

**Plato, *Phaedo*. Translated by Harold North Fowler. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1960.**

Plato (428-348 B.C.) studied under Socrates, and instructed Aristotle. His philosophical system based on ideal forms supported a potent ethical structure. Plato's system proved seminal to all subsequent Western philosophy. Plato founded the Academy in Athens, where he taught until his death.

Echecrates asks Phaedo to relate Socrates' conversation before his execution, as well as details of Socrates' death. Echecrates tells of return of the Delian delegation vessel, which event triggered Socrates' execution.

Socrates' friends and students visited him daily at prison. On the day of Socrates' execution, they all arrived early. Socrates rubbed his leg, which was troubled by his chains. Socrates noted that pleasure and pain accompany one another inseparably.

Cebes asked about the poems Socrates had been composing. Socrates said these were aids to interpreting recent dreams, in which Socrates was urged to make music. Socrates noted that philosophy is the highest form of music, but he also wrote hymns. Socrates asked Cebes to tell Evenus, as a philosopher, to follow Socrates into death as soon as possible, but not by suicide. Simmias doubted that Evenus would follow Socrates' admonition.

**Issue #1: Why is suicide wrong?** Socrates says humans are the personal property of the gods; therefore, suicide is theft. Cebes points out that Socrates is inconsistent, encouraging Evenus to die but viewing suicide as theft from gods. Simmias concurs. Why is Socrates so willing to die if the gods are good rulers? Simmias asks Socrates to explain. Socrates says he will defend better than he did in his trial. Socrates says, in dying, he goes to an actual life that rewards the good.

*(Crito interrupts. The guard does not want Socrates to get agitated by talking, which may then require more poison to execute the prisoner. Socrates says to ignore the guard.)*

Socrates: Philosophers study death and dying and nothing else.

*(Simmias's joke: Philosophers want death; most people think they deserve death. Socrates says that they should talk, ignoring the opinions of the crowd.)*

Socrates: Death separates the soul (*psyche*) from the body (*soma*). Philosophers, more than others, distrust bodily pleasures and focus on spiritual matters. The defects of sense experience compromise empirical knowledge. Pure thought, segregated from experience, can grasp reality itself. (*ontos*) To discover truth, the philosopher eschews his senses, seeking unadulterated rationality. The epistemological confusion caused by sense experience is an evil that philosophers should avoid. So, the dead, being separated from their bodies, can attain wisdom impossible for the living. But while alive, a philosopher should tend only absolutely necessary bodily needs, hoping to attain some truth. The body fetters wisdom. So, since philosophers practice separation from the body during life, they are less disturbed by death at life's end.

Philosophers practice bona fide courage and self-restraint. Others trade one pleasure for a greater pleasure, or a greater fear for a lesser one. True virtue requires love of wisdom itself, and purification from the body. Virtue does not arise by minimizing fear or maximizing pleasure. The impure dwell in mud after death; the pure live with friends and gods.

**Issue #2: Does the soul survive death?**

Socrates: We know the soul survives death because opposites generate one another. We see that life leads to death, just as cold portends warmth or height, depth. So, death must lead to life. Therefore, the soul exists, but at a location we cannot observe. Time is circular, leading straight to an end, but ever back upon itself.

Cebes: The recollection theory of knowledge also requires that souls pre-exist their incarnation.

Socrates: (Simmias inquires of Socrates.) Examples of equal real objects are never exactly equal. And yet we know absolute equality, equality in the abstract which admits no imprecision. Our negative evaluations of any matter presuppose that we know how the matter should stand. Therefore, knowledge of absolutes precedes all experience. We acquired absolute

knowledge before birth. And this argument applies as much to goodness and justice and beauty and holiness. We learned the absolutes of each before birth.

**First Lacuna.**

*Cebes: This proves the soul exists before birth, but not that it survives death. Our fears are childish. We fear hobgoblins and death. Socrates: You need a singer to croon away your fears.*

Socrates: The soul is imperishable because it is non-composite, and therefore not subject to decomposition. When the soul experiences, the body drags it into confusion. When the soul contemplates, it achieves clarity which is wisdom. The soul should rule its body. When death comes to the philosopher, his soul departs to the divine realm, where it dwells forever with the gods. When death comes to a person enamored with the body, his soul remains tied to physicality and he becomes a ghost. These physical attachments predispose the base soul to again be imprisoned in a body. The particular incarnated body is a consequence of the person's particular affections. Gluttons become pigs, robbers become wolves, and so forth. Better souls are reincarnated as social insects or good humans. Intense pains and pleasures "rivet" the soul to the physical and convince it that truth lies in experience. The philosopher seeks freedom from emotions by following reason. Philosophers do not fear the wind will blow their souls away.

**Second Lacuna.**

*Cebes and Simmias want to ask a further question, but do not want to trouble Socrates. Socrates reasserts that he is at peace, as are swans singing before death.*

Simmias: Reliable knowledge of post-death circumstances is difficult or impossible. Barring divine revelation, one can only pick mankind's best guess (the theory hardest to disprove) and set sail on that guess through the dangerous future. The harmony of lyre music does not survive destruction of the lyre. Is not the soul the body's harmony as the music is the lyre's?

*Socrates acknowledges the force of Simmias's argument and invites Cebes to express his concerns.*

Cebes: I am still not convinced that the soul survives death. Simmias's argument seems wrong. He argues that a deceased weaver, whose cloak remains, must be hiding, not dead, because we still possess the cloak he last wore intact. Weavers last longer than cloaks, just as souls endure after bodies rot. The soul may just be durable, not immortal. It may, after many bodies, die. That is what any reasonable person must fear.

**Third Lacuna.**

*Socrates' students jump into the debate.*

*Echecrates is wholly thrown off the track by Cebes's and Simmias's arguments against Socrates' assertion that the soul is immortal. He asks to know all that Socrates said and did in response to his students' criticisms. Phaedo relates Socrates' respectful listening, and the seriousness with which he addressed these criticisms. Socrates stroked Phaedo's hair.*

Socrates: The big danger when addressing potent criticism of a thought is that one might come to distrust the process of argument itself. This is misologism. Misologism parallels misanthropy, which arises when one places unwarranted trust in persons, and thereafter rejects all persons. In arguments, as in people, a few are good or bad. Most are in between. Another danger is that one might argue to win, not to arrive at truth. Uncultured persons argue thus.

**Answering the Counterarguments of Cebes and Simmias:**

*Socrates encourages Cebes and Simmias to think of truth, not Socrates' plight, and bring every good argument they possess to bear on the question of soul's immortality. Socrates summarizes Cebes's and Simmias's arguments, and the assent that he has fairly portrayed their concerns.*

Socrates addresses **Simmias's argument** first: The soul is not a harmony as the harmony of a lyre. A lyre is composite, and its harmony a result of its composition. Since you accept the idea that knowledge is recollection, let's pursue that idea.

Simmias: Arguments based on probabilities are inherently dubious and frequently mislead.

Socrates: Considering the soul a harmony makes it difficult to grasp the nature of evil. How can harmony be discord?

Socrates addresses **Cebes's argument**: Socrates again summarizes Cebes's argument: the proof so far demonstrates that the soul is very long-lived, but not that it is immortal. Socrates approaches Cebes's concerns by telling of his youthful investigations of natural phenomena, for which he is ill-equipped. His investigations led him to question not only the phenomena, but also what he knew before he began investigating, including mathematics. Then he came upon the teaching of Anaxagoras: the mind causes and arranges all things. But Anaxagoras failed to address final causes sufficiently. So, Socrates turned to the idea of the forms. "Beautiful things are made beautiful by beauty." Everyday objects gain their characteristics by "participating in" the essences. Objects gain relative degrees of a characteristic by participating more or less in the pertinent concept: small, large, hot, cold, even, odd. Opposites never become one another, and objects that participate in these concepts cannot, while participating, become the opposite. Some forms are linked, as, for example, the number "three" and "oddness." This foundation laid, Socrates recurs to the beginning, and asks Cebes to answer as to underlying causes (e.g., of hotness, the cause is not heat, but fire). Socrates asks what makes a body alive. Cebes answers that it is the soul. Death is the opposite of life, and does not admit its opposite. Therefore, the soul is imperishable. When the body dies, the soul leaves unharmed and imperishable. But after death, the souls of the impure are reincarnated. Only the souls of the virtuous live apart from flesh with the gods. The path to this blessed life is complex and winding. One needs divine guidance.

**Geology and Geography of the Earth.** Simmias asks about Socrates' understanding of the earth and our place on it. Socrates answers that the earth is round and unsupported, hanging statically at the center of everything. The earth is large. Reality dwells with the stars. Earthly things are diminished and derivative. In the heavens, there exists an uncorrupted earth that looks like a multi-colored leather ball made of twelve pieces. Beneath the surface, the earth is shot through with tunnels and caverns filled with water, hot and cold, and lava. The largest stream is Oceanus, which circles all the land, and Acheron, which flows the opposite direction. Another is the Stygian river, flowing into lake Styx.

Acheron is a place for purgation of moderately virtuous souls. Tartarus is the place of damnation. Those made virtuous by philosophy (the just, self-restrained, courageous, free, and true) are released from the prison of bodily existence. All of this mythology is not strictly demonstrable, but one may justifiably dare to believe.

**The Execution of Socrates.** Crito asks if Socrates has any instructions about his children or anything else, before he dies. Socrates replies that he has given all necessary instructions. Crito asks how Socrates' body should be buried. Socrates answers that Crito should please himself. Socrates will not be there, so burn or bury. Socrates bathes. He visits with his children and the family women, to whom he gave directions. At sunset, the poison bearer bursts into tears. Crito encourages Socrates to wait to drink the poison. Socrates says he gains nothing by delay. Socrates inquires of the poison-bearer what he is to do. He is instructed to drink the cup down and wait for his legs to grow heavy. The students cry. Socrates chastises them, saying he sent the women away to avoid such a scene. Socrates lies down; his legs get numb. Socrates instructs Crito to sacrifice a cock to Aesculapius, then dies.