollect the things it knew before.” (81c)

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- The argument from recollection (72e-77a)
 - Recollection is not the only solution to the dilemma, but it works.
 - The argument:
 - To learn is to recollect (72e).
 - One can recollect only what one has previously known (73c).
 - Recollection occurs by association, i.e., when perceiving one thing brings to mind another. (73c)
 - Association depends on similarities and dissimilarities (74a).
 - Since similarity comes in degrees, we have to judge it against an absolute standard, the Form of Equality (74a).
 - Knowledge of the Equal can't be derived simply from observation of particular things (e.g., sticks and stones).
 - Such things are never perfectly similar or dissimilar, yet the Equal is perfectly distinct from Inequality (74b-c).

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- The argument from recollection (72e-77a)
 - The argument (cont.):
 - “We must then possess knowledge of the Equal before ... we first saw the equal objects and realized that all these objects strive to be like the Equal but are deficient in this.” (74e-75a)
 - “But we began to see and hear and otherwise perceive right after birth.” (75b)
 - Hence, either we are born with knowledge of the Equal or we later recollect it (76a)
 - We can't have been born with it because “[a] man who has knowledge would be able to give an account of what he knows,” and clearly it is not the case that “everyone can give an account of the [Forms].” (76b)
 - Therefore, we must have acquired knowledge of the Forms before birth and “our souls [must have] existed apart from the body before they took on human form.” (76c)

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- The argument from recollection (72e-77a)
 - Problems with the argument:
 - Obj. 1: We had bodies before birth. So long as we innately possess partial knowledge of the most basic concepts (like equality), we don't have to suppose that our souls existed before our bodies.
 - Obj. 2: Being born with partial knowledge of basic concepts doesn't entail that we would all be able to "give an account" of them.
 - Obj. 3: Even if the whole argument is right, it doesn't prove the immortality of the soul. At most it establishes the *preexistence* of the soul, not its *postexistence*.