

# Plato, *Phaedo* (ca. 385 BC)

## The Soul's Mediation between Corporeality and the Good

*Kenneth Dorter*

The *Phaedo* has always been one of Plato's (429–347 BC) most popular dialogues, both for philosophical and literary reasons. Philosophically it comprises more of Plato's best-known doctrines than any dialogue except for the much longer *Republic*: immortality, theory of forms, learning as recollection, method of hypothesis, virtue as purification. As literature it depicts the last hours of Socrates, culminating in a death scene that is the most moving episode in all of Plato. The popular appeal of the dialogue is echoed in the composition of Socrates' audience, which consists mostly of non-philosophers, and in the consequent use of religious metaphors to present the teachings.

The central philosophical discussion begins when Socrates tells his audience that not only should philosophers not regard death as an evil, but they should welcome it as a fulfillment. Philosophy is devoted to overcoming the petty and obsessive demands of bodily appetites and vanities, in order that our true self, reason, can achieve its goal of communion with intelligible reality. We strive, then, to separate the soul from the body as much as possible, and since that separation is the meaning of death, "philosophy is the practicing of death." Paradoxically, even if the fulfillment of the philosophical life lies in death, suicide is prohibited. Our life is in service to the gods and we must not deprive them of that service. The divine basis of reality both inspires philosophy to flee the body in a death-like pursuit of incorporeal divinity and at the same time forbids it from consummating that pursuit.

This tension between our inner impulse toward the incorporeal and divine (death) and our duty to serve the divine in the corporeal world (life) is the architectonic principle on which the *Phaedo* is based. Throughout the dialogue a three-level ontology is at work: the corporeal realm of becoming, the incorporeal intelligible realm of being, and the soul as intermediate between them. This first becomes evident when Cebes and Simmias challenge Socrates to defend his claim that the nature of philosophy implies the welcoming of death, and Socrates replies by considering in turn the nature of the body, the nature of the soul, and the nature of the intelligible realm: corporeal

pleasure is not worthy of being a serious goal of life; the soul's pursuit of truth is most successful when it is most free from bodily disturbances; and because the forms or essences of things are intelligible rather than corporeal they can best be known when the soul is most detached from the body. When Cebes replies that death can only be regarded as a fulfillment of our being if the soul can be proved immortal, Socrates embarks on a series of three proofs, which once again proceed through the three levels of reality. The first examines the soul in relation to the nature of corporeal becoming; the second considers the nature of the soul's distinctive activity of acquiring knowledge; and the third shows the soul's affinity to the realm of intelligible form. Later, in response to an objection by Cebes, Socrates formulates a fourth argument in which all three levels of reality are explicitly combined: soul is what imparts the form of life to corporeality.

The *Phaedo* comprises roughly eleven sections: (1) a brief introductory scene; (2) the opening discussion of philosophy and its relation to virtue; (3–5) three arguments for immortality; (6) an interlude where Simmias and Cebes criticize the arguments; (7) Socrates' refutation of Simmias's criticism; (8) an autobiographical explanation of the method of hypothesis; (9) a fourth argument in reply to Cebes' criticism; (10) the myth of afterlife; and (11) the death scene.

### Philosophy and Virtue (62b–69d)

Socrates describes his claim that suicide is prohibited because of our service to the gods as an (Orphic) mystery that is not easy to understand (62b). We can begin to understand it, however, when we notice that the characteristic of the gods that all three speakers insist on is their goodness (62d–63b), and that the principle of the good is the ultimate cause of all things (98c–99a). To say that we may not kill ourselves because our life is in service to goodness is to say that the world is somehow a better place for our presence, and that we must live up to that responsibility. Accordingly, this section culminates in a discussion of the nature of virtue.

Philosophy, as the practicing of death, is not a withdrawal from the world, for then we would be depriving the gods of our service as surely as if we killed ourselves. Rather, it is a way of life that recognizes the primacy of selfless (because universal) reason over the self-centeredness of bodily passions. Philosophers do not fear death because only in "Hades" will they find wisdom (68a) – "Hades," we later learn, refers not to Homer's unseen ("Hades" means "unseen") world of the dead but to the invisible realm of intelligible reality (80d, 81c). Those who fear death, then, are not lovers of wisdom (philosophers) but lovers of the body, and what they call virtue is really a kind of vice. Since they fear death they are courageous only because they fear something else (dishonor) even more, so their courage is cowardice; and since they love the body they limit their pleasure only when it interferes with other kinds of pleasure, so their moderation is indulgence. True virtue only belongs to those whose behavior is governed by selfless wisdom; that is, by those who purify themselves of selfish motives in order to serve divine goodness.

### Reciprocity Argument (69e–72e)

We can find fulfillment in “Hades” only if the self or soul survives death, so Socrates must demonstrate immortality. As in the previous argument, he begins with a doctrine borrowed from religion: after the souls of the dead go to Hades they are reincarnated. If birth is actually reincarnation, then the soul must have existed posthumously. The demonstration can be summarized as follows:

- 1 Everything that has an opposite comes into being from it (bigger from smaller, waking from sleeping).
- 2 Being alive and being dead are opposites.
- 3 Consequently the living come from the dead.
- 4 Therefore our souls must exist in Hades after death so they can return to life.

A brief supplementary argument follows:

- 5 If the living died without returning to life, eventually everything would have been dead.
- 6 Therefore souls must be reincarnated.

Plato seems to recognize that, on the surface at least, there are difficulties with all the arguments in the dialogue because he portrays Socrates’ audience as never completely convinced by them. One problem with the present argument is that the opposite (contradictory) of “alive” is not “dead” but “not-alive.” We would agree that if something comes to be alive it must have been not-alive, but not that it must have been dead (previously alive). Socrates himself seems to be aware of the fallacy, for in the supplemental argument (steps 5 and 6) he says that even “if the living came from other things” than the dead, if nothing ever returned to life eventually everything would die out (72d–e). But to acknowledge that there are non-living things other than the dead is to admit that death is not the opposite of life, and that the first part of the argument is wrong. In fact this supplement seems meant to remedy that error by pointing out that the same conclusion follows nevertheless.

Why would Plato give us an invalid argument followed by a correction, instead of simply correcting the argument? Later Socrates warns that he is behaving as much like a polemicist as like a philosopher, and his audience should be careful lest they be taken in by bad arguments (91a–c). The reason becomes clear later: it is urgent that people believe in an afterlife as a deterrent to immorality (107c–d) – and Cebes had already pointed out that there is an irrational part of our nature which needs to be persuaded by emotional rather than logical means (77d–e, cf. *Timaeus* 71a–d). How we understand immortality depends on how we understand the self. For some the self is the individuality that distinguishes us from others, and immortality is personal; while for others the true self is what we share with everyone else, and immortality is impersonal. The *Phaedo* identifies the self with reason, and in the absence of appetites and competitiveness it is hard to see how one soul could be distinguished from another. In that case the *Phaedo*’s concept of immortality is an impersonal one, and would not satisfy

the first type of person. Socrates' warning about his polemical arguments implies that the dialogue is written on two levels, one that appeals to abstract reason, and another that appeals to our emotions but does not stand up to rational analysis.

The first part of the argument, by insisting that the living come from the dead, suggests individual souls waiting to be reincarnated. The supplement, by quietly acknowledging that the non-living from which the living come need not be dead, no longer conveys an image of souls retaining their individuality after death: immortality seems more like conservation of energy than personal survival. In fact Socrates began by saying that the argument applied not only to humans but also to animals, plants, and everything that comes to be. But those who would not be satisfied with an immortality in which our soul is part of an eternal but undifferentiated life force could be won over by corresponding traditional images of Hades, the gods, and shades of the dead. Both this argument and the argument against suicide began as elaborations of religious doctrines, where words like "gods" and "Hades" were used in a double sense. We can read the arguments of the *Phaedo* either as failed attempts to demonstrate what they claim, or as successful attempts to demonstrate something more subtle that they only imply. The second alternative is more plausible in view of Plato's portrait of Socrates' audience as reluctant to accept them at face value. Even after the final argument Simmias says that, although he can find nothing wrong with it, he is uneasy because something may have escaped them, and Socrates replies "Not only that, Simmias, but you should more clearly examine both those things which you rightly mentioned and the first hypotheses, even if they are convincing to you" (107a–b).

### Argument from Recollection (72e–77a)

After the reciprocity argument Cebes remarks that another proof for immortality is Socrates' claim that learning is recollection (see *Meno* 81d–86b), for "according to that view it is necessary for us to have learned at some earlier time what we now recollect. But that is impossible unless our soul existed somewhere before it was born in this human form" (72e–73a). Once again we are led to think of our souls pre-existing in Hades. The lengthy, complex argument can be paraphrased as follows.

- 1 Equal things sometimes seem equal and sometimes not.
- 2 We judge whether they are equal by an absolute standard of "equality itself."
- 3 Unlike equal things, which sometimes seem unequal, equality itself never seems unequal.
- 4 Therefore, our concept of equality itself cannot have been learned empirically from experience of equal things – they are only the occasion for recollecting it.
- 5 We must have acquired it before seeing equal things since we judge them by it.
- 6 We have perceived equal things since birth.
- 7 Therefore our souls acquired the concept of equality before we were born.
- 8 Therefore our souls existed before the body and are immortal.

The argument makes two general points: (1) since absolute concepts cannot be derived from sensory experience they are *a priori*; and (2) we must have acquired them

before we were born. The first of these is plausible since the senses give us only relative qualities, but the second is problematic since we might suppose, with Kant and others, that the *a priori* is part of what it is to be human, and therefore does not exist before birth. In fact Simmias makes that very point: we may “acquire that knowledge at the time we are born” (76c). Socrates asks in reply, “But at what other time do we lose it?,” and Simmias withdraws in confusion. But why must we lose it at another time? Why can we not acquire it as a potentiality that still needs to be activated? – which is what dormant memory is in any case. In fact both Simmias’s and Socrates’ words throughout this section imply that possibility. Six times in about half a page they repeat that “our souls existed before we were born as human beings” or simply “. . . before we were born” (76c–77a). This means that there is a difference between “our souls” and “we human beings.” “We” can only acquire that knowledge at birth because “we” do not exist beforehand, only our souls do. Simmias is right after all, but he does not notice how the distinction between “us” and “our souls” supplies the answer to Socrates’ challenge. The argument may still give us reason to believe that “our souls” are eternal, but it is no longer clear that “we” are eternal, in other words that our immortality is personal rather than impersonal.

Later Simmias recalls the conclusion of the argument rather differently: “Our soul exists even before it comes into the body just as its essence is the kind we designate as ‘that which is’” (92d). In that case the soul has the same kind of being as forms like equality itself, and so it will know them from its own nature if it is not impeded by the body (see 79c–d). “We” acquire knowledge of the forms at birth, not before, because that is when the soul becomes a human being, and we lose it at the same time because that is when the soul’s power to see the forms is obscured by the disruptions of the body. In that case there is another level to the argument than the mythological one conveyed by Cebes’ suggestion that our soul “learned at some earlier time what we now recollect.” Our soul does not literally have a prenatal learning experience that it forgets at birth; rather our soul (reason) *by nature* communes with eternal being, but “we” embodied souls who are caught up in the tumult of the body need to be made mindful of it, to “recollect” it.

The first argument demonstrated a naturalistic immortality as part of an eternal cyclical process of death and rebirth. This one gives us something more inward. We experience immortality not only externally as the stuff of eternal nature, but also internally through our knowledge of eternal forms. In the act of knowing we experience our soul’s affinity with the forms that, like it, have the kind of essence we call “that which is,” an essence not subject to becoming, and so eternal. At this level the argument leads naturally to the next, which assimilates the being of the soul to the being of the forms, and is introduced as a continuation of this one when, after a short interlude, Cebes asks to “return to the point from which we digressed” (78a–b).

The digression resulted from Simmias’s complaint that the recollection argument proves only pre-existence, not immortality. Socrates suggests combining it with the first argument, which proved afterlife, so the two together demonstrate immortality past and future. But he also accuses Simmias and Cebes of being like children who fear that the soul disperses when it leaves the body. Cebes agrees that “perhaps there is a child in us who fears these things,” and Socrates suggests that such fears need to be assuaged by “singing incantations” to that child – an image of how the mythological surface of the

arguments complements the conceptual underpinnings by appealing to us at an emotional level (the concluding myth is explicitly called an incantation at 114d).

### Affinity (78b–80b)

The affinity argument is the least rigorous and most hesitant of the arguments, weakening its assertions with qualifications such as “likely,” and concluding anticlimactically that “the soul is completely indissoluble or close to it” (80b). It works from analogy and therefore claims only probability not certainty. An argument that shows two things to agree on certain points, and then concludes that they probably agree also on the point in question, can be dismissed by disputing either the initial comparisons or the extrapolation to the conclusion. But if it is logically the most modest, it is psychologically the most effective argument, for if the initial comparisons seem justified, the conclusion may seem to follow directly from our experience, and convince more effectively than one based on abstract, indirect inference. Among the proofs for the existence of God the argument from design, based on an analogy between human and divine creativity, is more persuasive than the abstract cosmological or ontological arguments because our experience of order in the world is more reason to believe in a creative force than all the conceptual insistence of the other arguments. Something of the kind is true of the affinity argument, the “center of the dialogue’s five arguments.

The argument contrasts the transient corporeal realm with the eternal intelligible realm, and shows that in at least three ways the body resembles the corporeal while the soul resembles the intelligible. It follows that, just as the body resembles the corporeal also in impermanence, the soul is likely to resemble the intelligible also in eternity. The three resemblances are drawn from the three realms of being – corporeality (the composite), soul (knowledge), and the forms (divinity).

- 1 Responding to the worry that the soul might scatter upon death, Socrates points out that only what is composite can scatter, and that things that change are more likely to be composite, while the changeless is more likely to be simple. Forms are unchanging and therefore simple, while things always change and are therefore composite. Our body, being visible, is more like the visible changing things; while our soul, being invisible, is more like what is invisible and unchanging.
- 2 In the soul’s investigations, when it uses bodily senses it becomes confused because its subject is always changing, “whereas when it investigates through itself [reason] it goes to what is pure, eternal, immortal, and unchanging, and being akin to that it always stays with it whenever it [can]” (79d). So in respect of knowledge, too, soul is more like the forms while body is more like the realm of change.
- 3 In the soul–body composite one part rules while the other obeys, and it is natural for the divine to rule and the mortal to obey. In this respect as well the soul resembles the divine and the body the mortal.

On the basis of all these resemblances it is natural for the body to dissolve but not the soul. Although they are only analogies and can therefore be disputed, they point to

the strongest experiential grounds for our belief in immortality. There is something in us which we feel remains unchanged through all the body's alterations, which in the experience of rational knowledge feels itself akin to the timelessness of its subject, and which seems to us to have something divine and sovereign about it. An experience of that kind is more persuasive than the most virtuosic exercise in deduction.

### Misology and Method (80d–102a)

The affinity argument is followed by a depiction of our posthumous fate (such as reincarnation into creatures that reflect the life we led) and a return to the theme of philosophy as the practicing of death. At that point Simmias and Cebes express reservations about the arguments, and throw the audience into a perplexity that threatens to destroy their belief in rationality. Socrates combats the threat of misology by proposing a method of inquiry to protect us from random argumentation and its attendant confusion. This is the method of hypothesis, which he employs in his answers both to Simmias and to Cebes.

In a quasi-autobiographical account Socrates explains that he developed the method out of his frustration in trying to discover the ultimate causal principle, the good. We can satisfactorily understand the world only if we understand the reason why it is as it is – its goodness. Being unable to discover that principle, he resorted to a *deuteros plous*, a “secondary way” (literally, “second sailing”). The term refers to the use of oars in the absence of wind, so it is a slower, more laborious means to the same destination. The method of hypothesis is a gradual approach to the teleological principle of things, in three stages: (1) When we accept something as true we accept whatever agrees with it and reject whatever conflicts (100a). (2) But when the initial hypothesis itself comes into question we must examine its consequences to see whether they lead to disharmonious results (101d3–5). (3) And when we must give an account of it we do so in terms of the best of the higher hypotheses (101d5–e1). The first two stages are illustrated in Socrates' reply to Simmias, which preceded this account (Simmias anticipated stage one at 85c–d), and the third will be illustrated in his reply to Cebes.

#### *Reply to Simmias: refutation of epiphenomenalism (85e–86d, 91c–95a)*

Simmias's objection is that the soul may be invisible, incorporeal, beautiful, and divine – as the affinity argument claims – but so is the harmony of a tuned lyre, and since the harmony ceases to exist when the lyre is destroyed, the soul may perish when the body does. On that analogy the soul is a product of the body, an epiphenomenon. Socrates employs the first stage of the method of hypothesis by pointing out that since Simmias accepts the hypothesis (92d) of recollection he must reject epiphenomenalism because it conflicts with it by making the body prior to the soul. He employs the second stage by showing that the hypothesis (93c, 94b) of epiphenomenalism implies that the bodily elements are in perfect harmony, and that virtue itself is a kind of harmony, which leads to the absurd conclusion that all souls are equally virtuous. Moreover, since the soul rules the body, the epiphenomenalist hypothesis also entails the absurdity that a harmony can act against the elements that produce it.

*Reply to Cebes: argument from essential attributes (86e–87b, 95b–107a)*

Cebes' objection focuses on Socrates' weak claim that the soul is only "more like" the eternal than the body is, from which Socrates had argued that since the body does not fall apart upon death the soul would hardly do so either. Cebes points out that even if the soul is much longer lasting than any particular body, it passes through many incarnations and may die at the end of its final one, which may be ours. Socrates replies by considering the cause of generation and destruction, and at the same time illustrating the third stage of the method of hypothesis.

When his youthful attempt to explain everything by physical causation led to absurdities he looked for a "higher" explanation. Unable to discover the "true cause," the principle of the good, he settled for the best of the higher hypotheses, the hypothesis (100b) that the causes are forms. The third stage is then repeated at a higher level: although the theory of forms is "safe" from the previous absurdities, it too is dissonant: physicalism was at least sophisticated and informative (100c), but explanations like "things are beautiful because of beauty" are simplistic, artless, foolish, and ignorant (100d, 105c). Socrates accordingly replaces this second hypothesis with a higher one that unites the strengths of its two predecessors: "I see a safety beyond the first answer . . . not safe and ignorant . . . but [safe and] subtle" (105b). The new model introduces things that impart forms, and combines the forms with the natural causes spoken of earlier. This third hypothesis provides the basis for the fourth argument (105b–106e):

- 1 Some things impart certain forms to whatever they approach (snow imparts cold, fire heat).
- 2 These carriers can never have the opposite quality of the form they impart (snow can never be hot, or fire cold).
- 3 Soul imparts life to whatever it enters.
- 4 Therefore souls can never be qualified by death and are immortal, deathless.

But Socrates concludes on a note of caution: the argument proves only that a soul cannot be dead, not that it is imperishable – presumably because it might simply cease to exist rather than exist in a state of death. Therefore either they must agree that what cannot die is also imperishable, or else they will need an additional argument that the soul also cannot perish in some other way (105e–106d). Strangely, after introducing this difficulty, Plato has Cebes reply without explanation that no further argument is necessary – Cebes simply assumes in a subordinate clause what he needs to defend: "Hardly anything else would not admit destruction if the deathless, *which is eternal*, admitted destruction" (105d, emphasis added). Why does Plato end by allowing Cebes to beg the question he just raised through Socrates?

In earlier arguments where the overt conclusion was not supported, the implications of the premises pointed more cogently to a different conclusion that appealed to reason but not emotion. When Socrates says here that if deathless does not entail imperishability we need another argument, is there any indication of what that argument might be? Socrates responds to Cebes by saying, "The god, I believe, and the form of life itself, and anything else that may be deathless, everyone would agree that they



never perish" (106d). Throughout the dialogue "god" has been taken to mean "good" by all three main speakers (62–63b, 80d), and previously Socrates told us that he fell back on the method of hypothesis only because of his inability to discern the true cause, the good. That method gave us the theory of forms, which is recalled here in Socrates' reference to "the form of life itself," but has not yet reached its goal of the good, which is implicit in Socrates' additional reference to "the god." (Socrates' advice immediately after this argument – to "more clearly examine the first hypotheses, even if they are convincing to you" [107a–b] – can be read as an invitation to take this next step on our own.) Its goal will be reached only if the additional argument is a teleological argument from the nature of the good: the universe is good, goodness requires life, therefore life exists necessarily and soul must be eternal. In other words the causality of the good requires the eternal presence of soul and life (our service to the gods).

It is not surprising that Plato would leave such an argument merely implicit. To defend it required almost the entire *Timaeus* (see *Timaeus* 29a–30b). Moreover, it does not imply that the soul is imperishable as an individual person. For the "child within us" who is led by emotion, it may be better to allow the argument to rest on an apparently rigorous though actually fallacious connection, while pointing toward a plausible but impersonal connection for those not satisfied as easily as Cebes. The efficacy of teleology is hinted at in the concluding myth's account of the rational formation of the world (Sedley, 1989).

### Myth (107d–114d)

The last argument is followed by one of Plato's longest and greatest myths, according to which our fate after death depends on the rewards or punishments that our present behavior deserves. For those who believe in survival of the personality the myth provides a vivid image of our future experience. Some general claims like the sphericity of the earth are evidently to be taken literally, but details of rewards and punishments – some of which contradict the account at 80d–82b – seem to have more symbolic than factual value: "To rely upon these things as being just as I explained them would not be fitting for a reasonable man. But that they or some such things are true . . . seems to me to be fitting" (114d). The geography of the underworld sounds rather like biology: Tartarus pumps water through the river channels, and wind through the air, in much the way the heart and lungs operate in the living body (compare 112a–c with the *Timaeus's* description of the heart and lungs at 70b–d). If the geography of the myth is an image of the living body, and the rewards and punishments are fitted to the nature of the virtues and vices that call them forth, the fate of the souls can be taken as images of what our way of life does to us while we are alive. Those who are slaves to their passions suffer appropriate torment, while those who purify their souls of lust experience the eternity of the divine.

## Bibliography

### *Editions and translations*

- Plato (1911) *Phaedo*, ed. John Burnet (with intro. and notes). Oxford: Clarendon Press.  
Plato (1977) *Phaedo*, trans. G. M. A. Grube. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett.  
Plato (1993) *Phaedo / Plato*, ed. C. J. Rowe (with intro. and commentary). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

### *Studies*

- Dixsaut, M. (1991) *Phédon / Platon*, trans. and commentary. Paris: Flammarion.  
Dorter, K. (1982) *Plato's Phaedo: An Interpretation*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.  
Dorter, K. (2001) "Deathless is indestructible, if not we need another argument": an implicit argument in the *Phaedo*. In A. Havlicek and F. Karfik (eds), *Plato's Phaedo: Proceedings of the Second Platonic Symposium in Prague*, pp. 406–23. Prague: Oikoumene.  
Frede, D. (1999) *Platons "Phaidon": der Traum der Unsterblichkeit der Seele*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft.  
Gallop, D. (1975) *Phaedo/Plato*, trans. and commentary. Oxford: Oxford University Press.  
Sedley, D. (1989) Teleology and myth in the *Phaedo*. *Proceedings of the Boston Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy*, 5: 359–83.  
Stern, P. (1993) *Socratic Rationalism and Political Philosophy: An Interpretation of Plato's Phaedo*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.