

PHIL 31: Ancient Philosophy

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Handout #6: Flux, Forms, and Immortality in Plato's Phaedo

Though the Phaedo's death scene forges a dramatic connection with early Socratic dialogues such as the Apology and Crito, the Phaedo is quite different from these Socratic dialogues. Unlike the Apology (29a, 37b, 40c), the Phaedo is not metaphysically agnostic; Plato embraces psychophysical dualism and the immortality of the soul. The Phaedo also contains bolder claims to knowledge and theory construction than the Socratic dialogues. And, unlike the Socratic dialogues, the Phaedo denigrates the senses. Finally, the Phaedo is also thought to inaugurate the theory of separated Forms.

FLUX AND FORMS

According to Aristotle, Plato separates the forms, whereas Socrates does not (Metaphysics 987a31-b10, 1078b12-79a4, 1086a30-b7).

Socrates ... was concerned with ethics and not at all with nature as a whole; he was seeking the universal in ethics and was the first to turn his thought to definitions. Plato agreed with Socrates, but because of his Heraclitean views he took these definitions to apply not to perceptible things but to other things; for, he thought, the common formula could not be any of the perceptible things, since they are always changing. Beings of this sort, then, he called Ideas, and he said that these sensible things were separate from them ... [987a31-b9].

Here Aristotle claims that it was the search for definitions and knowledge that led Socrates to forms and that it was Plato's belief in the Heraclitean doctrine of sensible flux that led him to posit separated Forms. According to Aristotle, whereas Plato separated the forms, Socrates did not. (We will return to the issue of separation below.) It is in Plato's Phaedo that we first encounter arguments for forms that appeal to sensible flux. The argument goes something like this (74a9-c5).

1. Sensibles are in flux.
2. What is in flux is unknowable.
3. Hence, there can be no knowledge with sensibles.
4. There is (or can be) knowledge.
5. Hence, there must be nonsensible things -- Forms -- with which one can have knowledge.

But in what way are sensibles in flux? There are really two questions here: **What is flux?** and **What are sensibles?** Flux, here, seems to refer to the compresence of opposites -- sensibles are both F and not-F (74b8-9, 78d10-e4). Sometimes sensibles are understood as sensible particulars. But often Plato seems to have in mind sensible or observable properties. Insofar as he is concerned with sensible properties, Plato seems to mean that the set of things having a sensible property or properties will have both F-members and not-F-members, which implies that the form of F cannot consist in any sensible property or properties (78c10-79a7).

1. The form of F is a property.
2. x is F iff it has this property.
3. If F = G, then all and only G-things must be F-things.
4. For any sensible property G, some G things will be F and some G things will be not-F.
5. Hence, $F \neq G$.
6. Hence, forms are not sensible properties.
7. Forms are necessary for knowledge.
8. Hence, no knowledge with sensibles.

(4) is a generalization of Socratic claims that virtues cannot be defined in behavioral terms -- e.g. courage cannot be defined as standing firm in battle (La 192-) and justice cannot consist simply in paying one's debts (Rep 331cd) -- because these observable behaviors are sometimes virtuous and sometimes not. Nor is beauty being brightly colored (Ph 100c9-d3); a brightly colored Monet may be beautiful but a garish, crushed velvet Elvis portrait will not be beautiful. Largeness is not being so many inches tall (even if this makes Speedy Gonzales a tall mouse), because being that tall does not make everything large (a giraffe that tall would not be large) (Ph 96de, 100e5-101b2; cf. 74b8-9, 78d10-e4).

Plato's main claim is that sensible properties contain both F and not-F instances. In general, there is no reason to think that he believes that sensible particulars are both F and not-F. Presumably, particular actions are not both just and unjust. It's rather that in some cases returning what is owed is just, and in other cases it is not. However, in cases involving relational properties Plato does think that sensible particulars can have contradictory properties. Simmias is both tall (compared to Socrates) and short or not-tall (compared to Phaedo) (102b-d). And Helen is both beautiful (compared with mortals) and ugly or not-beautiful (compared with gods) (Hippias Major 289a-e).

SEPARATION

We saw that Aristotle says that Plato separates the forms, whereas Socrates does not (Meta 987a31-b10, 1078b12-79a4, 1086a30-b7). To understand and assess this claim we need to fix ideas. Following Gail Fine, we might understand separation as the capacity for independent existence.

- **Separation:** Forms are ontologically separate from sensible particulars iff the former can exist independently of the latter.

So understood, separation involves a kind of realism about universal or forms -- they can exist uninstantiated. In assessing Aristotle's testimony, we must ask two questions: Does Plato separate the forms? Does Socrates not separate the forms? There is room to doubt Aristotle's testimony on both scores.

DOES PLATO SEPARATE THE FORMS?

Interestingly, Plato does not apply the Greek term for separation -- "choris" or its cognates -- to forms in the middle period dialogues such as the Phaedo or Republic. Of course, it still might be true that he commits himself to separating the forms. Does he?

The Flux argument requires that we distinguish forms and sensible properties -- it is a contrast between two different sort of properties or universal. That does not imply anything

about the relation between forms (nonsensible properties) and sensible particulars. A fortiori, the Flux argument does not entail that forms could exist independently of sensible particulars.

The One over Many Assumption requires only that there be a form of F of which the many F-things partake. This doesn't require that F be able to exist independently of the many F-things.

In the Republic Plato suggests that forms are paradigms or ideals. Plato may believe, like Aristotle, that natural kinds (e.g. species) are eternal and immutable, so that there have always been instances of these kinds and forms. However, presumably he does not think that artifacts have always existed. He recognizes forms for artifacts, such as beds (596b). If a craftsman fashions the first artifact of a given kind by articulating and following a paradigm, then the form of F can predate the first F-thing. However, it may not be clear if the blueprint for an artifact constitutes its form.

DOES SOCRATES SEPARATE THE FORMS?

Some have been willing to question the reliability of Aristotle's testimony about whether Plato did in fact separate the forms. However, few seem to question Aristotle's testimony about Socrates. But that too deserves scrutiny.

It would be enough to show that Socrates was not agnostic about separation if we could show that he is committed to **separability** – the possibility of separate existence. Nonetheless, there is an interesting argument that Socrates thought the forms of the virtues are **separate**, and not just separable.

1. There are forms for the virtues.
2. Knowledge is necessary for virtue.
3. Knowledge requires the ability to articulate definitions of the virtues that meet Socratic constraints on definition (e.g. unity assumption, decision procedure requirement, measuring procedures, and explanatory requirement).
4. No one (yet) has articulated such definitions.
5. Hence, no one (yet) has the requisite knowledge.
6. Hence, no one (yet) is virtuous.
7. Hence, there are uninstantiated forms.

The conclusion of this argument is not that virtue is impossible, but that no one is in fact virtuous. This line of argument can be reinforced by the following argument.

1. There are forms for the virtues.
2. Knowledge is necessary for virtue.
3. As the Oracle says, Socrates is wisest of all.
4. As Socrates insists, he lacks the requisite knowledge.
5. Hence, no one has the requisite knowledge.
6. Hence, no one is virtuous.
7. Hence, there are uninstantiated forms.

It might be replied that even if Socrates is committed to believing that no one is virtuous, he must still believe that there are virtuous (and vicious) actions. But if there are virtuous actions, then the virtues are not uninstantiated even if there are no virtuous people.

But this reply assumes that there can be virtuous actions if there are no virtuous persons. But this assumption is suspect. Socrates can and should distinguish between actions that **conform** to virtue and those that **express** virtue. Genuinely virtuous actions must not merely conform to the requirements but must express a virtuous character. If so, we should not allow that there are virtuous actions if we concede that there are no virtuous people.

IMMORTALITY

The Phaedo accepts psychophysical dualism and the immortality of the soul. One of Plato's arguments for these conclusions is the theory of Recollection from the Meno, though it is not defended at as great a length nor explicitly connected with the paradox of inquiry, as it was in the Meno (Ph 72e3-77a5). Recollection is conceded by Simmias and Cebes, but Cebes wants to be shown that the soul will persist after death as well as before birth (77c1-5). Socrates has two replies.

First, Socrates reminds him of the argument from coming to be: things come to be only from their opposites (70d7-). Just as death must come to be from living, so too living must come to be from death. We know by this principle that x's life came to be out of death or non life, and Recollection implies that this death or non life came to be out of a previous life. Thus, Socrates concludes, we're justified in believing in a kind of "eternal recurrence" (77c7-d5).

1. All things come to be from their opposites.
2. Hence, death comes to be from life.
3. Hence, life comes from death, which comes from a previous life, which comes from death, etc.
4. Hence, there is an eternal recurrence that implies my persistence.

The argument here seems to trade on an equivocation between **contraries** and **contradictories**. Something F necessarily comes to be from its contradictory not-F, but not necessarily from its contrary or opposite. Death comes from life, and life comes from non-life, but not necessarily from death; non-life, in contrast to death, does not presuppose previous existence or life. If the principle of opposites is formulated in terms of contradictories, not contraries, then it is plausible but does not support (3). If it is formulated in terms of contraries or opposites, then it licenses (3), but it is dubious.

Second, Socrates recognizes that this argument may not satisfy (though he doesn't indicate why) and offers another argument (78b4-).

1. What is composite is likely to decompose (78c1-3).
2. What is noncomposite is less likely to decompose (78c3-4).
3. Because sensibles are in flux, they are more composite than forms that are not sensible and not in flux (78c6-79a11).
4. The body is sensible; the soul is not, but is akin to the forms that it studies (79b1-e5).
5. Hence, the body will decompose (80b9-10).
6. Hence, the soul will be immortal (80b9-10).

There are a number of possible worries about this argument. At best, it would seem to justify only the comparative conclusion that the soul is more likely to be immortal than the body, not the noncomparative conclusion that the soul is immortal. Even if noncomposite things are less

easily destructible than composite things, perhaps noncomposite things can be destroyed. Second, is (3) plausible? Sets of sensible things are composite in the sense that they manifest the compresence of opposites, but are sensible individuals composite? Also, we may wonder in what ways (4) asserts that the soul is akin to forms. If the assumption is that they are nonsensible, eternal, and unchanging, then (4) looks like it begs the question.

Socrates does not consider these worries, but he does consider two objections to his defense of immortality: Cebes's Cloak objection and Simmias's Attunement objection.

ATTUNEMENT (85e-87a, 91e-95a)

Is the soul an "attunement" of the body that is not itself a bodily component and cannot survive the destruction of the body (85e-d)? Socrates expresses two objections to Attunement.

(1) He claims that Attunement is incompatible with Recollection (92a-93e). Is this true? Might an attunement persist across lyres/bodies? If my son's cello is tuned on the basis of the attunement in his teacher's cello, then perhaps her attunement migrates. If so, then Attunement, as such, is not incompatible with Recollection but neither does it undermine immortality. One issue is whether (a) Recollection implies that the soul is always embodied but occupies different bodies over time or whether (b) it implies that the soul is disembodied at some points. If attunements can migrate from one instrument/body to another, then (a) implies that Attunement is compatible with Recollection. But then it's equally true that Attunement ceases to be an objection to immortality, because the soul/attunement can survive the destruction of this body. But Socrates may assume that Recollection involves (b), inasmuch as he thinks that death promises to liberate his soul from the corrupting influences of the body. But if Recollection is committed to (b), the Attunement is incompatible with Recollection, and we must choose between them. One question here is whether Recollection has been defended in its metaphysically robust, non-deflationary form. If not, we might prefer Attunement to Recollection.

(2) Socrates also asserts that attunement can be a matter of degree, whereas being ensouled cannot (93a-e).

1. Being ensouled is all-or-nothing.
2. Attunements are matters of degree.
3. Hence, being ensouled cannot be an attunement.

I think that the argument is valid, but we can question its premises. (a) Is it true that being ensouled cannot be a matter of degree? It may seem that there must be a determinate fact of the matter about whether I shall be among the people alive tomorrow. Yet, determinacy can be questioned. If I'm not yet convinced of immortality, I might suppose brain death brings the death of my soul. But where on the spectrum between normal cognitive function and brain death does my life end? Perhaps in some cases just short of brain death it is indeterminate whether I survive. (b) Perhaps it is the quality of an attunement, rather than its existence, that is a matter of degree. But the same might be said of the soul: it is the good or badness of one's soul, not its existence that is a matter of degree. But if we say this, there appears to be no asymmetry between attunements and souls.

CLOAK (87b-88b, 95a-107a)

Even if the soul has outlived many bodies, will it outlive the present one? Perhaps Socrates's soul stands to his present body the way the weaver stands to his last cloak; he outlasts many cloaks but not the one he dies in (86e-88b). Plato's reply is complicated and involves further claims about forms and formal explanations (96c5-105c8). The main claims, for our purposes, are these.

1. Plato contrasts sensible explanations of what makes all and only F-things F, which are subject to the compresence of opposites, with "safe" explanations of what makes F-things F in terms of their participation in F-ness, which are not subject to this problem. Safe explanations are better than sensible explanations (96c5-e5, 100c3-101d3).
2. Plato mentions his desire (and inability) to find an account that explains the coming-to-be of all things in terms of a Final Good (97c1-98b6).
3. Plato mentions the need to appeal to formal, rather than material-efficient causal, explanations (98b6-99d2).
4. In addition to safe explanations, there are informative explanations of one nonsensible property in terms of others (e.g. three is odd, heat arises from fire, and fever is produced by illness) (96c5-105c8).

(2) is a special case of (3). (4) satisfies (3) and approximates (2). (1) and (4) appear to reject Socratic constraints on definition, for instance, the idea that an acceptable definition must eliminate disputed terms and supply a decision procedure (cf. Eu 6e-7e, 9a). Plato's reply to Cebes makes use of the possibility of informative formal explanations, as in (1).

1. Soul explains life; it always brings life (105c9-d4).
2. Life is the opposite of death (105d6-9).
3. Hence, the soul will never admit death (105d10-12)
4. Hence, the soul is immortal (105e2-8).

This conclusion serves as a springboard for Socrates's speculation about the afterlife and its rewards for a life of virtue (107c-). Plato's arguments and conclusions are not entirely clear.

(a) The inference from (3) to (4) seems to ignore Plato's earlier claims about the relation among opposites.

snow will never ... admit the hot and still be what it was, namely snow, and also hot; but at the advance of the hot, it will either get out of the way or perish [103d5-8].

True, the soul will never admit death and continue existing; it must either go elsewhere (immortality) or perish. It's not clear why Plato is entitled to assume the first possibility and ignore the second. When we apply the hair dryer to Frosty the Snowman, he must either go elsewhere or perish. Presumably, he perishes.

(b) Does Plato assume that the form of soul will persist, because forms are eternal? But what is the relationship between my soul and the form of soulhood? Should I feel comforted by knowing that the form of soulhood persists if my soul does not? Does Plato assume that it is just my embodied existence that distinguishes me from other souls -- that my soul is just a particular instantiation of some generic universal soul? When Frosty melts, he dies. Perhaps the form of Snowman does not die (so long as there are other snowmen, if Plato does not separate the forms,

and in any case, if he does separate the forms). But this might seem like cold comfort to Frosty (pardon the pun).

(c) If all souls are just different instances of soulhood, is Plato in a position to recognize the existence of individual, qualitatively distinct souls? If not, what are we to make of Plato's idea that there will be differential rewards for qualitatively different souls?