

## 24.01 Classics of Western Philosophy

Prof. Rae Langton

### I. Plato

#### Lecture 3. The *Phaedo*

1. *The Recollection Argument*. Cebes notes that more support for the cyclical doctrine comes from ‘the theory that [Socrates is] always putting forward, that *our learning is actually nothing but recollection*’. This section of the dialogue (72e-77d) argues for the theory of Forms, and for the thesis that knowledge of the Forms is recollection. Socrates uses the recollection thesis to support a conclusion about the immortality of the soul.

1. *The Forms*. ‘There is something equal—I don’t mean a log to a log, or a stone to a stone... but some further thing beyond all those, *the equal itself*’ (74a)

(i) *Existence*. We know what it is for two things to *be equal* to one another. What we have knowledge of must exist. Therefore Equality exists.

(ii) *Distinctness from particulars*. Particular things are equal from one point of view, unequal from another. Equality itself cannot be equal from one point of view, unequal from another. Therefore Equality is something other than the particular things. (74c)

(iii) *Distinctness from particulars, again*. Particular things we perceive fall short of Equality. Equality itself cannot fall short of Equality. Therefore Equality is something other than the particular things. (74d,e)

(iii) *Generalization*. What is true of Equality is true of all the Forms. Therefore the Forms exist and are other than particular things.

#### 2. *Knowledge as Recollection*

(i) *Particulars as reminders*. Any process where perceiving one thing makes you think of another thing is a process of recollection. Perceiving a particular makes you think of something other than the particular, namely a Form. Therefore perception of a particular makes you *recollect* a Form (73, 74).

(ii) *Form as standards*. If we see that particular things fall short of Equality, we must have knowledge of Equality prior to that perception: when we compare something to a standard, we must have knowledge of the standard already. We do perceive that particular things fall short of Equality. Therefore we must have knowledge of Equality prior to that perception. Since the argument holds for any arbitrary perception, and perception begins immediately at birth, we must have knowledge of Equality prior to birth. What is true of Equality is true of all the Forms. So we must have knowledge of the Forms before birth. (74,75)

3. *The Recollection Argument for the immortality of the soul.* If we have knowledge of the Forms before birth, then we exist before birth. We do have knowledge of the Forms before birth. Therefore we exist before birth. (76e) Simmias asks: but what about existence *after death*? (77b) Socrates' reply is to combine the Recollection argument with the Cyclical argument of the previous discussion.

4. *The Affinity Argument* (78c-84b). This argument for immortality again depends on further arguments about the forms, this time about their *changelessness*.

*What are the forms like?* They do not change. Equality itself, Beauty itself, do not disappear with the disappearance of equal or beautiful things. But particular things are always changing. Therefore the Forms are not identical with particulars.

*How are the forms known?* What is changeless cannot be perceived by the senses, but only grasped by the mind. Since the Forms are changeless, they can only be grasped by the mind.

Socrates concludes that there must be two kinds of beings, perceptible, changing things, and imperceptible, intelligible unchanging things. (79a) He asks: with which of these two realms does the soul have most affinity? He answers that the soul is more akin to the Forms than to the particulars: the soul is pure, imperceptible, and more successful in its doings when it separates itself from particular perceptible things. If it resembles the Forms in these respects, it (probably?) resembles them in other respects also, e.g. in respect of changelessness. And if the soul is changeless, it is immortal. (80b)

5. *Questions about the Affinity argument.* How convincing is this merely probable argument, based on certain similarities between the soul and the Forms? For there are also some important dissimilarities: e.g. (i) Forms, but not souls, are unaffected by bodies; (ii) the soul is a particular individual, the Forms are universals.

6. *Objections of Simmias and Cebes* (84c-88b)

*Simmias.* Perhaps the soul is to the body as the harmony is to the lyre. A harmony is pure, invisible, and so forth; yet it does not survive the destruction of the lyre. If we apply Socrates' argument about the soul to the harmony of a lyre, we would get the conclusion that the harmony exists independently of the strings: which is absurd.

*Cebes.* Socrates' arguments may show that the soul pre-exists; but not that it survives death. Even if it survives death, being stronger and more lasting than the body, perhaps it does not survive *every* death. Perhaps the soul is to the body as the weaver is to the cloak. The weaver wears out many cloaks in one lifetime—but the last cloak survives the weaver. So too the fact that the soul is more lasting than a particular body does not prove that the soul outlasts every body.

*Reading for next time: 84c-end of Phaedo.*