

**Outline of Plato's *Phaedo***  
**(Draft)**

**Sean Coughlin**  
**University of Western Ontario**

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**A. 57a-59d – Introduction**

Phaedo is passing by Philius on his way back home to Elis from Athens. He stops in to town and Echecrates asks Phaedo what happened on the day of Socrates' death.

Question: Why does Plato set up the *Phaedo* as a story in a story? Note this oddity: Plato has Phaedo tell Echecrates that "I had a strange feeling, an unaccustomed mixture of pleasure and pain at the same time" (59a) but Plato, only a few lines later, has Phaedo have Socrates say, "What a strange thing that which men call pleasure seems to be, and how astonishing the relation it has with what is thought to be its opposite, namely pain! A man cannot have both at the same time" (60b).

**B. 59d-70b – Main Discussion and Problem: Should the philosopher fear death?**

*I – Initial Discussion (59d-63e)*

- i. Socrates asks Cebes to tell Evenus, a friend and poet, "if he is wise, to follow me as soon as possible" (61c).
- ii. Cebes: "How do you mean Socrates, that it is not right to do oneself violence, and yet the philosopher will be willing to follow one who is dying" (61d).
- iii. Socrates recounts a story from the mysteries: "we men are in a kind of prison, and that one must not free oneself and run away" and "that the gods are our guardians and that men are one of their possessions" (62b) so that "it is not unreasonable that one should not kill oneself before a god had indicated some necessity to do so" (62c). Socrates was ordered by the people of Athens to kill himself, so he is required to do so.
- iv. Cebes and Simmias raise an objection: if the story about men being possessions and servants of the gods is true, then the wise would resent dying, because once dead they would no longer be governed by the best masters; whereas only a foolish person would want to escape from a good master, because while a foolish man would think himself

better off if he were free, he would, in fact, be worse off. So, the philosopher should fear death, even if he must die, because he will not be ruled rightly, and so be worse off for having died (62d-e).

- v. Socrates defends his position, saying he will try to show that he “shall come to gods who are very good masters” (63c) once he has died.

## *II – Defense of the Thesis: A Philosopher should not fear Death (63e-69e)*

- i. Socrates claims that “a man who has truly spent his life in philosophy is probably right to be of good cheer in the face of death ... and that the one aim of those who practice philosophy in the proper manner is to practice for dying and death” (64a)
- ii. **Definition of death (64c):** death is “the separation of the soul from the body”, “that the body comes to be separated by itself apart from the soul, and the soul comes to be separated by itself apart from the body”
- iii. First claim: philosophers are not concerned with bodily pleasures but pleasures of the soul, and the philosopher must free the soul as much as possible from association with the body (64d-65a)
- iv. Second claim: the soul acquires knowledge through reasoning, not the bodily senses (65a-66b):
  - a. The bodily senses and their objects are not clear or precise, and so deceive the soul; the soul reasons best independently of them (65b-d)
  - b. The objects of reason, the Beautiful, the Good (i.e., the Forms) are not grasped by any of the senses; Forms are “the reality of all other things”; Forms are grasped by reason alone (65e-66b)
- v. First Conclusion: The philosopher can never adequately attain her aim, knowledge, so long as the soul is fused with the body (66b-d)
- vi. Second Conclusion (66e-68b): The philosopher should not fear death
  - a. “Either we can never attain knowledge, or we can do so after death” (67a);
  - b. We shall be close to knowledge if we associate as little as possible with the body while we live, though we will not attain knowledge; but since death is the separation of the soul from the body, we can attain knowledge after death if we have prepared ourselves while living(67b-67d)
    - i. Question: why must we prepare for death while alive? Why must our souls be purified of our bodily nature? Answered at 80c-84c and 107a ff.
  - c. The philosopher should not fear death because only in death can the philosopher attain knowledge (67d-68b)

- vii. Corollary: Complete virtue (wisdom) can only be attained after death (68c-69d)
  - a. Courage and moderation are states in which one ignores or controls the passions (68d)
  - b. Proof: It is impossible to act courageously out of fear; to act moderately for the sake of pleasure (68d-69a)
  - c. Therefore, since we are not virtuous when we are driven by our passions, in order to be virtuous, one must have a principled reason for choosing one course of action over another: this is wisdom (69a-d).
  
- viii. Summary (69e): Philosopher should not fear death, but welcome it

### *III – Cebes’ Objection (70a-c)*

“Socrates, everything else you said is excellent, I think, but men find it very hard to believe what you said about the soul. 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. If indeed it gathered itself together and existed by itself and escaped those evils you were recently enumerating, there would then be much good hope, Socrates, that what you say is true; but to believe this requires a good deal of faith and persuasive argument, to believe that the soul still exists after a man has died and that it still possesses some capability and intelligence.”

### **C. 70c-107a – Digression: The Arguments for the Immortality of the Soul**

#### *I – The First Argument: The Argument from Opposites (aka, from circularity, aka the cyclical argument) (70d-72d)*

Summary of the Argument: If what is dead comes from what is living, then what is living must come from what is dead, since if the process were not cyclical, everyone would be dead.

- i. All things come to be from their opposites (the hot from the cold, what is tall from what is short). (70e-71a)  
(\*note – is the opposite itself is the subject of change: the ugly becomes beautiful?)
- ii. There are two processes between the pair of opposites (the cold is heated, i.e., becomes hot; the hot is cooled, i.e., becomes cold) (71b-71d)
- iii. What is dead comes from what is living; what is living comes from what is dead. (71d-e)
- iv. Death is the separation of the soul from the body, so dying is the soul’s separating from the body. (71e)

- v. Therefore, life is the union of soul and body, and so coming to be alive is the joining of the soul and the body. (71e-72a)
  - a. \*Question: Is what is 'dead' in this argument the soul when it is not incarnate? Or is it the body when the soul leaves? Or both? Or neither – is what is alive whatever is made up of a soul and body together, and what is dead the composite when it is dissolved?
- vi. Support for conclusion – *reductio ad absurdum*: if the process only goes in one direction, everything would be dead. (72b-d)

This seems like a bad argument, but it is not altogether clear what is wrong with it. The first premise is at least plausible – if F comes to be, it comes to be from whatever is un-F, since if it were already F it wouldn't come to be F, but would simply be F. Then again, it violates the Parmenidean constraint that what is cannot come to be from what is not, or that what is F cannot come to be from what is not-F. If Plato accepts this Parmenidean thesis, why would he have Socrates use the premise? If we accept the first premise, the second premise is also plausible. Yet, even though it seems that the rest of the argument follows from the first two premises and the accepted definition of death (as the separation of the soul from the body), it seems, nevertheless, insufficient, especially given the concerns raised in (v.a.). I think Plato needs it to be the soul that is dead for the argument to work, since if it is the *composite* that dies, it is unclear why the philosopher should not fear death, since, even if the soul that was part of me continues to exist after I die, that no more guarantees that I will survive my death than if the body that was part of me continues to exist after I die (which it does, clearly, as a corpse).

Also, given this argument is unconvincing, and bizarre, why does Plato include it? Is it an appeal to the Pythagoreans – Simmias and Cebes – in his audience? Is it to subtly introduce an idea of change that will be used or critiqued later in the dialogue – namely that F comes to be from what is not-F? Keep your eyes out.

## II – The Second Argument: The Argument from Recollection (72e-77a)

Summary of the Argument: If the soul cannot acquire knowledge of intellectual objects through sensation, it must learn them through recollection, and so the soul must have known them before it was incarnated, and so it must have existed before birth.

- i. “According to [the hypothesis that learning is recollection], we must at some previous time have learned what we now recollect. This is possible only if our soul existed somewhere before it took on this human shape. So according to this theory too, the soul is likely to be something immortal” (72e-73a).
- ii. This is a reference to the *Meno* (73a-b).
- iii. Recollection occurs “when a man sees or hears or in some other way *perceives* one thing and not only knows (*gnōi*) that thing but also thinks of (*ennoēsei*) another thing of which the knowledge (*epistēmē*) is not the same but different” (73c).

- iv. Example 1 – Recollection of something dissimilar: as when a lover sees a lyre, something the lover used to play. They know the lyre, and recollect the lover. This is especially recollection when something is brought to mind which was previously forgotten (73d).
- v. Example 2 – Recollection of something similar: as a picture of Simmias leads to recollection of Simmias (73e).
- vi. When recollection is of something similar, the similarity is either deficient or complete (74a).
- vii. Example: The Equal-itself (*auto to ison*) (74a-75b)
  - a. We know what Equality is
  - b. We think we acquired the knowledge from *seeing* sticks or stones that are equal, but really, in seeing the sticks or stones, the senses only provide occasions for thinking about the Equal-itself which we already knew
  - c. Proof:
  - d. Equal sticks sometimes, while remaining the same, appear equal to one another, other times unequal
  - e. The equals-themselves never appeared unequal, nor has Equality ever appeared to be Inequality
  - f. Equal things (sticks, stones) are not the same as the Equal-itself
  - g. “Whenever someone, on seeing something, realizes that that which he now sees wants to be like some other reality but falls short and cannot be like that other since it is inferior, do we agree that the one who thinks this must have prior knowledge of that to which he says it is like, but deficiently so?” (74e)
  - h. Equal things (sticks, stones) fall short of the Equal-itself.
  - i. Therefore, we possess knowledge of the Equal-itself before we perceive equal objects and realize their deficiency.
  - j. We cannot come to know the *deficiency* of the equal things from perception – we could not know that sticks and stones were deficient unless we possessed beforehand some standard against which to judge their deficiency, and sensation could never provide us with such a standard, since the objects of sensation are never the same. (75a-b)
  - k. Perception begins at birth, so we must have possessed knowledge of the Equal-itself before birth; similarly with all other ‘Forms’ (75c-d)
  - l. If we acquired the knowledge and remain knowing after birth, we would still know and would not learn; if we forgot at birth what we knew before birth, then acquired it by the use of the senses, learning would be the recovery of knowledge, i.e. recollection (75d-e)
  - m. Either we are born knowing or learning is recollection (76a)
  - n. One who knows can give an account of what she knows (76b)
  - o. Not everyone can give an account of the objects of knowledge, (and infants definitely cannot, but they ought to, if they are born knowing) (76b)
  - p. Therefore, learning is recollection (76c)

- q. Therefore: (1) souls existed apart from the body before they took on human form; (2) they had intelligence (76c)
  - i. \*Note Simmias objection: “Unless we acquire the knowledge at the moment of birth, Socrates, for that time is till left to us” (76c) Does Socrates properly dispose of this objection?
- r. If, therefore, the ‘Forms’ (Equal-itself, Beautiful-itself, Good-itself, etc.) exist, and we recollect them when we perceive, our souls must exist before we were born. And, if the ‘Forms’ need not exist, then our souls need not exist before we are born. But both must necessarily exist (agreed to at 76e). So the soul must exist before we are born.

\*Question: To what extent does the theory of knowledge assumed here and throughout the *Phaedo* influence what comes next in the dialogue?

Problem: As Simmias and Cebes point out, this argument only proves the soul existed before death, not that it will continue to exist after it. The soul may yet cease to exist once it leaves the body (77b-c). Why might the soul cease to exist? Essentially, the worry is, if the soul is itself a compound, it might be resolved into its constituent parts after death and so cease to exist. So, Socrates says: “you seem to have this childish fear that the wind would really dissolve and scatter the soul, as it leaves the body, especially if one happens to die in a high wind and not in calm weather” (77d-e).

Socrates must show that the soul is unitary, and so cannot cease to be by being resolved into its constituent parts. Plato portrays this as a silly objection, but it is worth noting that Plato (or someone he is writing for) takes it seriously enough that Plato would include it in the dialogue, and it is worth trying to figure out what his reasons for including it might be. Many of the *phusikoi*, presocratic physicists, believed the soul to be some material compound. Diogenes of Apollonia (and Anaximenes before him), for instance, seemed to think the soul was air (Aristotle reports this in *De anima* I.2). This might explain the joke about the wind, but this does not mean the soul was *a compound* in the sense that it was made of different kinds of parts; nevertheless, it would suggest that the soul is *extended* and so made up of spatially different parts. We will see this come up again in the character Socrates’ “intellectual autobiography” (96b ff). Also, Aristotle reports that the Atomist Democritus believed we contain within us ‘soul atoms’ that are spherical and smooth like fire (*De anima* I.2). Perhaps Simmias’ and Cebes’ worry is an allusion to these or similar theories. Still, whether or not Plato is referencing some earlier theory, we should still wonder why Plato thinks the soul is the kind of thing that must be unitary and not composite. What is wrong with soul atoms?

My hunch: One of Plato’s goals in the *Phaedo* is to move away from pre-Socratic conceptions of soul – conceptions of the soul as just another kind of material cause, another material part of a person – and move towards a conception of soul that is not material, and so must be a *different kind of cause* than the one envisaged by his predecessors. I would go further and say that Plato

will try to prove that the soul is a different kind of thing from the body altogether, that the soul is a different ontological type from a body, it is a Form. Not that the soul is necessarily *only* a Form, and it might be a special kind of form, one that is both a separately existing substance F and also the subject of some predicate G like Life, and a subject that does not admit un-G, death; then again, it may turn out to be what Aristotle will call an efficient cause and possibly a final cause as well. But whatever it is, it is not another material cause, nor is it just some disposition or accident of the material body.

### III – *The Third Argument: The Argument from Affinity (aka, from Resemblance) (78b-80c)*

Question: is the soul unitary or composite?

Summary of the Argument: The soul resembles the objects of reason, which are unitary and so imperishable; the body resembles the objects of sensation, which are not unitary and can perish by being dissolved into their constituent parts.

- i. Composite things can be dissolved; incomposite things cannot be dissolved (78c)
- ii. Things that remain the same as themselves are unlikely to be composite; things that vary and are never the same are likely to be composite (78c)
- iii. Each of the 'Forms' (the Equal-itself, etc.), (which are non-sensible but grasped by reason alone (79a)), is uniform by itself and (so) does not change. (78d)
- iv. Each of the particular instances, (which are perceptible (79a)), never remains the same as itself. (78e)
- v. So, two kinds of things exist: invisible things (unchanging) and visible things (always changing) (79a)
- vi. One part of us is the body, another part the soul (79b)
- vii. Body resembles or is most like the visible (objects of perception) (79b)
- viii. Soul resembles or is most like the invisible (objects of thought) (79b-c)
- ix. When the soul uses the body (the senses) to investigate something, "it is dragged down by the body to the things that are never the same, and the soul itself strays and is confused and dizzy, as if it were drunk, in so far as it is in contact with that kind of thing" (79c)
- x. When the soul investigates by itself, "it passes into the realm of what is pure, ever existing, immortal, and unchanging, and being akin to this, it always stays with it whenever it is by itself and can do so; it ceases to stray and remains in the same state as it is in touch with things of the same kind, and its experience then is what is called wisdom" (79d)
- xi. \*Note: this assumes the body does not *investigate anything, i.e., we do not know anything* by the senses, *but only* by the soul.
- xii. Therefore: The soul is more like what can remain in the same state, at least when it is separate from the body; but the body is like what never remains in the same state. (79e)

- xiii. Supporting argument: The soul rules the body, the body is ruled by the soul; what rules is more like the divine, what is ruled is more like the mortal; therefore, the soul is more like the divine, the body more like the mortal (80a)
- xiv. Therefore, “the soul is more like the divine, deathless, intelligible, uniform, indissoluble, always the same as itself, whereas the body is most like that which is human, mortal, multiform, unintelligible, soluble and never consistently the same” (80b).
- xv. Therefore, “it is altogether natural for the body to dissolve easily, and for the soul to be altogether indissoluble, or nearly so” (80c)

Socrates concludes that, just as a corpse in a fair season, or a mummy which has been purified, decays slowly or does not ever completely decay, so the soul, if purified, will not suffer an analogous fate (i.e., continue to be mortal), but will spend the rest of its time with the gods. Hence, the importance of practicing philosophy: practicing for death. As long as the soul believes truth resides in bodily sensations (the passions), it will be tied to the body; but if it is purified by ordering or ignoring bodily sensations, it will become most like the eternal and depart into their company at death (80c-84c). Simmias and Cebes are not convinced.

#### *IV – Simmias’ and Cebes’ Objections*

- i. Simmias’ Objection – The soul could be like an attunement
  - a. Relationship of the soul to the body could be like the attunement to the lyre
    - i. (note: the text says “harmony” but *harmonia* in Greek is translated by our word “attunement”, whereas our word “harmony” properly translates the Greek word *sumphonia*. I freely switch between both because our translator chose “harmony”. Just remember I mean *harmonia*.)
  - b. Attunement “is something invisible, without body, beautiful and divine in the attuned lyre, whereas the lyre itself and its strings are physical, bodily, composite, earthy and akin to what is mortal” (85e-86a)
  - c. Similarly, the soul: “the body is stretched and held together by the hot and the cold, the dry and the moist and other such things, and our soul is a mixture and harmony of those things when they are mixed with each other rightly and in due measure” (86b-c)
  - d. Therefore, even if the soul is more divine than the lyre, or resembles the immortal more than the lyre does, it cannot exist without the lyre, and so it will perish when and even before the lyre perishes: it is “the first to perish in the process we call death” (86d)

- ii. Cebes' Objection – The soul could be like a weaver
  - a. Relationship of the soul to the body could be like a weaver to the cloaks which he weaves
  - b. Cebes thinks the soul is “stronger and much more lasting than the body” (87a)
  - c. Still, he thinks the argument from resemblance “is much as if one said at the death of an old weaver that the man had not perished but was safe and sound somewhere, and offered as proof the fact that the cloak the old man had woven himself and was wearing was still sound and had not perished. If one was not convinced, he would be asked whether a man lasts longer than a cloak which is in use and being worn, and if the answer was that a man lasts much longer, this would be taken as proof that the man was definitely safe and sound, since the more temporary thing had not perished.” (87b-c)
  - d. The weaver resembles the immortal more than any cloak he has woven and wears, he exists for a longer time than any cloak; still, he will perish before the last cloak he was wearing.
  - e. Likewise, “each soul wears out many bodies, especially if it lives many years. If the body were in a state of flux and perished while the man was still alive, and the soul wove afresh the body that is worn out,<sup>1</sup> yet it would be inevitable that whenever the soul perished it would be wearing the last body it wove and perish only before this last.” (87d-e)
  - f. Therefore, even if the soul resembles the immortal and divine more than any of its bodies, it will still die with or before its last body.
- iii. In either case, “any man who faces death with confidence is foolish, unless he can prove that the soul is altogether immortal” (88b)

#### D. 88d-91c – Dramatic Interlude

Socrates warns Phaedo against *misologia* – hating reasonable discourse. Socrates will not be dissuaded by these objections, because they are a means for getting at the truth. “It would be pitiable, Phaedo, when there is a true and reliable argument and one that can be understood, if a man who has dealt with such arguments as appear at one time true and another time untrue, should not blame himself or his own lack of skill but, because of his distress, in the end gladly shift blame away from himself to the arguments, and spend the rest of his life hating and reviling reasonable discussion and so be deprived of truth and knowledge of reality.” (90d)

Socrates argues that, if he can defeat the objections, then he is better off, not because he will have persuaded those in his company, but because the truth is a fine thing to be convinced of,

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<sup>1</sup> Could also be translated: “even if the body is in a state of flux and is perishing while the man is still living, yet the soul always weaves afresh the web that is worn out” – This translation brings out the parallel passage at 91d7.

especially in this case (that the soul is immortal). If he cannot defeat the objections, then his folly (trying to persuade people of something that is not true) will die with him and that is better for every one else. (90e-91c)

**Socrates then summarizes the objections:**

**(1) Simmias': The soul, though it is more divine and beautiful than the body, yet predeceases it being a kind of attunement**

**(2) Cebes': The soul lasts much longer than the body, but the soul, on leaving its last body, is itself destroyed**

**Socrates says both objections lead to the same conclusion: “this then is death, the destruction of the soul, since the body is always being destroyed” (91d).<sup>2</sup>**

**\*Note: The definition of death seems to have changed from the definition proposed at 64c. Death is no longer the separation of the soul from the body, but the destruction of the soul itself.**

Question: Why has Plato chosen these two objections? Why has the definition of death changed? Do these objections bring out at least two worries about all three of the first arguments? Do these objections help to bring out what was wrong the argument from opposites?

## **E. 92a-107b – Socrates' Replies to Simmias and Cebes – The Final Arguments for the Immortality of the Soul**

*I – Socrates' Reply to Simmias (92a-95a)*

- i. Four Arguments that the soul is not like a harmony and so cannot perish the way a harmony does.<sup>3</sup> All of these objections rely on the premise that “a harmony, or any other composite [cannot] be in a different state from that of the elements of which it is composed” (93a) – in other words, that the material

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<sup>2</sup> The Greek says: ἀπολλύμενον οὐδὲν παύεται, which Burnet glosses as “is unceasingly perishing” (p.92). This brings out the sense better, I think, since the mortal has already been associated with the body and with what never remains the same at 78c.

<sup>3</sup> Burnet (94-98) notes only two: the first is the argument from recollection; the second is an extended argument dependent on two admissions: a. every harmony is determined by its component elements; b. no harmony admits of degrees. On the one hand, I think Burnet is right to claim that a harmony cannot admit of degrees. A harmony cannot be more and more fully a harmony. Nevertheless, a harmony might still be more or less present – an instrument can be more or less *in tune*. The degree to which the harmony is present will depend on the tension in the various strings of the lyre, just as the degree to which a soul is harmonious will depend on the degree to which virtue or vice is present. But this will make no sense if the soul *is* a harmony, since a harmony cannot be more or less harmonious.

parts are *prior* to the harmony, and that the harmony is just a disposition (a quality or affection) of those parts.

- a. As was admitted in the argument from recollection, the soul exists before the body, but the attunement cannot exist before the lyre.
    - i. “you must change your opinion, my Theban friend, if you still believe that a harmony is a composite thing, and that the soul is a kind of harmony of the elements of the body in a state of tension, for surely you will not allow yourself to maintain that a composite harmony existed before those elements from which it had to be composed” (92a)
    - ii. Simmias concedes the point because he accepts the *Phaedo*’s theory of knowledge (92d-e)
  - b. A harmony can be present in greater or lesser degrees, but a soul cannot: no soul “is more and more fully a soul than another, or is less and less fully a soul, even to the smallest extent” (93b)
  - c. A soul can be more or less harmonious, more or less virtuous, but a harmony cannot be more or less harmonious.
    - i. Some souls are virtuous and good, others are vicious and bad (93c)
    - ii. Virtue is harmony, vice disharmony (93e)
    - iii. If a soul just *is* a harmony, it cannot be *more or less* harmonious (93d)
    - iv. So all souls would be equally harmonious, and so equally good, and no souls would be vicious (94a)
    - v. *Reductio*: Contradicts (i)
  - d. A soul rules the body by acting contrary to the body, but a harmony cannot act contrary to the lyre
    - i. “we see a thousand examples of the soul opposing the affections of the body” (94b-c)
    - ii. “on the other hand, we previously agreed that if the soul were a harmony, it would never be out of tune with the stress and relaxation and the striking of the strings or anything else done to its composing elements, but that it would follow and never direct them” (94c)
  - e. Conclusion: Soul is not a harmony. (95a)
- ii. Questions: Why does Plato choose the example of the attunement of the lyre? Is it simply because this was a theory floating around that he had to refute? What were his motives?

## II – Socrates’ Reply to Cebes (95a-107b)

Socrates seems to take this objection much more seriously than the previous one:

“This is no unimportant question that you raise, Cebes, for it requires a thorough investigation of the cause of coming to be and ceasing to be (*peri geneseōs kai phthoras*)

*tēn aitian*). I will, if you wish, give you an account of my experience in these matters. Then if something I say seems useful to you, make use of it to persuade us of your position.” (96a)

Socrates states that, to answer the objection, he will look to the causes of coming to be and ceasing to be, as well as the causes of being (96b). Traditionally, these questions were taken up by the materialist pre-Socratic philosophers in a discipline called *peri phuseōs historia*, natural history. Plato will use this discussion to raise problems for the pre-Socratic materialist accounts of the causes of coming to be, ceasing to be, and existing, and will use these problems to motivate positing *forms* as causes, and to show how forms must function in explanations. This, in turn, will allow Plato to show how the soul must function in explanations, and from there, it will become clear why the soul cannot admit death, and also why we must abandon pre-Socratic characterizations of the soul as something like a material thing which make it seem as though the soul could perish.

This, in outline, is Plato’s strategy in this section. It is complicated, and the subject of an incredible amount of scholarly controversy, much of which I will only touch upon in order to get to the main point – how introducing Forms as causes eliminates Cebes objection that the soul might perish. We will also look into the theory of forms as it is here expressed.

Three Parts:

1. 96a-99d: Socrates Intellectual Autobiography
2. 99d-103c: The Safe Explanation
3. 103c-107b: The Clever Explanation

### *1. Socrates Intellectual Autobiography*

Summary: Socrates was enthusiastic about natural history, but finally became convinced that he “had no natural aptitude at all for that kind of investigation” (96c). It even made him blind as to what he thought he knew before, specifically about how men grew. He then gives a series of reasons explaining why he gave up on these kinds of questions (96c-97b). Then, one day, he heard someone reading from a book of Anaxagoras, that *nous* (Mind or Reason) was the cause of all things, and Socrates thought he “had found in Anaxagoras a teacher about the cause of things after [his] own heart” (97e). However, when he read the book he was disappointed, and goes on to explain why.

- i. Pre-Socratic causes of coming to be, ceasing to be and existence
  - a. The pre-Socratics are characterized as being concerned with the following types of questions:
    - i. Causes of nourishment, e.g. “are living creatures nourished when heat and cold produce a kind of putrefaction?” (96b)

- ii. Causes of thinking, e.g. “do we think with blood, or air, or fire, or none of these, and does the brain provide our senses of hearing and sight and smell, from which come memory and opinion, and from memory and opinion which has become stable, comes knowledge?” (96b)
    - iii. Causes of perishing (96b)
    - iv. Causes of astronomical and meteorological phenomenon (96b)
    - v. Causes of growth (96c)
  - b. \*Note: i., ii., and v., are all causes that seem to suggest the soul should somehow be involved. In the case of ii., the soul has been assumed to be the cause of thinking throughout the whole of the *Phaedo* up until this point. Why has the soul dropped out of explanations?
- ii. Four Explanations
- a. “I thought before that it was obvious to anybody that men grew through eating and drinking, for food adds flesh to flesh and bones to bones, and in the same way appropriate parts were added to all other parts of the body, so that the man grew from an earlier smaller bulk to a large bulk later, and so a small man became big.” (97c-d)
  - b. “I thought my opinion was satisfactory, that when a large man stood by a small one he was taller by a head, and so a horse was taller than a horse.”
  - c. “Even clearer than this, (i) I thought that ten was more than eight because two had been added, (ii) and that a two-cubit length is larger than a cubit because it surpasses it by half its length.”
  - d. “I am far, by Zeus, from believing that I know the cause of any of those things. I will not even allow myself to say that where one is added to one either the one to which it is added or the one that is added to it becomes two, or that the one added and the one to which it is added become two because of the addition of the one to the other. I wonder that, when each of them is separate from the other, each of them is one, nor are they then two, but that, when they come near to one another, this is the cause of their becoming two, the coming together and being placed closer to one another. Nor can I any longer be persuaded that when one thing is divided, this division is the cause of its becoming two, for just now the cause of becoming two was the opposite. At that time it was their coming close together and one was added to the other, but now it is because one is taken and separated from the other” (96e-97b)
  - e. “I do not any longer persuade myself that I know why a unit or anything else comes to be, or perishes or exists by the old method of investigation, and I do not accept it, but I have a confused method of my own” (97b)
  - f. Question: How do causes work in these explanations? What do all these explanations have in common? How are they supposed to be related? What does Socrates find wrong with these explanations?

*Conclusions about Explanations (1): “Standard View”*

For Plato, giving the *cause* (*aitia*) of a thing's being or becoming means giving the cause of that thing's being or becoming F, where F is some predicate like 'tall' or 'taller', 'large' or 'larger'. An explanation, then, must give an account of the *cause* of some sensible thing being or becoming F. An explanation answers the question: S is (or came to be, or ceased to be) F on account of what cause (*dia ti*)?

The objections in this first set of objections are thought to express what Plato thinks are constraints on explanation: x is inadequate to explain being or becoming F if it explains being or becoming F no more than it explains being or becoming un-F. Scholars have put this in different ways. In one formulation:

- 1) The same cause cannot have opposite effects
  - a. E.g. “by a head” explains both being taller and being shorter
- 2) Opposite causes cannot have the same effects
  - a. E.g. coming-together and being-separated are both causes of one's becoming two
  - b. Every cause has one, and only one, effect

In another formulation (Sedley's laws of causation<sup>4</sup>):

- If x causes anything to be F (whose opposite is un-F)
- a. x must not be un-F
  - b. x's opposite must not cause anything to be F
  - c. x must never cause anything to be un-F

On either formulation, Plato is taken to be making the point that F is the cause of F being or becoming F, in other words, that some Form is the cause of some sensible F-thing being or becoming F. Therefore, a statue is beautiful on account of the Beautiful; or a statue became beautiful on account of the Beautiful; but we must not say that a statue became ugly on account of the Beautiful or that a statue became beautiful on account of the Ugly (assuming there is a form of the Ugly, which Plato would surely deny).

The pre-Socratic err because, in answering the question, “S is F on account of what cause?”, they cite causes like 'by a head' that is no more a cause of being taller than being shorter; or causes like 'by being separated' which causes two just the same as 'by being brought together' causes two. In either case, we do not have a genuine explanation.

Then again, are explanations like 'by a head' really that problematic? Is it really that paradoxical to say that Socrates is shorter than Simmias by a head and Simmias is taller than Socrates by a head?

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<sup>4</sup> David Sedley (1998). “Platonic Causes.” *Phronesis* 43 (2):114-132., p.121

*Conclusions about Explanations (2):* Terence Irwin, “The Theory of Forms” (p156ff.).

When senses make conflicting judgments, thought is “provoked” to ask questions.

- i. For example, the same thing is light and heavy – the heavy is light and the light is heavy
- ii. So, while one thing may have different properties of different types without thought being ‘provoked,’ opposite or contradictory properties (different properties of the same type) cause conflicting judgments.
- iii. E.g. large and small:
  - a. What makes X small? It is only six inches long.
  - b. What makes X large? Six inches length.
    - i. Thus, the same property – six inches length – is both an instance of largeness and smallness

This is problematic:

Something “large ‘by a head’” is also “small ‘by a head’”

The same property – the same head – explains both why something is Tall and why something is Short

‘By a Head’

X’s being larger than Y is explained ‘by a head’

Y’s being smaller than X is explained ‘by a head’

‘By a head’ is cause of opposite qualities

Thus, according to Irwin, Plato’s point is that:

1. G cannot be the explanation of x’s being F if either (1) G is present in y, but y is not-F or (2) G is not present in z, but z is F
2. Cannot say that x is F in so far as x is G if (1) or (2) is true

In instances where, in the same subject, opposite properties can be or are present (especially relative properties), the cause cannot be unitary – i.e., a cause cannot bring about both of two opposites in the same subject – what Irwin calls the compresence of opposites.

Thus, the character Socrates’ “safe explanation” – explanation from Forms -- will not allow for the compresence of opposites, so is not disqualified

So, we cannot use mathematical measurements to determine whether some x or y is large or small, because both x and y must be large or small relative to some absolute standard – relative to the Form of Largeness or of Smallness; not, relative to Simmias or Socrates.

It follows that no sensible property can be the appropriate standard -- the single explanatory principle. Why? Sensible standards would always be relative to one another – compresence of opposites.

*Conclusions about Explanations (3)*: Stephen Menn (2010). "On Socrates' First Objections to the Physicists (Phaedo 95E8-97 B7)." *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 38.

Menn suggests Plato is claiming Anaxagoras (and possibly by extension other materialists, but the only pre-Socratic named is Anaxagoras, and the account of growth provided is certainly Anaxagorean) cannot account for a identity through time or at a time of a particular *subject*, in other words, not only do the materialists have trouble assigning proper causes of certain predicates, they cannot even *identify a single subject of predication*.

Plato is using a series of arguments very similar to a series first presented in a play by Epicharmus, in which a character raises a problem for accounts of growth in order to get out of paying a debt.<sup>5</sup>

Dialogue of Epicharmus (DL 3.1.9-17)

- a. But suppose some one chooses to add a single pebble to a heap containing either an odd or an even number, whichever you please, or to take away one of those already there; do you think the number of pebbles would remain the same?
- b. Not I.
- a. Nor yet, if one chooses to add to a cubit-measure another length, or cut off some of what was there already, would the original measure still exist?
- b. Of course not.
- a. Now consider mankind in this same way. One man grows, and another again shrinks; and they are all undergoing change the whole time. But a thing which naturally changes and never remains in the same state must ever be different from that which has thus changed. And even so you and I were one pair of men yesterday, are another to-day, and again will be another to-morrow, and will never remain ourselves, by this same argument.

The point: Epicharmus is willing to accept that nothing persists through change; Plato is not.

Plato may think that materialist explanations using addition cannot explain growth, because they cannot account for a persisting subject of the change, or at least this may be what Plato is using Epicharmus' arguments to show. If this is right, it would provide Plato with a good motivation for positing a different kind of cause or explanation: it will motivate Forms as causes, and ultimately the final argument for the immortality of the soul.

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<sup>5</sup> See also Sedley. (1982) "The Stoic Criterion of Identity." *Phronesis* 27 (3), pp. 255-275

Two types of identity: *through time* and *across possible situations*

Identity through time: 1 added to 1 becomes 2

Is it the one to which 1 is added? Or the one that is added? Or both? Or neither?

If I grow by eating: is it me that grows or the nutriment that grows? Or both? Or neither? (cf. Aristotle, *De generatione et corruptione* I.5)

Identity across possible situations:

If 10 is greater than 8 by 2 having been added to it, then this assumes that there is something that can be both 10 and less than 8 and 8 and equal to 8. To put it in a “sharper” way, if I am taller than you by a head, then if you cut my head off, we’ll be the same height. This assumes that it is the larger portion, not the smaller portion, or both together, or neither, that is me. Clearly, Plato thinks that none of the remaining portions would be me. (paraphrase of Menn)

The Presocratics claim that the cause of something’s growing is that something is added to it. But they have no explanation for when or why something becomes a part of S, and so they cannot explain nutrition and growth. And if they cannot explain the causes of nutrition and growth, it seems they’ll have a hard time explaining the causes of the origin of living things, and also the causes of thinking.

iii. The Book of Anaxagoras

- a. *Nous* (Mind or Reason) directs and is the cause of everything (97c)
- b. “*Nous* would direct everything and arrange each thing in the way that was best. If then one wished to know the cause of each thing, why it comes to be or perishes or exists, one had to find what was the best way for it to be, or to be acted upon, or to act.” (97c-d)
- c. Socrates mentions the types of things he expected *nous* as a cause to explain: the shape of the earth (97e), its location in space (97e), the heavenly bodies (98a), their yearly motions (98a), and in general, “how it is best that each should act or be acted upon” (98a)
- d. Socrates expects that an explanation involving *nous* would bring in no other cause for them than that it was best for them to be as they are: “once he had given the best for each as the cause for each and the general cause of all, I thought he would go on to explain the common good for all”.
- e. Socrates hopes were dashed when he actually read the book, because “the man made no use of Mind, nor gave it any responsibility for the management of things, but mentioned as causes air and ether and water and many other strange things” (98b)

- iv. Objections to Anaxagoras
- a. Anaxagoras' mistake is to confuse the true cause for that without which it the cause could not act as a cause (99b)
  - b. Example: To say the cosmos is due to Mind but only mention as causes the materials of the cosmos is similar to saying Socrates' actions are all due to his mind, and then in giving the causes of everything he does, to say the reason he is sitting is because his body consists of bones, sinews and their material characteristics (bones are hard and jointed, sinews contract and relax, enabling his limbs to bend and that is the cause of Socrates sitting with his limbs bent) (98c-d)
  - c. Example: The causes of talking are sound and air and hearing (98d)
  - d. Problem: does not mention the true cause – that, after the Athenians had decided it was better to condemn Socrates, he thought it best to him to sit and more right to remain and endure the penalty.
  - e. Distinction: a cause and its necessary conditions
    - i. Socrates' mind, his soul, is the true cause of his actions; more specifically, the cause is his choice of the best course of action, which he chose because he acts with his mind (99a-b)
    - ii. Socrates' bones and sinews, in short, his body, is that without which he could not act (99b)
    - iii. In Aristotelian terms, Anaxagoras fails to distinguish between the material cause and the final cause: in order for a house to exist, all the material parts of a house must exist, and be placed in the right order; but the *reason* as house exists is because someone thought it was best to build a house, probably for shelter.
  - f. Instead, "one man surrounds the earth with a vortex to make the heavens keep it in place, another makes air support it like a wide lid. [...] They believe that they will some time discover a stronger and more immortal Atlas to hold everything together" (99c)
  - g. Socrates says he would become the disciple of anyone who taught the workings of that kind of cause, but since there was no one to teach him, nor could he learn it himself, as a *second best* he busied himself with the search for the cause. (99c-d)

Conclusion:

Throughout the reply to Cebes, Plato is setting out his explanation in contrast to that of Anaxagoras – both on the issue of teleological explanation and *nous*, and on the issue of predication and change: causes of becoming-F and being-F.

## What is Anaxagoras' Theory?

### Anaxagoras' Theory of becoming- and being-F (From David Furley<sup>6</sup>)

- i. Anaxagoras is responding to Parmenides
  - a. Nothing can come to be from what is not
  - b. Anaxagoras takes this to mean that nothing can come-to-be F from what is not-F. (e.g., hot cannot come to be from what is un-hot.)
- ii. Some sensible thing S comes-to-be or is F by 'participating' in F, where F is not something that participates, but is purely, essentially and eternally F – it is F-itself. E.g. Gold-itself, Hot-itself.
- iii. If S comes to be F, F does not come-to-be from what is not-F; F is always F. But S comes to *participate* in F in the literal sense of having a share or containing a portion of F. S changes from being not-F to being F by gaining some portion of F.
  - a. Example: If S is gold, it is gold by having a share or portion of gold, where gold in this case is not some other gold thing mixed with all the other homoeomerous substances (on pain of regress), but pure gold-itself.
- iv. The cause or reason, therefore, of S's being F, of a statue's being gold, is that it participates in gold; the cause of the statue's coming-to-be gold is that it came to participate in gold-itself; i.e., some pure gold was added to it.

### Two-problems with Anaxagoras' theory (Following Menn and Furley)

- i. F-itself: For some predicates F, Anaxagoras' kind of F-itself (a material body) and Anaxagoras' kind of participation (having a share of F-itself) cannot explain whatever needs to be explained.
  - a. Anaxagoras' account is plausible if F is gold, but it does not work for predicates like 'odd', 'equal' or 'beautiful'.
  - b. In order to preserve explanation through participation in an F-itself, the F-itself must be something indivisible and non-spatial; S must participate in F not by literally containing a portion of it, but in some non-spatial way.
- ii. Subject of Participation: Coming-to-be F or coming-to-participate-in-F requires a persisting subject which first does not contain a portion of F and later does contain a portion of F. Anaxagoras cannot explain what this subject is. In quantitative change, in the case of S's coming to be larger, he cannot explain it. And since qualitative change is also described in the same way, he remains in difficulty.
  - a. It is not enough for F to come to be in the same general region of space as S: Socrates does not become taller when a stool is placed under him or a hat on top of him
  - b. Not more golden by having gold added above him or below him, nor even if it were interspersed with his body, unless it also becomes a *part* of Socrates.

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<sup>6</sup> David Furley. (1989). "Anaxagoras in Response to Parmenides". *Cosmic Problems*, Cambridge University Press, pp.47-64.

- c. Anaxagoras does not admit Socrates as one of the things in his ontology and so cannot account for identity through time, cannot explain when and why Socrates comes to be or ceases to be F
- d. There must be a persisting subject S which is capable, while remaining S, either of being F or un-F; if S's being F cannot be explained through material causes, it must be explained through a formal cause instead.

## 2. *The Safe Explanation – Forms as Causes*

Socrates begins by saying he will not look directly at the sun, but at its reflection in water. In other words, he will not try to define the Forms directly, but see what he can explain knowing what a Form must be like to work successfully in an explanation, but without knowing the definition of the Form. He can use the Form as a cause of S's being F without having an answer to the question What is F? Compare the same method in the *Meno*.

- i. The method of hypothesis
  - a. "Taking as my hypothesis in each case the theory that seemed most compelling, I would consider as true, about cause and everything else, whatever agreed with this, and as untrue whatever did not so agree." (100a)
  - b. This method is a reference to 5<sup>th</sup> Century geometry – implications
    - i. Start from something known or agreed upon to be true
    - ii. Attempt to deduce from this something that we seek
  - c. We are seeking the cause on account of which S is F
  - d. Hypothesis: the beautiful itself exists, a Good-itself, etc. (100b)
  - e. From this hypothesis: show the cause by which S is F, and show the soul is immortal
- ii. Assuming the beautiful-itself exists, if there is anything else beautiful besides the beautiful itself, then it is beautiful for no other reason than that it shares in the Beautiful-itself.
  - a. What kind of cause is this? It is a cause to S of S being F
  - b. It is not a cause of S's participating in F-itself – we gave this up when we gave up teleological explanation
  - c. It is not a cause of the F-itself being F – this was assumed as a hypothesis
  - d. It is a cause of F-ness, of what it is to be beautiful, or good, or anything else, to S
- iii. "I no longer understand or recognize those other sophisticated causes, and if someone tells me that a thing is beautiful because it has a bright color or shape or any such thing, I ignore these other reasons" (100d)
  - a. Why does Socrates ignore these other reasons?
- iv. "I simply, naively and perhaps foolishly cling to this, that nothing else makes it beautiful other than the presence of, or sharing in, or however you may describe the relationship to that Beautiful we mentioned, for I will not insist on the precise nature of the relationship, but that all beautiful things are beautiful by the Beautiful." (100d)

- v. Return to the examples in the autobiography
  - a. The hardest case: when one is added to one it is the addition and when it is divided it is the division that is the cause of two (101c)
  - b. Materialist cannot explain why *this* one becomes two
  - c. Plato thinks he can explain it: it shares, or they both share, in Twoness, where Twoness is not some part added to it
  - d. These things are two because they participate in Twoness, they are each one because they each participate in Oneness. They both, remaining the same, participate in Twoness relative to each other and Oneness relative to themselves. But no piece of Twoness or Oneness is added to them so that they would no longer remain the same. S becomes, while remaining S, F or un-F.
- vi. Tallness in us never becomes Short
  - a. What is the point of this? Only to maintain a distinction between Predicates and Subjects
    - i. “It [tallness] is not willing to endure shortness and be other than it was, whereas I admit and endure shortness and still remain the same person and am this short man.” (102e)
    - ii. Opposites do not become opposites: Hot does not become Cold
    - iii. Instead, a subject goes from being un-F to being F (103a-c)

Safe explanation: I am alive by the presence of the Form of Life in me.

### 3. *The Clever Explanation – Souls as Causes*

- i. Aim: to show the soul is immortal
- ii. How? If the soul causes life the same way fire causes heat and three causes oddness, then the soul cannot die because the soul will not admit death.
- iii. There are some things that, when present, are always F and never un-F and for them to exist as what they are they must remain F. Otherwise, they are destroyed or depart.
- iv. Fire is always hot; Snow is always cold (103d)
- v. Three is always odd (104a)
- vi. Fire is not the opposite of snow; three is not the opposite of two (104c)
- vii. Fire is not the opposite of cold, but it cannot admit cold without ceasing to be fire (105a)
- viii. So, a clever explanation:
  - a. What is the cause of a body becoming hot?
    - i. Not participating in heat but by the presence of fire
  - b. What is the cause of sickness?
    - i. Not participating in sickness but fever
  - c. What is the cause of life to a body?
    - i. Not participating in the Form of Life, but a Soul
    - ii. A soul always brings life with it (105d)

- iii. The opposite of life is death (105d)
- iv. The soul, if it causes life the way fire causes heat, will never admit death
- v. Therefore, the soul is deathless
- d. Can the soul be destroyed?
  - i. Snow can be destroyed, but if it could not be destroyed, it would retreat safely
  - ii. But, to be deathless is to be indestructible, to never perish
- e. Therefore, “when death comes to man, the mortal part of him dies, it seems, but his deathless part goes away safe and indestructible, yielding the place to death” (106e)
- f. Therefore, the soul is immortal. (107a)

**F. 107c-118a – Main Discussion (epilogue): Eschatological Myth & Socrates’ Death**