

# Plato's *Phaedo*

G. J. Matthey

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## Lessons from the *Euthyphro*

- We can extract some lessons from our study of Plato's early dialogue *Euthyphro*.
- One of the main tasks of philosophy is to discover the "form" that makes things be of various kinds.
- The form is *objective*, and not dependent on how anyone views things of the kind.
  - Here Socrates disagrees with his main opponents, the Sophists, who were *relativists*.
- The objectivity of the forms extends even to what we call "normative" kinds:
  - Just acts,
  - Good acts,
  - Beautiful things.
- More needs to be said about what these forms are and how we come to know them.

## The Forms

- A form is described by attaching "itself" to the term that signifies the kind (75d)
  - Two sticks are equal in length.
  - The form that makes them equal in length is the Equal itself.
- Plato mentions a number of forms in the *Phaedo*:
  - The Equal itself,
  - The Greater itself,
  - The Smaller itself,
  - The Beautiful itself,
  - The Good itself,

- The Just itself,
- The Pious itself,
- The Odd itself,
- The Even itself,
- Smallness itself,
- Bigness itself,
- The Cold itself,
- Twoness itself,
- Oneness itself.

### **Things and Forms**

- Things of a kind are *distinct* from the form that makes them of that kind (74c).
  - The equal sticks are distinct from the Equal itself.
- Things of a kind are *inferior* to the form that makes them of that kind (74d).
  - The equality shared by the sticks is inferior to the Equal itself.
- A form makes a thing be of a kind in the sense that it is the *cause* of its being of that kind. (100c).
  - The Equal itself causes equal sticks to be equal.
- Things *share in* the forms that make them the kind of things they are, taking on the corresponding quality (101c).
  - Two equal sticks share in the Equal itself and have the quality of being equal to each other.

### **Properties of the Forms**

- In various places in the *Phaedo*, Plato enumerates various properties that the forms have:
  - They contain no complexity within themselves, and as a result they “remain the same and never in any way tolerate any change whatever” (78d).
  - They are invisible (79a), and more generally not perceivable by any of the senses.
  - They never come to be or cease to exist: they always exist (79d).
  - They are divine (80a).

### **Forms and Opposites**

- Things change into their opposites.
  - The larger comes from the smaller,
  - The smaller comes from the larger (103a).
- Forms are of the same kind as the things they make to be of that kind (“self-predication”) (102e).
  - The Tall itself is tall.
- Forms cannot change into their opposites (102d).
  - The Tall itself can never become short.
- The quality in a thing which shares in the form cannot change into the opposite quality (102d).
  - The tallness in Shaquille O’Neal can never become shortness in Shaquille O’Neal.

### **Excluded Qualities**

- Some qualities of things exclude other qualities indirectly.
  - A trio of things is made a pair by Threeness.
  - But a trio of things is also odd and shares in the Odd.
  - The Odd and the Even are opposites and thus exclude each other.
  - So, a thing which is odd cannot be even.
  - So, a trio of things cannot be even.
- The point is that although the quality of being even is not the opposite as the quality of being three, it is still excluded from anything that is three.
- This point will be used in an argument below.

### **Knowledge of the Forms**

- The forms are not perceivable by the bodily senses.
- Plato assumes that if the forms are not perceivable by the bodily senses, they cannot come to be known in the course of one’s life.
- If knowledge of the forms is not acquired in the course of life, then either:
  - It was possessed at birth, or
  - It was not possessed at birth.

- Knowledge of the forms was not possessed at birth, since if it were, more people would know them.
- Plato concludes that if one knows the forms now, then one must have acquired knowledge before birth, lost it, and recovered it after birth through “recollection.”

### **Immortality**

- Plato develops the theory of the forms in the *Phaedo* to aid in his arguments for the immortality of the human soul.
- He claims that only by being free from the body can the soul attain the knowledge it desires.
- The body is a hinderance to the soul, by giving rise to needs and desires, which disrupt it.
- The philosopher is really in training for death, which will release it from the tyranny of the body—if the soul survives.
- It requires “a good deal of faith and persuasive argument” to show that the soul exists after the body dies.

### **The Argument from Opposites**

- The first argument for immortality has two parts, the first of which establishes a conditional conclusion, and the second of which supplies the the condition.
  1. If a quality of a thing comes to be, then it comes to be from its opposite. (E.g., it becomes hot, so it was cold.)
  2. Being alive is the opposite of being dead.
  3. So, if something comes to be alive, then it comes to be alive from being dead.
  4. If a thing comes to be alive from being dead, then it is in virtue of a soul that exists without a body.
  5. If a soul exists without a body, then it previously had a body which died.
  6. So, if a soul comes to be alive, then it previously had a body which died.
  7. So, if a soul exists before birth, then it exists after (some) death.

### **The Argument from Recollection**

- Plato needs to establish that souls exist before birth in order to establish that they exist after death.
- In so doing, he appeals to knowledge of the forms.
  1. The soul knows the forms.

2. If the soul knows the forms, then it knows them through recollection.
3. So, the soul knows the forms through recollection.
4. If the soul knows the forms through recollection, then the soul existed before birth.
5. So, the soul existed before birth.
6. If a soul exists before birth, then it exists after (some) death. [From the previous argument]
7. So, the soul exists after (some) death.

### **The Argument from Analogy**

- Another argument for immortality is based on the resemblance between the soul and the forms.
  1. Suppose the soul ceases to exist.
  2. For any x, if x ceases to exist, then it is a complex thing that has been decomposed.
  3. The forms are simple, and hence not subject to decomposition.
  4. The soul resembles the forms in many respects, and in investigating the forms actually passes into its realm.
  5. So, the soul resembles the forms with respect to their simplicity.
  6. So, the soul cannot be decomposed.
  7. So, the soul cannot cease to exist.

### **The Argument from Excluded Qualities**

- Plato constructs a final argument for immortality, to counter the objection that a given soul might be inhabiting its last body.
- This argument rests on the earlier claim that a thing can exclude a quality which is not its opposite.
  1. The soul can only bring life to the body into which it enters at birth.
  2. So, the soul excludes the opposite of life.
  3. The opposite of life is death.
  4. So, the soul does not admit death.
  5. So, the soul is deathless.
  6. What is deathless is indestructible.
  7. So, the soul is indestructible.

### Assessment

- The theory of forms has been described in the *Phaedo* to support the arguments for the immortality of the human soul.
- Arguments for the existence of the forms, and for our knowledge of them, must be given for the theory to be credible.
- The arguments for immortality seem to be very weak.
- Historically, the only argument which adapted by later philosophers is related to the “Argument from Analogy.”
- One tries to establish (on grounds other than the resemblance of the soul to forms) that the soul is simple, and then argues from that premise to the conclusion that the soul is immortal in the way Plato did.
- This argument was convincingly attacked by Immanuel Kant in the eighteenth century.