Class #12 - 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 mis-perceive our bodies and their properties.
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, who holds an idealist view like that of Berkeley, compares the physical world to a rainbow.
There is no real rainbow; it is just a way of looking at drops of water.
Similarly, there are no real bodies; they are just ways of perceiving the world of ideas.

Such doubts about the physical world do not extend to the mental world.
We can not doubt the existence of our thoughts.
As Descartes showed, 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 sukkah 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 seem to 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 derived from 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.
They responded by putting him on trial.
After his conviction, they sentenced 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 in a portion which is not part of our excerpt, 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.
We can call this view of Plato and Descartes the soul theory of the self, in contrast to the body theory of the self.

One view of the soul is that it 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 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.
Near the beginning of our excerpt, Socrates discusses the nature of reality.

> Is there3 or is there not an absolute justice?
> Assuredly there is...
> And an absolute beauty and absolute good?
> Of course.
> But did you ever behold any of them with your eyes.
> Certainly not (*Phaedo* 25).

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.
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 paradoxes of motion and the sorites.
According to the sorites paradox, there can be no heaps.
One grain of sand is not a heap.
The addition of any one tiny grain of sand to something which is not a heap will never turn it into a heap.
So, it seems as if there can be no heaps.
Sorites arguments can be run for many physical properties, if not all of them.
There can be no bald people, no colors, no young or old, no people at all.
Most physical properties seem lead to inconstancy and paradox.

Similarly, as we saw, Parmenides argued that we can't know anything about what we ordinarily take to be the material world, since its properties are always changing.
Zeno's paradoxes of motion were arguments for Parmenides view that all change is an illusion.
Descartes held a similar view, as we saw at the beginning of the *Meditations*.

> Some years ago I was struck by the large number of falsehoods that I had accepted as true in my childhood, and by the highly doubtful nature of the whole edifice that I had subsequently based on them. I realized that it was necessary, once in the course of my life, to demolish everything completely and start again right from the foundations if I wanted to establish anything at all in the sciences that was stable and likely to last (Descartes, First Meditation, 17).

Like Parmenides and Descartes, Plato believes that knowledge is of a world not available to our senses.
Reality must be stable and true.
If we are going to know about the world, the properties of the real world must be lasting, not fleeting.
Plato calls this permanent world the world of forms, or realities.
The forms, unlike physical objects, are perfect, unchanging realities.
There are forms of beauty, and justice, and truth, and love, and other properties.
Since the forms are stable and perfect, we can have knowledge of them.
Knowledge is, for Plato, always of forms.

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.

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, 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.

> The body is a source of countless distractions by reason of the mere requirement of food, and is liable also to diseases which overtake and impede us in the pursuit of truth: it fills us full of loves, and lusts, and fears, and fancies of all kinds, and endless foolery, and in very truth, as men say, takes us away from the power of thinking at all (*Phaedo* 25-6).

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 lover of wisdom welcomes the removal of bodily distractions.

> The true philosophers, Simmias, are always occupied in the practice of dying, wherefore also to them least of all men is death terrible. Look at the matter thus: - if they have been in every way estranged from the body, and are wanting to be alone with the soul, when this desire of theirs is being granted, how inconsistent would they be if they trembled and repined, instead of rejoicing at their departure to that place where, then they arrive, they hope to gain that which in life they desired - and their desire was for wisdom - and at the same time to be rid of the company of their enemy (*Phaedo* 27).

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.
We are our souls.

We see Socrates' claims that self is not the body in a portion of the dialogue that is not in our excerpt.
Another of Socrates' friends, Criton, 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... (*Phaedo*).

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

We will not spend time on Plato's arguments for the immortality of the soul in class, since they are not our concern.
We are reading the *Phaedo* to get a sense of Plato's view of the self.
Still, I'll discuss them a bit here.

It is generally agreed that there are four arguments for the immortality of the soul in the *Phaedo*.

1. The Cyclical Argument
2. The Argument from Recollection
3. The Argument from Affinity
4. The Argument from Exclusion/The Theory of Forms/The Final Argument

Our selection omits the interesting argument from recollection.
In that argument, Plato concludes 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.

In the cyclical argument, which appears first in the dialogue, Socrates begins by arguing 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.

In the argument from affinity, Plato argues that the soul is like the unchangeable, invisible forms, which are eternal.
Simmias, unhappy with the cyclical argument, worries that the cyclical argument is insufficient.
Socrates shows that the soul is not like the variable, visible world.
The body is material and changing, liable to death.
Not the soul.

> The soul si in the very likeness of the divine, and immortal, and rational, and uniform, and indissoluble, and unchangeable; and...the body is in the very likeness of the human, and mortal, and irrational, and multiform, and dissoluble, and changeable (*Phaedo* 32).

Lastly, in the final, argument from exclusion, or from the theory of forms, Plato argues that the soul, like the forms, can not participate in any of its opposite characteristics.
The short can not be tall, the hot can not be cold, the even can not be odd.
The soul, which bears life, can not participate in the opposite of life, which is death.

Plato's arguments contain more detail than appears here.
I've presented the general outline of each argument to provide a taste of the reasoning.
Let's put aside the arguments since our central concern is the soul theory of the self.
We are looking at the arguments for immortality in order to see Plato's characterization of the self.

VI. The Soul Theory of the Self

As we can see from the arguments for immortality, Plato takes the self to be the soul, which is longer-lasting than, and pre-existing to, the body.
It is not always clear what philosophers and ordinary folks mean by 'soul'.
For Descartes, the soul is the mind, the seat of thought.
Plato's soul is not exactly a mind.
Certainly it has an intellectual function, being able to understand the forms.

> He attains to the purest knowledge of them who goes to each with the intellect alone, not introducing or intruding in the act of thought sight or any other sense together with reason, but with the intellect in its own purite searches into the truth of each thing in its purity (*Phaedo* 25).

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.

There is no reason that these two functions must be attached.
Later writers like Descartes, Locke, and Reid mainly take the soul to be just the mind, though Locke considers a broader notion.
It will be useful, going forward, to keep in mind the definition of soul being discussed.