

Chapter 12

The metaphysics of the *Phaedo*

12.1 Readings and Homework

12.1.1 Readings

Required

- Plato, *Phaedo* until 77a.

Recommended

- Plato, *Phaedo*

12.1.2 Homework

1. Why does the true philosopher gladly accept upcoming death? Write an outline of the argument 63e-68b
2. Give an outline of the argument for immortality in 74-77. Explain how this argument can be said to be “hypothetical”.
3. The argument in 74-76 for the immortality of the soul contains an argument for the existence of the forms in 74b-e. Try to reconstruct the argument. Is there any move(s) in the argument of 74-77 to which you could object?
4. Does it sound reasonable to you? Is there any move(s) in the argument of 74-77 to which you would object?

5. In 65c, Plato claims that the senses are an obstacle to good reasoning. In 74b, however, he claims that learn about the forms from sensible experience. How do you think these two seemingly contradictory claims stand together in Plato's view?

12.2 Introduction to the labyrinth of the *Phaedo*

The *Phaedo* is about **Socrates' death**, that is, the death of a philosopher.

The structure of the *Phaedo* is difficult to grasp. Even more layers than usual.

- One explanation can be that Plato wants to make clear that the **subject is very hard**: it is almost impossible to write about it (remember the Seventh Letter)
- The dialogue structured by the **position** of Socrates
- Note the several theses based on **hypothetical premises**. In particular, the existence of the forms remains an hypothesis throughout the dialogue.

See for example, right from the beginning, Socrates' apology for his way to take death: Socrates gives his *doxa* – = opinion – he does not pretend to have given a sound argument. That is to say, the argument is valid, but not necessarily sound for he did not prove the truth of some of the assumptions.

- **In short: the whole dialogue is a discussion of the immortality of the soul with the hypothesis that the forms exists in mind.**

12.3 Philosophy as a training to death, 64c-68b

Here we have a nice example of a reasoning that leads only to *hypothetical* conclusions, depending on the truth of the premises.

OUTLINE:

Beginning of the dialogue: "is there such thing as death?" 64c

1. Definition of Death

P1. Death is nothing but the separation of the soul from the body

2. The philosophers's interest (contrasted to other people) is not the body

P2. Philosophers are not interested in pleasures of the body, whether necessary pleasures or not

QUESTION: is it true that even necessary body pleasure can and/or should be despised? Certainly, not all philosophers think so!

CC 1. Philosophers frees the soul from its association with the body as much as possible

CC2. People deem philosophical life close to death

!! Assumption for people: life is body pleasure

3. The philosopher interest, i.e. knowledge, is perfectly attainable only by the soul

P4. Knowledge is only acquired by the soul, not the senses of the body

P5. Senses are even obstacles to good reasoning and search for reality

QUESTION – Senses and reasoning: are the senses always an obstacle to good reasoning? What about the experiment with the slave boy? What about the argument in 74 according to which we learn-recollect through experience?

P5. It is in reasoning that the philosophers are *the most* freeing themselves from the body

P6. There are Forms (the just, the good etc.), unobservable, the “reality” of things

P7. These are better tracked down by thought/soul alone, freed from the senses/body

4. Conclusion: the philosopher should welcome death

CC1: IF we are to attain pure knowledge, it is with the soul only, discarding the body.

CC2: IF we are to attain pure knowledge, it is in death

CC3: There is good hope to be able to attain pure knowledge in death for who has his soul well purified

CC4: It would be crazy for the philosopher, who desires to free his soul, to fear death, which is just this separation.

Comparison with other lovers.

Corollary (contraposition): To fear death is a sufficient sign of loving body pleasures, wealth and honors (why honors? – see Rep VIII)

12.4 Theory of the Forms: The argument from imperfection *Phaedo*, 74-76

Special Thanks again

The following notes are largely derived from Prof. Cohen's brilliant course notes on Plato. His notes are copyrighted. I reproduce them with the authorization of the author. You can find the original notes on Prof. Cohen web site:

<http://faculty.washington.edu/smcohen/320/index.html>

The link is also on my web site.

12.4.1 Making the argument explicit

- This is both an argument for **the existence of Forms** and an argument for our **possession of a priori concepts**. Plato bases the argument on the **imperfection of sensible objects** and our ability to make judgments about those sensible objects. (The Forms are supposed to be the perfect objects that the sensible objects only imperfectly approximate).
- The argument as given at *Phaedo* 74-76 concerns the concept of equality, but it could equally well be given with respect to a number of different concepts (any concept that might have some claim to being an a priori concept).
- The argument tries to show that **we cannot abstract the concept of equality from our sense-experience** of objects that are equal. For

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1. We **never experience** (in sense-perception) objects that are really, precisely, equal, and,
 2. We **must already have** the concept of equality in order to judge the things we encounter in sense-perception to be approximately, imperfectly, equal.
- The argument can be schematized as follows:
 1. We perceive sensible objects to be F.
 2. But every sensible object is, at best, imperfectly F.
That is, it is both F and not F (in some respect - shades of Heraclitus??). It falls short of being perfectly F.
 3. We are aware of this imperfection in the objects of perception.
 4. So we perceive objects to be imperfectly F.
 5. To perceive something as imperfectly F, one must have in mind something that is perfectly F, something that the imperfectly F things fall short of. (E.g., we have an idea of equality that all sticks, stones, etc., only imperfectly exemplify.)
 6. So **we have in mind** something that is perfectly F.
 7. Thus, **there is something** that is perfectly F (e.g., Equality), that we have in mind in such cases.
 8. Therefore, there is such a thing as the F itself (e.g., the Equal itself), and it is distinct from any sensible object.

12.4.2 Plato, Rationalism and Empiricism

- On the one hand, Plato has obvious affinities with **rationalism**
Plato, like the classic 17th C. rationalists, maintains that we do not derive our concepts from sense-experience by abstraction.
Plato's argument that our sensory judgments of (near) equality depend on our having the concept of perfect equality, and that our having such a concept depends upon there being such a thing as perfect equality (i.e., the Form The Equal Itself) for our concept to be a concept of, bears a striking similarity to other rationalist arguments. Thus, cf. Descartes (Meditations III, HR I, 166):

For how would it be possible that I should know . . . that something is lacking in me, and that I am not quite perfect, unless I had within me some idea of a Being more perfect than myself, in comparison with which I should recognize the deficiencies of my nature?

The structure of the argument is the same as Plato's:

1. I judge myself to be imperfect.
2. That is, I judge myself to lack perfection.
3. Hence, I have the idea of perfection.
4. Hence, there is a being that this idea is an idea of.

[There is an added wrinkle in Descartes case: (4) is not deduced directly from (3) but rather by appeal to the principle of the reality of that of which we have a clear and distinct idea and the claim that our idea of perfection is clear and distinct. Plato echoes Parmenides in deducing (4) from (3).]

More recently, the linguist Noam Chomsky describes what he calls "The Argument from the Impoverished Stimulus" as a classic rationalist argument. It notes that we classify physical shapes that we experience (written, printed, drawn, etc.) as inexact representations of geometrically perfect regular figures (squares, circles, triangles, etc.). Why do not we classify them as exact representations of irregular figures?

The idea is that our sensory stimuli are impoverished. We never experience perfect squares, circles, triangles, etc. Yet we have these concepts, and we classify things accordingly. How did we acquire these concepts if we have never experienced anything that they (literally) apply to?

- On the other hand, he has also affinities with **empiricism**:

Plato has it that we derive our concept of equality from experience of objects, after all (just as the empiricist does).

However, for Plato, the experience is disembodied experience of non-physical objects of contemplation - the Forms.

This explains two seemingly contradictory claims of the *Phaedo* stand together in Plato's view.

- In 65c, Plato claims that the senses are an obstacle to good reasoning.

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- In 74b, he claims that we learn about the forms from sensible experience.

12.4.3 Problems in Platos argument

The argument has two faces. Plato uses it not only

- to establish the **existence of supra-sensible Forms**, but also
- to establish that we have **cognitive contact** with them in a prenatal state.

But we should separate these two faces of the argument. For one who was convinced that the argument shows that there must be such objects for a priori concepts might well not be convinced that the argument shows that we must have had some disembodied contact with those objects at some time before we were born.

As an argument for prenatal contact with the Forms, the argument has obvious flaws.

Other kinds of rationalism

- It leaves open the possibility that we are so constituted as to have the concept of equality - i.e., that it is wired in to our brains (or whatever). This would mean that we **acquire it at birth**. Plato closes this possibility off at 76d1-3: he must think it obvious that we do not have the concept at birth (since we cant use it then). We lose it at birth and regain it later, via experience. But he does not establish that we lack the concept at birth (we cant use it, but that does not mean we do not have it).
- In any event, he does not take this possibility seriously. He has no way to meet the (non-Platonic, anti-empiricist) claim that we have the concept wired in at birth, and hence do not have it before birth (or, at any rate, not very much before birth), and then begin to employ it (fumblingly, at first) in our early childhood bouts with sense-perception. [This is rationalism but without ante-natal existence.]
- His not taking this kind of rationalist position seriously may be due to some features his own view shares with empiricism.

Do we necessarily recollect what we have made to think of?

- Socrates notes that in the case of sensible equals, you see their imperfection - their falling short of Equality Itself, which they strive to be like. The sensible equals, nevertheless, make you think of (*ennoein*, 74d1, lit. put you in mind of) Equality itself. And this must be a case of recollection, says Socrates.
- But making one think of or putting one in mind of is not the same as, and does not entail, reminding one of. A 2:15 marathon puts me in mind of, i.e., gives me the idea of, a 1:30 marathon, but it hardly reminds me of it. I can't be reminded of what I have never experienced, but I certainly cannot be put in mind of such a thing. At least, Plato has no right to assume the contrary.

An assumption in 76b-c: knowledge is propositional

- For Plato: To know something is to possess its definition. That is: we explain what X is by offering the definition

X =df ABC

- From this assumption, Plato draws that ordinary people don't know (they cannot give any definition) in the proper sense.
- It is also under this assumption that the forms, and our disembodied contact with them, are needed to solve the paradox of dictionaries (infinite regress of definitions).
- Plato's idea is the following: at some point, one must invoke a kind of knowing that is not propositional - i.e., not a matter of knowing that something-or-other - but is more like **knowledge by acquaintance**.

More graphically: one must invoke a kind of knowing that is not a matter of grasping a definition of one term by means of other terms, but of grasping the thing itself.

The postulation of knowledge by acquaintance is thus necessary to cut the infinite regress of Socrates' search for definitions.

- Note that this completes the answer to the question of the *Meno*: how do we recognize the good definition?

- That said, someone could come and claim that knowledge is not exclusively propositional. For example: that to have a concept is to have some abilities and capacities (Aristotle and Ryle).

End of Prof. Cohen's notes

12.5 Conclusion

In short:

- The *Phaedo* gives several argument for the immortality of the Soul, on which depends whether Socrates is acting in the right way or not. The rationale is that if the soul is immortal, then there is good hope to attain pure knowledge in death
 - One argument for the immortality of the soul draws the doctrine of recollection
 - the doctrine of recollection relies on the existence of the Forms
 - Socrates must then give an argument for the existence of the Forms and the doctrine of recollection
- The *Phaedo* gives an argument for the existence of the Forms as what corresponds to our **innate concepts**
 - Our innate concepts are deduced as conditions of possibility of our experience of sensible things as imperfect
 - This is a classical argument of rationalism
- The second side of the argument concerns the doctrine of recollection
 - Plato does not justify his deduction from our possession of innate concepts to the doctrine of recollection
 - Plato needs to suppose the possibility of knowledge by acquaintance of the Forms
 - That said, if you are a rationalist, you have to give an account of how we come up with innate concepts or ideas, and this might not be a trivial problem!

