

Class 12 - February 25  
The Soul Theory of Identity  
Plato, from the *Phaedo*

I. Descartes and the Soul Theory of Identity

In the Second Meditation, Descartes asserts that he exists as long as he is thinking.

We call this assertion the *cogito*.

In sections of the Meditations that come after the *cogito*, which we have not yet read, Descartes claims that the only essential property of himself is his mind.

We can doubt a lot about our bodies.

We often mis-perceive them.

We could be dreaming that our bodies are as we imagine them to be, while we have very different, say, alien bodies.

Most radically we could even be under the false impression that there is a material world.

Perhaps the world of bodies is just a Berkeleyan world of ideas.

Leibniz compares the physical world to a rainbow.

There is no real rainbow.

It is just a way of looking at drops of water.

Such doubts about the physical world do not extend to the mental world.

We can not doubt the existence of our thoughts.

Thus, according to Descartes, we can be sure about the existence of our minds without knowing anything securely about our bodies.

Descartes concludes from this difference between our knowledge of bodies and our knowledge of minds, that we are essentially only our minds.

As Descartes uses the term, the mind is what others call the soul.

We will look in detail at Descartes's arguments for the distinction between the mind and the body later in the term, when we ask about the nature of mind.

For now, our concern is with the nature of personal identity.

We saw, in our last class, that the claim that we are identical to our bodies is problematic.

Our bodies are constantly changing in a way that our selves are not.

Artifacts like the ship of Theseus (and my sukka) appear to have identity conditions that go beyond their material composition.

We might want to have a strict criterion for identity on which the ship of Theseus changes every time a plank gets changed.

That would entail that the ship is constantly changing.

We might be able to live with that inconstant result.

We would have a merely practical problem of determining which ship belongs to Theseus for the purposes of property ownership.

For our selves, we have a deeper problem.

We remain constant in ways that our component particles of matter do not.

We might not wish to say that it is merely a practical problem of property ownership whether I exist through time.

For example, I have interests in the future of my self that I do not have for other people.

If those future people are not me, it is difficult to explain why I care so much about them.

Descartes hints at a different view of personal identity: we are our souls.

In fact, Descartes's view is not quite that we are our souls or minds, but that we are an amalgam of our minds and bodies.

But, Descartes's view is subtle, and liable to be interpreted as a soul theory of identity.

Indeed, Descartes's correspondent Antoine Arnauld thought as much.

It seems that the argument proves too much, and takes us back to the Platonic view (which you reject) that nothing corporeal belongs to our essence, so that man is merely a rational soul and the body merely a vehicle for the soul, a view which gives rise to the definition of man as a soul which makes use of a body (Arnauld, *Fourth Objections*, AT VII.203).

Since Descartes's view is being compared to Plato's Soul Theory of personal identity, we are going to look at the original.

## II. Socrates and the Soul

Before the beginning of the long dialogue *Phaedo*, Socrates has been condemned to death for the crimes of corrupting the youth of Athens and teaching new Gods.

The Athenians were unhappy with Socrates' criticisms of their society.

In *Apology*, Socrates defends his life, arguing that he only searches for truth, and that he wants to improve his city by doing so.

He pursues truth by showing engaging people in dialogue.

These dialogues, though, inevitably show that people do not know what they think they know.

We are ignorant of the nature of truth, and good, and beauty.

The Athenians did not much like being humiliated by Socrates, and so responded by putting him on trial. After his conviction, they sentence him to death.

In *Crito*, Socrates' friends arrange for his escape from Athens.

Socrates refuses to leave.

He argues that to escape would be unjust, and would weaken the rule of law.

He does not want to commit a wrong, even if he is being wronged.

In *Phaedo*, which contains Socrates' death scene, his friends are gathered around him before he drinks a poisonous potion of hemlock.

They are unhappy, and Socrates tries to comfort them by telling them about what he believes is in store for him.

He argues that death is welcome, since the death of the body does not entail the death of the self.

What we really are, says Socrates, is our soul.

One view of the soul, which Plato discusses in a section prior to the one I asked you to read, is that the soul is like a breath or smoke, which is infused within our bodies.

When the body dies, such a soul could disperse in the air.

If the soul disperses, Cebes worries, then it dies with the body.

Socrates argues, in sections of the *Phaedo* prior to our excerpt, for the immortality of the soul, in order to allay fears that the ghostly substance disperses.

The immortality of the soul, with the identity of our selves and our souls, would entail that our selves are independent from our bodies.

### III. The Forms

In order to understand Plato's arguments, we need a little more context.  
At the beginning of our excerpt, Socrates discusses the nature of reality.

Do we say there is such a thing as justice by itself, or not?  
We do say so, certainly!  
Such a thing as the good and beautiful?  
Of course!  
And did you ever see one of them with your eyes?  
Never... (*Phaedo* 181).

As we saw in the *Republic*, Plato believes that reality is not as we perceive it.  
Indeed, Plato believes that reality is not perceivable with our senses.  
The objects of our senses are constantly changing.  
Particulars in our world are inconstant and unreliable.  
For example, the material constitution of any object is constantly changing, as we discussed in our last class.  
My physical constitution, like that of any natural thing like a tree or a river, and even any artifact, is different than it was yesterday, or when I was a child.  
Even rocks erode.

The physical world also admits of many paradoxes, like the sorites, or the paradoxes of motion.  
According to the sorites paradox, there can be no heaps.  
One grain of sand is not a heap.  
The addition of any one grain of sand to a small pile will never turn it into a heap.  
So, there can be no heaps.  
Sorites arguments can be run for just about any physical property.  
So, all physical properties lead to inconstancy and paradox.  
But, reality must be stable and true.

If we are going to know something, then, it has to be something lasting, not fleeting.  
Plato's view that reality must be stable is in large part derived from the work of Parmenides.  
Zeno's paradoxes of motion were arguments for Parmenides view that all change is an illusion.  
According to Parmenides, we can't know anything about, say, the weather, or our bodies, or the material world more broadly, since they are always changing.  
Descartes held a similar view, as we saw at the beginning of the *Meditations*.

Some years ago now I observed the multitude of errors that I had accepted as true in my earliest years, and the dubiousness of the whole superstructure I had since then reared on them; and the consequent need of making a clean sweep for once in my life, and beginning again from the very foundations, if I would establish some *secure and lasting result in science* (Descartes, First Meditation 61).

Like Parmenides and Descartes, Plato believes that knowledge has to be of a world that is not available to our senses.  
He calls this a world of forms, or realities.  
The forms are prototypes, universals on which the properties of particular sensible objects are based.  
They are, for example, causes of the qualities of things.

Consider any two blue things.

They share a common property.

Plato explains that commonality in terms of their participation in the form of blueness.

'x is blue' means that x participates in the form of blueness.

The forms, unlike physical objects, are perfect, unchanging realities.

We can not have any knowledge of the constantly changing and paradoxical physical world.

What we thought we knew could (and will) change.

But, if some things were stable and perfect, then we could have knowledge of them.

Knowledge is thus always of forms.

There are forms of beauty, and justice, and truth, and love, and other properties.

Mathematical examples may help to make Plato's point clearer.

We have lots of mathematical knowledge.

For example, the central angle in a circle is twice the measure of an inscribed angle which intercepts the same arc.

But, we never have any sensory experience with circles, and their arcs.

The theorems we know hold only of perfect mathematical objects.

Similarly, we never experience anything perfectly straight, or pitched, or just, or beautiful.

We must have knowledge of the perfect archetypes, since we can compare sensible things to them.

And, as Simmias agrees with Socrates at the beginning of our excerpt, we can not know about the archetypes of sensible objects from sense experience.

#### IV. The Body and the Soul

Contrary to the popular view that our bodies are helpful in attaining knowledge, Socrates argues that they hinder the process.

So long as we have the body with us in our enquiry, and our soul is mixed up with so great an evil, we shall never attain sufficiently what we desire... (182).

Socrates notes several ways in which the body is a distraction from pure thought.

We need food.

We get sick.

We have emotions (love and fear and desire) which impede our philosophical progress.

Our desires for wealth and the material goods it provides lead to conflict and away from truth.

The true philosopher, the lover of wisdom, welcome the removal of bodily distractions.

Those who rightly love wisdom are practicing dying, and death to them is the least terrible thing in the world. Look at it in this way: If they are everywhere at enmity with the body, and desire the soul to be alone by itself, and if, when this very thing happens, they shall fear and object - would not that be wholly unreasonable? Should they not willingly go to a place where there is good hope of finding what they were in love with all through life (and they loved wisdom) and of ridding themselves of the companion which they hated? (182-3).

Death, argues Socrates, is the only true path to wisdom.

Socrates' argument depends on whether the soul survives the death of the body.  
It depends on Socrates' view that the self is not the body, and is the soul.

We see Socrates' claims that self is not the body in our excerpt.  
Crito asks how Socrates wants himself buried.

He thinks me to be what he will see shortly, a corpse, and asks, if you please, how to bury me! I have been saying all this long time, that when I have drunk the potion, I shall not be here then with you... (183).

Thus, according to Socrates, and the soul theory of self, a dead body is not a person.  
It is just an empty vessel which used to contain a person.

## V. Immortality

Plato's arguments for the immortality of the soul come earlier in the dialogue than our selection.  
We will not spend time on them in class, since they are not our concern, but I'll mention two here.

In the most interesting argument, Plato claims that the soul precedes the body.  
Knowledge of the forms, he says, must precede any knowledge of particulars.  
Learning thus must be recollection, and the soul must have been acquainted with the forms prior to birth.  
The argument starts by characterizing recollection.  
Recollection can come from experiencing something we once knew.  
It might be from something similar, or something dissimilar.  
I can look at my watch and think of my daughter, or I can see a picture of her.  
So, recollection is defined as seeing one thing, but thinking of another.  
When I see a picture of my daughter, I can note similarities and dissimilarities with my idea of her.  
In order to note the similarities and differences, I have to know both my daughter and the picture.  
I also have to know when two things are equal, and unequal, in order to compare them.  
So, I must have prior knowledge of equality.  
It seems that my thoughts of the form of equality are triggered by my experiences with ordinary objects, comparing logs, stones, etc.  
Still, I know that equality, as applied to logs, is not real equality.  
Real equality must be absolute identity, which I never experience with my senses: there are no two identical snowflakes, or logs.  
Further, I could not have gotten my idea of equality from the logs and stones, since I would need to have it already in order to use it.  
So, I must be recalling it.  
If I am recalling the forms, then my knowledge of them must precede my birth.  
So, the soul has to be able to exist independently of the body.

Another argument is called the cyclical argument.  
Socrates first argues that any quality of a thing arises from participation in its opposite form.  
For example, sleeping comes from waking and waking comes from sleeping.  
Something can get bigger only if it was smaller.  
Then, Socrates states that living and death are opposites.  
Dying things come from living things.  
Thus, living things must come from dying things.

Plato supports the cyclical argument by noting that all opposites have two processes which represent the cycling from one to the other (e.g. getting bigger).

It is clear that there is a process of going from living to death.

So, we can verify that living and death are similar to other opposites in this way.

Still, that does nothing to show that there is a process of going from death to living, which is what Socrates is trying to establish.

## VI. The Soul Theory of the Self

Plato takes the self to be the soul, which is longer-lasting than, and pre-existing to, the body.

We can call this the soul theory of the self, in contrast to the body theory of the self.

It is not always clear what one means by 'soul'.

For Descartes, the soul is the mind, the seat of thought.

Plato's soul is not exactly a mind.

In other writings, Plato indicates that the soul is divided into three parts: a rational part, an appetitive part, and a spirited part.

There are essentially two aspects of platonic souls.

1. They are the seat of knowledge, performing the functions that we attribute to minds.
2. They are the bringers of life; having a soul distinguishes living things from non-living things.

Locke and Reid will engage the question of whether the mind is the soul.

It will be useful, going forward, to keep in mind the definition of soul being discussed.