

Plato's Phaedo Study Guide

Plato's Phaedo by Plato

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Plot Summary

The *Phaedo* is one of the great works of philosophy, written by the ancient Greek philosopher Plato about the last days of his teacher, the historical figure Socrates. The *Phaedo* is a Socratic dialogue, which is a particular sub-genre of philosophical literature in which Plato uses Socrates's discussions with various citizens of Athens to inquire into various philosophical issues. The Socratic dialogues are among the first known works of philosophy and more or less inaugurated the entire practice of philosophy that continues to this day.

Little is known about Socrates. He is thought to have lived between 469 and 399 B.C. He was an Athenian citizen who spent his days wandering Athens and questioning its important citizens on philosophical issues. All of what is known about Socrates is second-hand and most of it is disputed, but his famous trial and death, caused by the accusation of the Athenians that his philosophical practices corrupted the youth, is perhaps the "creation story" of philosophy.

Socrates lived the paradigmatic philosophical life and in legend is thought to have cared for nothing but discovering the philosophical truth. He had many followers, some of whom went on to be some of history's great philosophers. The difficulty with the history of Socrates, however, is that Plato and those others who wrote about him sometimes used his character to elaborate on their own philosophy.

Some Socratic dialogues are thought to be more or less accurate representations of real discussions, but others clearly are not. In the *Phaedo*, for instance, Plato sends an explicit message through his character *Phaedo* that he, Plato, was not present for the events which took place. Thus, the dialogue is more clearly one of those used to express its author's point of view. In fact, this is reasonably clear given that the *Phaedo* is one of the quintessential expressions of Plato's philosophy.

Plato (429-347 B.C.) was perhaps Socrates's greatest student. He is one of Western civilization's great writers and is perhaps the most influential author in philosophical history. He was an Athenian citizen of high status and raises some of the most profound philosophical questions of anyone. Plato's philosophy is characterized by several distinct doctrines, many of which come through in the *Phaedo*; the *Phaedo* is more or less one of Plato's philosophical manifestos.

The *Phaedo* itself takes place after the arrest and trial of Socrates. Socrates is in prison and has been sentenced to death. He has already refused to escape in the Socratic dialogue, the *Crito*, and is waiting to drink poison. In a last visit with his friends and followers, he discusses with them the nature of the soul and whether it can survive death. Socrates gives an extended argument that the soul is immortal and is improved when it leaves the body. He then outlines his understanding of the structure of the world and the afterlife. At the end of the dialogue, Socrates drinks the poison and dies.



The dialogue as a whole takes place as a conversation between Phaedo, one of Socrates's followers, and Echecrates, another of his followers that was not present. However, Phaedo relates the events as primarily a conversation between Socrates and his followers Cebes and Simmias.



57a - 62c

57a - 62c Summary and Analysis

The Phaedo is the Socratic Dialogue which proceeds Socrates's death. The dialogue is admittedly fictional, and in the dialogue Socrates expresses the ideas of his student, Plato. Phaedo states explicitly that Plato was "ill" the day Socrates died. The dialogue concerns the nature of death, the immortality of the soul and the notion of Platonic forms.

The Phaedo opens with a discussion between Phaedo and Echechrates. Echechrates asks Phaedo if he was with Socrates when he drank the hemlock and Phaedo claims that he was. They note that stories of the pre-trial and the trial are already known. Socrates had been held in jail some time before his execution due to a religious ceremony.

A good many of Socrates's friends were present when he died. Phaedo will attempt to recount the entire story. He says the experience was "astonishing." He felt no pity, for Socrates appeared happy and he died without fear. Socrates appeared to leave the earth as he lived his life, with the blessings of the gods. Plato was not present, but the following friends of Socrates were: Apollodorus, Critobulus and his father, Crito, Hermogenes, Epigenes, Aeschines, Antisthenes, Ctesippus of Paeania, Menexenus and others. Some strangers were present as well.

On the previous days, Phaedo and the others would visit Socrates in prison and spend most of the day with him. On the day Socrates was to die, Socrates stood before "the Eleven" or the police commissioners of Athens and was told how he would die. When Socrates was at trial, his wife, Xanthippe, was there with their child. She had to be led away due to her grief.

Socrates tells Cebes that he had a dream where he was told to practice and cultivate the arts. In the past, Socrates thought he was already doing this, since he did philosophy and this was the highest form of art. However, before he died, Socrates wondered if he should not write some poetry, so he did, and he wrote in honor of the god of the festival taking place. He tells Cebes to relate his poetry to Evenus and bid him farewell. Evenus is a philosopher and will not take his own life because this is not right.

Cebes asks why it is not right to commit suicide; he is not sure why. Socrates admits that for some in certain circumstances, it is better for them to die than live. For those for whom dying is best, it is wrong for them to die but wait for others to help them. There is an explanation of this; men in prison can be freed but must not run away. The gods are the guardians of men and men are their possessions. Cebes agrees. Socrates notes that Cebes himself would be angry if one of his possessions killed itself without

permission. So it is not unreasonable to not kill oneself before a god gives one reason to do so.



62d - 66a

62d - 66a Summary and Analysis

Socrates maintains that philosophers should be willing and ready to die. However, Cebes replies, a god is a protector of his possessions, so why should not Socrates resent having to die? The wise resent denying. Simmias agrees. Socrates defends him saying that death is not so bad, that he goes to join the company of good men. He insists that his gods are good masters. For some time, Socrates has believed in a good life following this one.

Socrates goes on to maintain that the man who truly spends life doing philosophy is correct to happily face death because death will bring him to great blessing. He wants others to realize that the one goal of the philosopher is to practice for death and dying. Philosophers should therefore not resent death.

After a few further comments, Socrates asks Simmias whether he believes in death and if it is anything more than the separation of body and soul. Simmias believes in death and agrees with Socrates's definition. Socrates goes to lead Simmias to admit that the pleasures of food, drink and sex are not the great goods of life, along with other purely bodily goods. Instead, a man should be more concerned with the state of his soul. The philosopher in particular separates the body from the soul. The masses think that those who take little pleasure in the body do not deserve to live.

Then Socrates wonders about acquiring knowledge. The body might be an obstacle to knowledge; the senses, for instance, often yield faulty conclusions. When we examine things by the body, we are deceived. Reality is clearest to the soul in the process of reasoning. The soul reasons best without the senses, as well. The philosopher most hates the body and wants to be by himself.

Socrates then asks whether the idea of the Just, the Beautiful and the Good exists, but Simmias admits he has never seen any of these things with his eyes. You cannot grasp them with your bodily senses. These ideas or Forms must be grasped by the soul alone without the senses.



66b - 72e

66b - 72e Summary and Analysis

Socrates believes that something in existence will lead us away from the confusion of the senses. However, as long as the body and soul are fused, we cannot attain our ultimate desire, the truth. The body keeps men busy and distracted from contemplation. No thought comes from the body and only the body causes war, discord, and desire for wealth, for example. The body enslaves.

If we want pure knowledge, we have to escape the body and see things in themselves with the soul along. So when we die, we might get what we truly want: wisdom which cannot be achieved through the knowledge of the body. Either we can never have knowledge or we can only do so after death. The soul is by itself without the body and so when we dissociate we will be closest to knowledge and prevent being contaminated. Those who love learning must therefore practice philosophy and thereby practice dying.

Socrates has hope that he is going where he can acquire what he has been preoccupied with for his whole life. He is prepared and purified. Purification consists in the soul being alone. Freedom in this case is death and so a philosopher should not fear death because only death can give him what he wants.

Many are ready to go to the underworld when their loved ones die, hoping to see those they lost and be with them. As such, one who loves wisdom will desire to be where true wisdom is. Thus, anyone who fears death loves the body more than wisdom.

Socrates then notes that courage and moderation are parts of the love of wisdom; but courage and moderation are strange in others because they see death is evil. However, the brave face death when they fear greater evils. Fear and terror make men brave besides philosophers. However, one should not be brave through fear. The moderate among the masses are also moderate out of fear. They do not want to lose what they have.

Socrates argues that the only way to truly achieve virtue is not fear but wisdom. Only in this way can we have genuine courage, moderation, justice and true virtue generally. Without wisdom, there is no virtue. This is Socrates's defense that he is right to die without resentment or complaint and hopes and expects to find good masters and friends.

With this, Cebes intervenes, disagreeing with Socrates about the soul. Many think that when the soul leaves the body it is destroyed. Socrates would be right only if the soul survives death. Socrates replies by asking whether the souls of the dead exist in the underworld. Some believe that they exist there and are reincarnated, but if this theory is rejected a new theory will be needed.



Next Socrates begins to argue that smaller things must come to be from something larger that became smaller. Weaker things come from stronger things as well, as swift things come from slower things. The worst things must come from the better and the unjust comes from the just. Thus, all things come to be as opposites from opposites.

However, these opposites contain processes between each pair of them. The first process goes from the first to the second, the second process from the second to the first. In other words, the two opposites bear two relations to one another. Between the larger and the smaller exist the relations of increase and decrease. Other examples include separation and combination and cooling and heating. Death is the opposite of living, accordingly. So there are two opposites and two processes between them. Living things become dead and dead things generate the living. Living things come from the dead.

Now if living things come from dead things, then it seems likely that prior to birth our souls exist in the underworld. But the opposite seems to hold as well. The soul follows death. This is because living things again come to be from dead things. So it seems the soul stays alive.

Next Socrates argues that if the two processes of becoming, the two opposing processes, did not balance each other they would force everything into the same state and cease to become. If sleep only followed being awake and not the other way around, no sleeping thing would ever wake up. Thus, if every living thing only dies, then everything would be absorbed by death and so it seems that coming to life again exists and living comes to be from the dead and so the souls of the dead exist.



73a - 81a

73a - 81a Summary and Analysis

Cebes agrees with the argument that the souls of the dead exist but Cebes rejoins that Socrates teaches that learning is mere recollection. In this view, we must have once learned what we now recollect, meaning that our souls had to preexist our bodies. So the soul appears immortal. Simmias wants to know the arguments for this.

Cebes argues that when men are questioned in the right way, they give the right answer by themselves; they could not do this without innate knowledge. If you show them a diagram, it will become clear. Socrates then claims this shows that knowledge is recollection.

However, Simmias is not satisfied with this and wants to review the argument himself. The argument is repeated that when we see something we have not thought of in some time, we recollect it. Socrates then gives examples. Recollection is produced by similarities. When recollection is caused by similar things, we must experience the similarity.

Socrates then argues that we can often identify when things are equal, such as two sticks or two stones. In these cases, we are acquainted with a Form or an abstract relation, the Equal. The Equal is the abstract fact about the world that makes it true that two sticks are two tokens of the same type. Thus, for it to be true that two things are the same, Equality the Form must exist.

Sometimes, however, equal sticks and stones appear to be unequal. However, the Equal itself is never Unequal. When we understand the form of Equality, we never see it is partly Unequal. However, we can only compare partly equal things by reference to knowledge of a perfect form, thus when we see two objects that are related by not identical, we compare them according to their departure from the form of Equality.

The problem, though, is that everything perceived by the senses is imperfectly equal to other things and so we must already have knowledge of the Equal prior to experience. So our knowledge of Equality cannot come from the present life. We must have recollected it from a period of existence without the body. This will be true of all Forms, the Greater, the Smaller, the Beautiful, the Good, the Justice, and the Pious. All knowledge therefore must be recollected from the period of bodilessness. We lose knowledge at birth and must recover it gradually. Simmias agrees.

However, it can only be true that we learned of the Forms in the soulless state if our souls preexisted our births and had intelligence before this as well. So it seems that the soul could exist after the body as well. However, Cebes challenges this next move: why does the soul's preexisting the body entail it surviving death? Further argument is needed.



After a bit of good fun at Cebes's expense, Socrates asks Cebes what sorts of things can be scattered or divided. Anything that is composite by nature can be split into component parts. Simple, noncomposite things cannot be split. Those that stay the same seem most likely to be simple. Now it appears that the Equal itself, and the other Forms never change; they are uniform. Cebes agrees. However, beautiful particulars, say, the beautiful things, the things that "participate" in the Form, they often change. They are never in the same state. Only particulars can be perceived by the senses.

So things exist in two ways: visibly and invisibly. The invisible is always the same, but not the visible. We have two parts of our body, body and soul. The body is always changing, and is visible. However, the soul is invisible and so it seems like the soul is more like the invisible Forms. The soul uses the body to learn, but it can be confused by the body. Yet when the soul thinks of itself, it is never confused. The soul seems like a noncomposite, unchanging thing. When the soul and body are together, the divine thing, the soul, can rule or fail to rule the body, the earthly thing. The soul seems more like the divine. It does not die. Therefore, it seems that only the body can die and never the soul.

The soul must therefore spend the rest of the time with the gods.



81b - 88b

81b - 88b Summary and Analysis

However, perhaps the soul will be impure when it leaves the body, by being associated with it. How could it escape? The bodily element will be heavy but such souls wander the world. These are the souls of inferior men, however, and pay the penalty for poor upbringings. They may be born again because of their attachment to the body. For instance, gluttons may return as donkeys. Destination will be determined by earthly behavior. Those who practice moderation will be happy and perhaps join a "gentle group" of ants. No one can join the gods if they have not practiced philosophy and leave this life pure.

The philosopher should avoid bodily passions and master them. Only in this way can he have wisdom and go to heaven. Lovers of learning know that philosophy will reveal to the individual its imprisonment in the body and its ignorance. Desires are traps. So philosophy tells men to withdraw from the senses. Genuine lovers of learning must become moderate in their desires and also brave. Philosophy will free the soul but it can only do so when surrenders itself to passion from time to time and is not dominated by emotion.

Socrates finishes speaking and concentrates on what he said. He then asks Simmias and Cebes if they reject his arguments. They say that they wish to question him further. He happily allows this. Simmias thinks that precise knowledge about the next life is very difficult. So one should simply try to learn that truth for oneself and adopt the best of men's theories, which is better than divine doctrine.

Simmias wishes to respond to Socrates's point about the visible and the invisible. Harmony is invisible, beautiful and divine, but if the lyre is broken, harmony no longer exists. So maybe the soul is of this kind, an invisible thing that ceases to exist without the bodily thing that produces it. Socrates acknowledges the point. Cebes then presents his objection; he acknowledges that the soul preexists the body but he is still unconvinced by Socrates's argument that the soul survives death.

Socrates responds to Simmias's objection by arguing that harmony is weaker than the lyre, but since the soul operates the body, it is stronger, and so is unlike harmony. Harmony is too short-lived to be like the soul. The soul has a strong nature and can survive many bodies. Further, the soul is not damaged by birth.



88c - 95a

88c - 95a Summary and Analysis

Phaedo and Echechrates begin reflecting on the conversation, noting that Phaedo and some others were disappointed by Socrates's arguments. On the one hand, both Phaedo and Echechrates want more argument on the soul surviving the death of the body. Phaedo mentions that Socrates was aware of the need for further argument. So he continues the story.

Socrates maintains that there is no greater evil than hating reasonable discourse. So he must address the worries of Simmias and Cebes. He maintains that just because argument is difficult, one must not come to hate argument. He also notes that he is mostly concerned with convincing himself, since believing that one survives death is a good thing to believe before one dies.

The argument continues. First, Socrates asks Cebes and Simmias how their views evolved after the last argument. Simmias has abandoned the harp/harmony analogy, now admitting that the soul is not necessarily composite. Socrates points out that when Simmias conceded that the soul preexists the body, it must have been simple and noncomposite at that time. Thus, Socrates's first counterargument is that it is inconsistent to believe both that the soul is noncomposite before birth and composite after death.

Further, Socrates argues that a harmony is directed by the lyre, but the soul directs the body and not the other way around. Harmonies are moved; they are not movers. However, the soul, the fullest soul, is a mover. Next, Socrates argues that the good soul is harmonized, and if it is, it cannot be made of parts, for a harmony cannot contain a harmony within it. Otherwise, it would fail to be harmonious! Socrates points out that while all souls are not fully harmonized, to be souls they must be harmonized to some extent. Virtue is harmony and so no soul has disharmony in itself. The souls of all living things are equally good, Socrates concludes.

The soul rules the man, especially if he is wise. It rules by opposing the affections of the body. However, if the soul were a harmony, like that of the lyre, it would not be out of tune with the body. So it seems to not be a harmony, not run by the body. Therefore it seems wrong to say that the soul is a harmony.



95b - 107b

95b - 107b Summary and Analysis

Cebes is impressed with Socrates's response. However, he is worried that Socrates has only shown that the soul existed a long time before the body and will exist a long time afterward. Therefore, why think it is immortal? Socrates responds by thinking over natural science, and looking into the causes of things, why they came to be and perished. However, he realizes he has little ability in the area and becomes blind to things he thought he knew before. He now thinks he is far from knowing the cause of things.

Instead, Socrates tries to uncover causes through his own method. He mentions that Anaxagoras taught that "Mind" directs and causes everything. It seemed right to Socrates at the time. So Socrates decided to learn from him. However, he was quickly disappointed when he saw that Anaxagoras made no use of Mind or gave it responsibility for managing things. Instead, he appealed to other, more local causes. Socrates still remains mystified.

Socrates worries that he will harm his senses if he thinks about empirical causes much further and decides to consider matters through his soul alone and think on the meanings of words. Socrates turns to discuss the forms again, the "Formal" causes of things. The Beautiful is the Form that makes the beautiful things in the world beautiful. It is the abstract object that makes it true to say of each beautiful thing that it is beautiful. So Socrates maintains that everything beautiful is beautiful by means of the Beautiful. Socrates ignores other explanations of beauty. He thinks that he can avoid error if he sticks to these sorts of causes.

Socrates then extends his argument to other Forms, such as that it is through Bigness that big things are big and Smallness that they are small. To Socrates, it seems that other, more proximate causes are confusing; instead, a man is made taller than another, ultimately, by participating in the form of Tallness.

At this point, Echeocrates interrupts Phaedo's story and notes that Socrates argument seems good. Phaedo notes that all those present thought the same. Then Phaedo returns to the story.

Socrates notes that Simmias is taller than Socrates but shorter than Phaedo and so seems to participate in Tallness and Shortness at the same time. However, what is clear is that Tallness cannot participate in Shortness or vice versa. The Forms are whole and pure. The Tall cannot be short. So it seems now that the opposite Forms cannot come to be from one another. Cebes seems to agree.

Socrates follows this by arguing that snow is associated with cold and fire with hot. The snow will cease to exist in the face of heat. Fire ceases to exist in the face of cold. The



Form itself deserves its own name, but the particulars can cease to have the properties they have, such as that snow ceases to be but not the Snow. Socrates then makes the same point about numbers. Again, opposites do not admit of each other. Further, even non-opposite forms do not admit of each other—twoness cannot participate in threeness.

Socrates concludes from this that the ultimate form of explanation in the changes of things is their participation in different Forms. He then argues that the soul is what makes the body living and in fact the soul brings to life whatever it occupies. Building on the last section, the soul becomes a principle of life and it also therefore cannot admit of its opposite, death. Since Forms cannot admit of opposites and since souls are like souls, the soul, essentially a living thing, cannot admit of death. For this reason, the soul is immortal. So when the body dies, the soul survives. Cebes then concedes. Simmias does so as well, but he admits some misgivings. Socrates decides to say something further.



107c - 115e

107c - 115e Summary and Analysis

If the soul is immortal, Socrates argues, we must care for it not only for this life, but for all time. Death does not escape everything, for it would otherwise benefit the wicked. The soul has nothing but education and upbringing when it leaves the body. Socrates reminds his friends that the guardian spirit of each man, when he dies, guides him to his next station. However, they must first be judged. Then they are led back to earth by another guide. Socrates supposes that there are many paths to Hades and back.

Well-ordered souls follow the guide and are somewhat familiar with his attachments, but the soul attached to the body hovers around the visible world and struggles. Some souls wander alone but the good soul with a pure life finds travelers and gods to aid them.

Simmius then asks Socrates to defend these beliefs, but Socrates says he is not sure that he could and that in any event he does not have time. Instead, he only describes his view of the earth's shape. He thinks it is a sphere in the middle of the heavens; it has no need of air to prevent it from falling. It is instead balanced in the middle of a homogenous substance.

The earth is quite large and the Greeks live in a sea in a small portion of it. It is pure and lies in the sky where the stars are. The people of earth dwell in the hollows of the earth, living deeply below the earth's surface, but are in fact somewhere in the middle. The heavens are really just the air of the earth. The things below the world in the oceans are inferior to the things of the land and so Socrates expects that the beings in the heavens are superior still to humans. Socrates then engages in some further descriptions and spends some time describing the various concentric spheres or "hollows" of the earth. He describes chasms, rivers, and the four major rivers of the world, Oceanus, Acheron, Pyriphlegethon and Cocytus.

When the dead arrive at the places led by their guardians, they are judged as to whether they led a good and pious life. Those living an average life go to Acheron and leave on vessels to the lake where the rivers meet. They dwell there and are purified by penalties for wrongdoing and are rewarded for their good deeds. Some are thought incurable; they are hurled into Tartarus and never emerge from it. However, those committing great and curable crimes and who feel remorse are thrown into the Tartarus but emerge as current throws them off.

Those who live very pious lives are freed and released from the earth as a prison. They travel to a pure dwelling place and live on the earth's surface. If they have purified themselves with philosophy, they have no body at all and live in dwelling places that are hard to describe. For this reason, one must make every effort to have virtue and wisdom for the reward is beautiful.



Socrates knows that no sensible man would insist that things are just as he has described them, but he thinks it is fit to risk the belief, because it is noble. The soul is immortal so the man should repeat this to himself like an incantation. The man should be of good cheer, for if he has ignored the pleasures of the body and the like as of little concern but learns and adorns the soul with moderation, righteousness, course, freedom, and truth, then a good fortune awaits him.



115a - 118a

115a - 118a Summary and Analysis

Socrates notes that Simmias and Cebes will live to see another day, but Socrates begins his journey this day. Crito then speaks and asks for instructions about his children or other things. Socrates has no new instructions. He merely wants his friends to take good care of themselves in everything. If not, then they will achieve nothing.

Crito asks how they should bury him, but Socrates says that they should bury him as they like. For Socrates is identical with his soul, not his body. The state of his body after death does not matter to him. He wants his friends to pledge that he will not stay when he dies but he shall go away.

After this, Socrates gets up and goes to take a bath. Phaedo and the others sit and talk to themselves. They feel like they have lost a father. After his bath, Socrates's children come to him and the women of his household. He speaks to them and gives instructions. The women and children are sent away. The sun is setting. Socrates talks for a short while until an officer of the Eleven comes. He is kind to Socrates because he finds him the noblest, gentlest and best man who has ever come to the prison.

Socrates bids the officer farewell and is happy with how pleasant the guard is. He then sends Crito for the poison. Crito then sends his slave and the slave returns with the poison in the cup. Socrates must drink it and walk around until his legs feel heavy and then lie down. Socrates carefully takes the cup and prays to the gods that his journey will be fortunate.

Socrates then drinks the cup and drains it calmly. His friends then break down into tears. Crito cannot restrain himself and gets up. Socrates sends the women away to avoid this "unseemliness." He wants to die in good omened silence. The men then controlled their tears and Socrates walk until his legs are heavy. He then lies on his back and his body begins to paralyze from the feet up. Socrates's last words are "Crito, we owe a cock to Asclepius; make this offering to him and do not forget." Crito says it shall be done. Then Socrates dies and Crito closes his mouth and eyes.

Phaedo ends noting that this "was the end of our comrade, Echecrates, a man who, we would say, was of all those we have known the best, and also the wisest and the most upright."



Characters

Socrates

Little is known about Socrates's real life and beliefs. In the *Phaedo*, he appears to function as Plato's mouthpiece, articulating his views about the soul, physical reality, death and so on. The *Phaedo* finds Socrates in prison, awaiting his death by drinking poison. His friends and family come to visit him for the last time but a philosophical conversation breaks out between him and his friends over the philosophical issues raised by his death. Socrates is not afraid to die but he is not completely convinced of the arguments he has used to show that he will survive death and have a happy afterlife.

Socrates's friends are worried about his fate, particularly his friends Cebes and Simmias. They fear for his death and wonder whether the soul can survive death. Socrates reports that he is convinced that it does but Cebes and Simmias want to hear his arguments. The *Phaedo* is almost entirely a discussion of these arguments and takes place in three stages.

The first argument is that the soul must pre-exist the body. The person seems to know many things that she could not have possibly learned from experience about the nature of the Forms and so knowledge appears to be a form of recollection but of facts that could not be learned with the body. So the soul must pre-exist the body to have learned these facts. Next, Socrates argues that the soul must survive death because it is not composite, or not made of parts; he then uses his view of the soul as non-composite to argue that it is indestructible.

After these arguments, Socrates recounts his view of the afterlife, drinks the poison, and dies.

Plato

Plato was Socrates's greatest student and one of Athens's most important citizens. It is widely held by historians and classicists that Socrates was a real person and that Plato was his student. However, Socrates and Plato had different views on many matters and in many cases it is not entirely clear what Socrates's position was. This is for two reasons. First, Socrates often seems to change his positions and at other times maintains that he has no true positions and only defends views for the sake of argument.

The second reason is that not all Socratic dialogues are true representations of genuine events. In some cases, Plato uses Socratic dialogues to express his own views through Socrates's arguments. The *Phaedo* is one such dialogue. The central philosophical idea of the *Phaedo* is the notion of the Forms. A Form is an abstract object that is, to put it not entirely accurately, like an extant type of which particular, material world objects are



tokens. For instance, the Form of the Beautiful exists and particular objects "participate" in the form if and when they are beautiful.

Particular things have no properties of their own independent of the Forms. The Forms are not mere ideas in the minds of persons but exist independently of the mind. They are not exactly types, but more like Ideals, which specify the ways in which particular objects express their being.

Socrates makes great use of the idea of the Forms in his arguments about the soul. In various cases, he draws analogies between the nature of the Forms and the nature of the soul, arguing that since Forms are pure and indestructible that the soul must be as well. However, it is quite clear that the doctrine of the Forms is Plato's idea and not Socrates's. In fact, philosophers often call the Forms "Platonic Forms" for this very reason.

Phaedo

Socrates's friend who is present at Socrates's death, who recounts the story of his death to Echeocrates and for whom the dialogue is named.

Echecrates

Phaedo's conversation partner to whom he tells the story of Socrates's last hours.

Simmias

One of Socrates's main interlocutors who doubts Socrates's arguments for the immortality of the soul.

Cebes

Socrates's other interlocutor; he also doubts Socrates's arguments for the immortality of the soul.

Socrates's Followers

Socrates has many friends and followers, many of whom who are present at his death.

The Gods

Socrates believes that the gods and guardian spirits lead departed souls to the realms appropriate to their moral deeds.



The Philosopher

The philosopher is the only man whose soul can travel beyond the surface of the earth.

The Soul

Each person is a soul inhabiting a body, and when she dies the soul is free in the underworld.

Socrates's Family

Socrates's family is present in the Phaedo but play a minor role. They are not present at his death.

The Guard of the Eleven

The prison guard from the Athenian criminal court who must make Socrates drink the poison, but he refrains out of profound respect for Socrates.



Objects/Places

Ancient Athens

The Socratic dialogues take place in Athens, as does the Phaedo.

Socrates's prison cell

Socrates is in prison on the charge of corrupting the youth and it is there that he will die.

The Earth

Socrates believes that the earth is a series of spheres embedded within one another. The lower spheres contain the underworld and the true surface of the earth is above, and is where the great souls and gods live.

The Underworld

The underworld exists below the present one and contains departed souls that will usually be reincarnated after some time.

The Surface of the Earth

The surface of the earth is basically heaven, where the great souls of good men and philosophers live, never having to be reincarnated.

The Soul

Each person is identical with a soul and operates through the body, which is inferior to it in various respects.

The Body

The body is the tool of the soul to which it is bound in life; the body dies at death.

The Forms

The forms are abstract objects, or ideals in which particular, material objects "participate" in order to have the properties that they have. For instance, all beautiful things participate in the ideal Form, the Beautiful. Only the forms are perfect exemplars



of themselves, and so nothing is perfectly beautiful but the form of the beautiful. Socrates employs the doctrine of the forms in his argument. In all likelihood, Plato employs the doctrine of the forms himself, as it is his doctrine, not Socrates. It is only the Socrates of the Phaedo who defends the existence of the forms.

Particulars

The real-world material objects that gain their properties from "participating" in the Forms.

Virtue

Men with virtue contain virtue in their souls and this virtue determines where they go in the afterlife.

Philosophy

Philosophy is the noblest human activity because it focuses on the highest and more extant objects, the Forms. Good and wise philosophers go to heaven.

Argument

Socrates thinks there is no greater tragedy than when a man becomes skeptical of argument itself just because argument is difficult.

The Poison

The poison in the work is a drink that Socrates must imbibe as his sentence. It is also called Hemlock.



Themes

The Nature of the Soul

The *Phaedo* concerns the last hours of Socrates. He has been sentenced to death by an Athenian court and must drink poison within hours of the conversation that takes place between him and Simmias and Cebes. Naturally, Socrates is interested in the question of what will happen after his death. Simmias, Cebes and Socrates's other friends are as well.

Socrates seems totally calm but he admits in the dialogue that it would be good for him to face death believing not only that his soul will survive death but that it will be well and happy. As a result, the *Phaedo* concerns what the soul is, whether it survives death and whether it is immortal.

Socrates defends an answer, characteristic of the author, Plato. He argues first that the truest knowledge is not of particular objects in the world known through the senses but the objects considered by reason itself, the ideals in which the particular objects of the sensible world participate. The Forms are immortal, indivisible and perfect. Socrates then spends much of the *Phaedo* arguing that the soul is like the Forms and so is also indestructible and immortal.

However, the soul not merely survives death, but it is assigned a guardian spirit which shepherds it to that part of the underworld appropriate to its level of virtue. Some, the good and the wise, are able to travel beyond the underworld to the surface of the earth, and Socrates hopes to go there.

The Philosophical Life

Socrates is thought to be the founder of philosophy as a discipline. He was completely devoted to the philosophical life, often spending days in the streets, simply talking with people in the city about philosophical topics. In fact, in another dialogue, Socrates reports that he encountered the Oracle at Delphi who told him that he was the wisest of men and he sought out the wisest in the world, seeing if anyone knew more than he did. In still another dialogue, Socrates claims that a god spoke to him, encouraging him to practice philosophy and pursue the truth.

In the *Phaedo*, Socrates explains that a life pursuing philosophical knowledge is the noblest of all pursuits. In fact, he claims that philosophers are among the only people that get to travel to the surface of the earth and contact ideas directly along with the gods. Thus, the philosophical life is a major theme of the *Phaedo* because Socrates believes that it is the path to true righteousness, wisdom and knowledge.

Socrates argues that a philosopher should never fear death because he is engaged in the noblest of pursuits and will be rewarded by the gods. What matters most for a good



life is to love ideas in themselves; since the body gets in the way of knowing the truth directly, death is a blessing. The soul will have what it always desired. Thus, the philosophical life is completed and perfected at death.

The Forms

Plato makes it quite clear in *The Phaedo* that he is not writing a dialogue that attempts to record an actual part of Socrates's life. *The Phaedo* reports that Plato was not at Socrates's death which many scholars take to indicate that Plato does not want readers to think that he is actually representing Socrates as he really was. Instead, Plato intends to express his views through Socrates and the dialogue.

Plato is famous for the doctrine expressed in the *Phaedo*, the doctrine of the Forms. The Forms are abstract ideals that are not made of matter. Instead, they are mind-independent yet abstract, non-material entities. The doctrine is hard to understand for the unfamiliar. The Forms are best understood as ideals or measures of perfections of various properties, such as being tall, being beautiful, being wise, and so on.

The only way that any particular objects can have the properties they have is not through themselves as they only imperfectly express these properties. Instead, they "participate" in the Forms which are the perfect ideals of the particular objects that participate in them. The Forms are incredibly important to the argument of the *Phaedo* because the Forms are by nature perfect, indestructible, immaterial and simple. Socrates argues that the soul pre-exists the body, survives death and is immortal, but he only does so by drawing an analogy between the soul and the Forms. As a result, the soul shares in the properties of the Forms.

Style

Perspective

The perspective of the *Phaedo* is three-fold. The explicit perspective in the text is that of *Phaedo*, who tells *Echecrates* about his experience with *Socrates* at his death. Periodically in the dialogue, *Phaedo* and *Echecrates* will summarize what is going on in the story and review the state of the argument. However, this perspective is only *Phaedo's* perspective, which is a proxy for both relating *Socrates's* ideas and expressing *Plato's*.

Socrates's perspective is perhaps the one most directly represented in the text. First, he does most of the talking and expresses his views about the soul, the philosophical life, the Forms, and so on. He expresses concern about the facts about the afterlife and describes in detail his views about the underworld and about how justice is dealt out to souls of varying deeds and degrees of virtue.

However, the primary perspective of the *Phaedo* is the author's, *Plato*, who stands among the greatest philosophers of human history. Through *Socrates's* words he expresses his own doctrines and his own arguments. The primary doctrines *Plato* defends are the immortality of the soul, that the soul is identical with the human person and that the Forms are the truest form of reality and can be known by reason alone in contrast to particulars known through the senses.

The doctrines expressed through *Socrates* are among the most important doctrines expressed in philosophical history. *Aristotle* takes these doctrines as his main foil for his ideas; philosophers for centuries took *Plato's* views as the ones that must be struggled with in order to make progress in philosophy.

Tone

The tone of the Socratic dialogues is complex because the dialogue appears to serve two purposes. The first purpose seems to be to communicate *Plato's* doctrines, such as the doctrine of the Forms; however, the second purpose appears to be to glorify *Socrates* as among the greatest and wisest men in history. As a result, the *Phaedo* reads like a philosophical text, an abstract, albeit well-written discussion of important philosophical questions. However it also has a certain gravity about it, intended to express reverence for a man of seemingly superhuman virtue, intelligence and commitment to his ideals.

First, the tone is abstract because it covers a variety of complex issues. First, the main line of discussion covers the pre-existence of the soul, its survival after death, the perception of knowledge in the body and outside of it, the immortality of the soul, its nature, and the structure of the afterlife.



Cebes and Simmias are focused on examining arguments for survival of death in enough detail so that they can watch Socrates die at peace. Socrates is worried about the arguments because he would like to believe that he will survive death strongly enough to go to his death with peace. For this reason, the three men focus on the details of the argument in detail, which involves complex issues and the detailed doctrine of the Forms.

However, towards the end of the dialogue, Socrates describes his beliefs about the afterlife. Then the prison guard brings the hemlock and Socrates's death draws near. The men begin to cry after Socrates drinks the hemlock and when Socrates dies Phaedo describes him in grand and reverent terms.

Structure

To understand the structure of the Phaedo, one must understand the structure of a Socratic dialogue. Plato first writes these works in dialogue form. The dialogues mostly focus on philosophical issues but they occur in a particular setting under particular circumstances. Plato is a surprisingly lucid writer and is able to make the philosophical issues in question engaging despite their abstract nature and complex matter.

There are many Socratic dialogues but they were not written as novels or even as plays. They do not have chapters and were written in ancient Greek. As a result, Plato scholars have assigned the dialogues sections according to the original pagination and paragraph number. Often Plato's texts are organized in standard, modern forms of literature but the structure of the dialogue is crucial because they are often divided according to different parts of a dialogue and the issues involved.

The Phaedo contains a variety of commentary from translators and authors depending on who has reproduced the text for popular consumption. However, the document itself is not terribly long despite its detailed and dense structure. The structure of dialogue will sometimes appear simple because it is in dialogue form, but this is only possible because the texts have been scrutinized in great detail.

The structure of the Phaedo begins by introducing the setting and the issues as recounted by Phaedo and Echecrates. The conversation then begins about Socrates's fate and the nature of the soul. The argument has three major parts although other matters and discussions are interspersed. It begins with an argument that the soul pre-exists birth, the next that it survives death and finally that the soul is immortal. After these three arguments, Socrates engages in an extended description of his view of the afterlife. At the end, Socrates drinks the hemlock in a touching and profound scene and dies.



Quotes

"Socrates, practice and cultivate the arts." (60e, 53)

"And would you not be angry if one of your possessions killed itself when you had not given any sign that you wished it to die, and if you had any punishment you could inflict, you would inflict it?" (62c, 54)

"I am afraid that other people do not realize that the one aim of those who practice philosophy in the proper manner is to practice for dying and death." (64a, 55)

"It is only those who practice philosophy in the right way, we say, who always most want to free the soul." (67d, 58)

"No one may join the company of the gods who has not practiced philosophy and is not completely pure when he departs from life, no one but the lover of learning." (82c, 72)

"There is no greater evil one can suffer than to hate reasonable discourse." (89d, 77)

"That I am far, by Zeus, from believing that I know the cause of any of those things." (97a, 84)

"Now we say that the opposite itself could never become opposite to itself, neither that in us nor that in nature." (103b, 88)

"Now we say that the opposite itself could never become opposite to itself, neither that in us nor that in nature." (103b, 88)

"Because of the things we have enunciated, Simmias, one must make every effort to share in virtue and wisdom in one's life, for the reward is beautiful and the hope is greater." (144c, 97)

"For know you well, my dear Crito, that to express oneself badly is not only faulty as far as the language goes, but does some harm to the soul." (115e, 98)

"During the time you have been here I have come to know you in other ways as the noblest, gentlest and the best man who has ever come here. So now too I know that you will not make trouble for me; you know who is responsible and you will direct your anger against them. You know what message I bring. Fare you well, and try to endure what you must as easily as possible." (116c, 98)

"Such was the end of our comrade ... a man who, we would say, was of all those we have known the best, and also the wisest and the most upright." (118a, 100)

Topics for Discussion

Why has Socrates been sentenced to death? Why has he accepted his punishment, as related in the Phaedo?

Why does Socrates not fear death?

What is Socrates's argument that the soul preexists the body?

What is Socrates's argument that the soul survives death?

What is Socrates's argument that the soul is immortal?

What are the Forms? What role do they play in Socrates's major arguments?

What is one example of a form? How does Socrates establish their existence? Why are they the most real things that can be known?

What is Socrates's belief about the nature of the earth and the afterlife?