



**UNIVERSIDADE ESTADUAL DE CAMPINAS
INSTITUTO DE FILOSOFIA E CIÊNCIAS HUMANAS**

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INQUIRY AND KNOWLEDGE IN PLATO'S *PHAEDO*

INVESTIGAÇÃO E CONHECIMENTO NO *FÉDON* DE PLATÃO

CAMPINAS

2023

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Thesis presented to the Institute of Philosophy and Human Sciences of the University of Campinas in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor, in the area of Philosophy.

Tese apresentada ao Instituto de Filosofia e Ciências Humanas da Universidade Estadual de Campinas como parte dos requisitos exigidos para a obtenção do título de Doutor em Filosofia.

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ESTE TRABALHO CORRESPONDE À VERSÃO FINAL DA TESE DEFENDIDA PELO ALUNO GUSTAVO RAFAEL BIANCHI AZEVEDO FERREIRA, E ORIENTADA PELO PROF. DR. LUCAS ANGIONI.

CAMPINAS

2023

Ficha catalográfica
Universidade Estadual de Campinas
Biblioteca do Instituto de Filosofia e Ciências Humanas
Cecília Maria Jorge Nicolau - CRB 8/3387

F413i Ferreira, Gustavo Rafael Bianchi Azevedo, 1991-
Inquiry and knowledge in Plato's Phaedo / Gustavo Rafael Bianchi Azevedo
Ferreira. – Campinas, SP : [s.n.], 2023.

Orientador: Lucas Angioni.
Tese (doutorado) – Universidade Estadual de Campinas, Instituto de
Filosofia e Ciências Humanas.

1. Platão - Fédon. 2. Epistemologia. 3. Investigação (Teoria do
conhecimento). 4. Filosofia antiga. I. Angioni, Lucas, 1973-. II. Universidade
Estadual de Campinas. Instituto de Filosofia e Ciências Humanas. III. Título.

Informações Complementares

Título em outro idioma: Investigação e conhecimento no Fédon de Platão

Palavras-chave em inglês:

Epistemology

Inquiry (Theory of knowledge)

Ancient philosophy

Área de concentração: Filosofia

Titulação: Doutor em Filosofia

Banca examinadora:

Lucas Angioni [Orientador]

Anderson de Paula Borges

Carolina de Melo Bomfim Araújo

Evan Robert Keeling

Paulo Fernando Tadeu Ferreira

Data de defesa: 02-02-2023

Programa de Pós-Graduação: Filosofia

Identificação e informações acadêmicas do(a) aluno(a)

- ORCID do autor: 0009-0000-4486-8600

- Currículo Lattes do autor: <http://lattes.cnpq.br/4274291739622750>



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A Comissão Julgadora dos trabalhos de Tese de Doutorado, composta pelos Professores Doutores a seguir descritos, em sessão pública realizada em 2 de fevereiro de 2023, considerou o candidato Gustavo Rafael Bianchi Azevedo Ferreira aprovado.

Prof. Dr. Lucas Angioni

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A Ata de Defesa com as respectivas assinaturas dos membros encontra-se no SIGA/Sistema de Fluxo de Dissertações/Teses e na Coordenadoria do Programa de Pós-Graduação em Filosofia do Instituto de Filosofia e Ciências Humanas.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am most indebted to my parents Edneia and Maurício Ferreira for their invaluable support during all my studies so far.

I am grateful to my advisor Lucas Angioni for his supervision and for providing me with the opportunity to be a part of his research group, MESA (Metaphysics, Science and Dialectic in Aristotle), attending countless seminars and international events and occasionally presenting my own work for discussion. My experience in these occasions was tantamount in shaping the way I work. The following members of MESA really helped me in my work on Plato: Angelo de Oliveira, Davi Bastos, Marcelo Cabral, Rafael de Souza, Roberto Grasso, Guus Eelink e Alessandro Bonello.

I am also grateful to the following members of the defense examination committee:

Carolina Araújo, whose written and spoken comments and objections gave me a lot to work on, so much so that I am still working on it.

Anderson Borges, who provided me with highly important suggestions on several occasions, including the qualification exam. He also kindly gave me the opportunity to present a former version of Chapter III to his research group, with which I experienced a very profitable exchange. It is amazing to be able to discuss Plato's *Phaedo* with a scholar that has published a translation of it to our mother tongue, Portuguese.

Evan Keeling, who kindly provided me with 180 markings and comments on the PDF file he examined. This helped me immensely to improve my English text and my arguments for the this final version.

Paulo Ferreira, who brought crucial points to my attention in the defense examination and on previous occasions. My work on Plato has benefited greatly from his contributions and will continue to do so, as he was kind enough to invite me to his research group seminars, which I am now attending regularly.

Inara Zanuzzi, Mateus Ferreira and Márcio Damin for committing themselves to replace the other members if needed.

I thank Breno Zuppolini for the several outstanding discussions we had about the *Theaetetus* and the *Phaedo*, including the one in my qualification exam. His contributions were crucial for the development of chapters II and III.

I thank Wellington Damasceno, as well, for carefully reading a former version of Chapter III. The questions he asked me about my view of the Recollection Argument led me to improve it a great deal.

I also benefited from discussing the Recollection Argument with Marciano Cavalcanti. Finally, I thank my greatest friend Liége Toffoli for patiently debating with me about the equal sticks.

This study was financed in part by the Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior – Brasil (CAPES) - Finance Code 001.

ABSTRACT

The present study of Plato's *Phaedo* aims at understanding Plato's view on the relationship between inquiry and knowledge. The passages of the *Phaedo* that most explicitly deal with inquiry and knowledge are Socrates' Defense (63e8-69e5), the Recollection Argument (72e4-78b3), and Socrates' Intellectual Autobiography (95a4-102a-9). By a careful inspection of each of these three passages, this work provides insight into three topics, respectively: (i) the extent to which Plato thinks that knowledge is attainable given that inquiry is hindered by human limitations; (ii) the process through which a subject learns about the existence of certain special objects and thereby gets in position to inquire into them; (iii) the mode of inquiry Plato deems appropriate in order to attain knowledge.

Keywords: Epistemology; Inquiry (Theory of Knowledge); Ancient Philosophy; Plato's *Phaedo*.

RESUMO

O presente estudo do *Fédon* de Platão objetiva compreender a visão de Platão sobre a relação entre investigação e conhecimento. As passagens do *Fédon* que lidam mais explicitamente com a investigação e o conhecimento são a Defesa de Sócrates (63e8-69e5), o Argumento da Rememoração (72e4-78b3) e a Autobiografia Intelectual de Sócrates (95a4-102a-9). Por meio de uma inspeção cuidadosa de cada uma dessas três passagens, este trabalho contribui para a compreensão de três tópicos, respectivamente: (i) a medida em que Platão pensa que o conhecimento é alcançável dado que a investigação é prejudicada por certas limitações humanas; (ii) o processo pelo qual um sujeito aprende sobre a existência de certos objetos especiais e, assim, fica em condição de investigá-los; (iii) o modo de investigação que Platão considera apropriado para se obter conhecimento.

Palavras-chave: Epistemologia; Investigação (Teoria do Conhecimento); Filosofia Antiga; Platão – Fédon.

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INTRODUCTION

The present study of Plato's *Phaedo* aims at understanding Plato's view on the relationship between inquiry and knowledge. The main topics to be examined are the following: (i) the extent to which Plato thinks that knowledge is attainable given that inquiry is hindered by human limitations; (ii) the process through which a subject learns about the existence of certain special objects and thereby gets in position to inquire into them; (iii) the mode of inquiry Plato deems appropriate in order to attain knowledge. In approaching these topics it should be kept in mind that "knowledge (ἐπιστήμη)" for Plato is, in most contexts, an extraordinary epistemic achievement, and consequently "inquiry (ζήτησις; σκέψις)" a demanding endeavor. When this point needs to be emphasized, I will use the expressions "philosophical inquiry" and "philosophical knowledge".

The passages of the *Phaedo* that most explicitly deal with inquiry and knowledge are Socrates' Defense (63e8-69e5), the Recollection Argument (72e4-78b3), and Socrates' Intellectual Autobiography (95a4-102a-9). In this work I will provide a careful examination of each of these three passages. Other parts of the *Phaedo*, especially the Affinity Argument (78b4-84b8), and extracts from other dialogues will also be discussed, though in less detail. Below I introduce the main interpretative questions that the three passages raise about inquiry and knowledge and briefly present the answers I will defend to these questions. Such answers should help to understand Plato's view on the relationship between inquiry and knowledge.

Socrates' Defense

In this passage, the character Socrates defends himself from the accusation of taking his own imminent death too lightly, and in the course of this defense he speaks about inquiry, knowledge and Forms. There is much less literature about this passage than about the Recollection Argument or Socrates' Autobiography, and existing literature about it usually focuses on ethical rather than epistemological or metaphysical questions. The present study attempts to improve this situation in two ways. **Chapter I** demonstrates the importance of Socrates' Defense in the structure of the *Phaedo* and offers an analysis of the argument in the passage. It also works as a general introduction to the next chapter. **Chapter II** directly addresses two important questions the passage raises about inquiry and knowledge.

The first and principal question is regarding Socrates' striking claim that, in the opinion of genuine philosophers, one cannot know anything "purely" as long as one's soul is embodied (66d7-67a1). The explicit reason for this claim is that bodily matters deter inquiry (66b3-d7), so no one can complete it with ultimate success while embodied. This claim raises the question whether for Plato philosophical knowledge is attainable in this life. The objects of such knowledge, special entities named "Forms", are first and foremost the essences of qualities such as justice, beauty and goodness.¹ In **Chapter II**, I will defend the thesis that Plato thinks knowledge of Forms comes in degrees and only the highest degree is unattainable by embodied beings.² It is also my aim to consider in which way those degrees of knowledge are distinct from each other, a question that interpreters have scarcely addressed. The answer I will suggest is that the degree to which a subject knows a Form is in direct proportion to how far she has gone in her inquiry into that Form. So, although one cannot complete philosophical inquiry while embodied, one can at least know a Form to an increasing degree as one advances in such inquiry. Furthermore, I will offer an analysis of an essential practice associated with philosophical inquiry, namely "purification (κάθαρσις)", the practice by which philosophers separate the soul from the body as much as possible.

1 The view that Forms are essences of qualities, assumed throughout the present study, is most clearly and fully defended by Politis (2021). An important passage in Socrates' Defense (65d12-e5) is evidence for this view and will be discussed accordingly in Chapter II.

2 This thesis very briefly supported by Pakaluk (2003) and Fine (2016).

In Socrates' Defense, the body is said to hinder the acquisition of philosophical knowledge, especially if one employs its senses in philosophical inquiry.³ Thus, the other question to be addressed in connection with that passage is why exactly this is the case. The question is critical because, in the Recollection Argument, Simmias and Socrates agree that they have obtained their knowledge of a Form from sense-perception. To reconcile these two seemingly incompatible claims, it is crucial to be clear on what Socrates means by each of them. Thus, also in **Chapter II**, I will emphasize that the rationale behind the claim in Socrates' Defense that the senses are an obstacle to philosophical inquiry is that trusting their reports is counterproductive when a subject is inquiring into a Form, that is, when she has already become aware that *the Form exists* and is now trying to grasp it. As Socrates points out in the Affinity Argument (78b4-84b8), sensible things, unlike Forms, are never in the same state, which means (or so I will argue) that the truth-values of reports about them depend on time and other circumstances. This leaves open the possibility that the senses have an epistemic role in the discovery of the very *existence of Forms*, and this may be Socrates' point in the Recollection Argument (on which see below).

My treatment of these two questions in Socrates' Defense can help to understand Plato's view on the relationship between inquiry and knowledge; in particular, it can help to determine the extent to which Plato thinks that humans can attain knowledge given that their success in inquiry is limited by their having bodies.

The Recollection Argument

Here Socrates argues that what is called "learning" is actually recollection, that the items recollected are Forms, and that one recollects the Form of a quality upon *sensing the instances of the quality*. This raises the question of what kind of learning recollection in the *Phaedo* is supposed to explain. On one interpretation, Socrates' argument implies that recollecting Forms amounts to concept acquisition, an ordinary accomplishment needed for the competent use of language. On a

3 Even if one does not employ the senses in philosophical inquiry, they can still hinder the acquisition of philosophical knowledge. For, as shown in the Affinity Argument, specifically in 83b4-e4, the bodily senses can provide us with intense pleasures and pains and thereby make us believe that sensible things are most important when they are not. This point was convincingly made by Ebrey (2017: 5-10).

second interpretation, recollecting Forms is a superior accomplishment, requiring successful philosophical inquiry. A difficulty with the first interpretation is that Plato generally treats apprehension of Forms as something special and difficult. In the second interpretation it is difficult to deal with Socrates' claim that one recollects Forms *upon using one's senses*, for this seems to imply that recollection is something ordinary and easy.

In **Chapter III**, I will argue for the thesis that recollection in the *Phaedo* is supposed to explain the kind of learning that enables a person to transition from being a non-philosopher to being a philosopher.⁴ For I interpret Socrates as saying that *sense-perception of the instances of a quality* is epistemically involved in the *discovery of the existence* of the Form of the quality, and such a discovery is clearly a precondition for a person to engage in the inquiry into Forms (which dispenses with the senses), that is, philosophy. My argument for that thesis is placed into a thorough examination of the Recollection Argument in which I deal with a number of interpretative questions, including how the argument supports the claim that the soul had knowledge of Forms before birth.

If my thesis is correct, recollection in the *Phaedo* is the process through which a subject obtains knowledge of the existence of Forms and thereby gets in position to desire and attempt to know more about them. By answering in this way the question of what kind of learning recollection in the *Phaedo* is supposed to explain, we can see further aspects of Plato's view on the relationship between inquiry and knowledge. Thus we can be sure that knowledge is not just the *end goal* of inquiry but, as expected, it is a *precondition* for inquiry too.⁵ And most importantly we can identify the *content of* and the *route to* the precondition knowledge that allows one to perform philosophical inquiry.

Socrates' Intellectual Autobiography

In this passage, Socrates tells the story of his intellectual journey in search of the answer to the question of what the causes of being and becoming are. The

4 This thesis is meant to apply only to recollection as presented in the *Phaedo*. There is evidence elsewhere that recollection also explains the acquisition of philosophical knowledge, but this higher kind of learning is not addressed in the Recollection Argument. (See more on this on Chapter III).

5 Of course, these two sorts of knowledge cannot both have the same content nor be equally robust. In fact, much of Chapter III is devoted to distinguish them.

turning point in this story is when Socrates ceases to search for the answer with his senses and begins inquiring in *logoi* (arguments or statements). By looking into this methodological shift we have an opportunity to find out more about Plato's view on the relationship between inquiry and knowledge, for we are invited to discern the mode of inquiry he deems appropriate in order to attain knowledge. **Chapter IV** emphasizes that this mode of inquiry, inquiry in *logoi*, is fundamentally characterized by the opposition of arguments in question-and-answer discussion, and is governed by the Method of Hypothesis. Using this method, Socrates offers a new answer to the question about causes: he claims that the Forms are the causes of being and becoming. **Chapter IV** also discusses Socrates' puzzlement over traditional answers to that question, and underlines that his own new answer is superior to those because it is immune to a line of argument that rejects all putative causes that do not meet certain requirements for something to be really a cause.

CHAPTER I

The importance and structure of Socrates' Defense

There is much less literature about Socrates' Defense than about most of the other passages in the *Phaedo*. Two possible reasons for this stand out. First, the *Phaedo* is concerned with supporting the immortality of the soul, and Socrates' Defense does not explicitly present an argument for it. Second, the passage does not seem to contain theses as interesting as the thesis that learning is recollection (Recollection Argument) or that the Forms are the causes of being and becoming (Socrates' Intellectual Autobiography). These features can make Socrates' Defense seem, at first sight, less important than what follows it.

Notwithstanding, Socrates' Defense is essential to the *Phaedo* for two reasons. First, it provides the motivation and context for the whole argumentation in favor of the immortality of the soul. Second, it contains important theses that are picked up later at crucial points in that argumentation. A sustained defense of the second point has already been provided by Pakaluk (2003: 108-11). In the present chapter, I provide a defense of the first point. I also analyze the argumentative structure of the passage as a whole.

1. Socrates' Defense motivates the argumentation for the immortality of soul

The core of the *Phaedo* is mainly composed of four arguments for the immortality of the soul: the Cyclical Argument (69e6-72d10), the Recollection Argument (72e1-78b3), the Affinity Argument (78b4-84b8) and the Final Argument (95a4-107b10). This long argumentation begins when Cebes presents the following worry regarding some of the things that Socrates was saying:

T1. *Phaedo* 69e6-70b4:

‘Socrates, I approve of the other things you say, but the matter of the soul causes people to have strong doubts and to worry that once separated from the body it no longer exists anywhere (...). For if it really did exist somewhere alone by itself (...) then there would be much hope, and a noble hope at that, Socrates, that **what you say** is true. But this very point doubtless requires no little reassurance and proof, that the soul exists when the human being has died, and has some power and wisdom (τινα δύναμιν ἔχει καὶ φρόνησιν).’⁶

Cebes is referring to the things that Socrates says in his Defense (63e8-69e5). Socrates has been accused of facing his imminent death too lightly, and a key element in his response is the proposition that the souls of good people, when separated from the body due to biological death, go to a happier destination than the souls of wicked people. This proposition must be what Cebes refers to by “what you say” (in bold print in T1), Cebes’ point in that sentence therefore being that the soul’s posthumous existence is a condition for the truth of that proposition. Cebes questions Socrates as he does in T1 because Socrates has relied on that proposition but has not provided support for the soul’s posthumous existence. Hence what motivates the question about the soul’s immortality in the *Phaedo* is the need to back a key element in Socrates’ Defense, namely the belief that good people’s souls fare better after death.

Indeed, in 67e-68b Socrates stresses that what gives him serenity in the face of death is the hope of gaining wisdom after death. Socrates, just as any other genuine philosopher, hopes that after death he will go to a place where “there is hope of finding (...) wisdom” (68a1-2). Now, philosophers could not hope for this if they did not believe that after death the soul not only continues to exist but is also capable of wisdom. These two points are questioned in T1: Cebes questions not only the soul’s continued existence, but also whether in the afterlife it “has some power and wisdom” (τινα δύναμιν ἔχει καὶ φρόνησιν, 70b4).⁷ The hope of gaining wisdom after death does imply that the soul will preserve at least the intellectual capacity for knowing.⁸

6 All translations of the *Phaedo* in the present dissertation are by **Sedley and Long (2011)**. The numbering of pages, columns and lines follows the OCT edition by **Duke et. al. (1995)**, which has been my source for the Greek text of the *Phaedo*.

7 By “some power (τινα δύναμιν)” he seems to mean some intellectual faculty or capacity.

8 Rowe (1993a: 146) comments that the view that the souls of the dead go to Hades already existed, but remarks that Socrates is proposing a new view of Hades, according to which souls can obtain wisdom there.

That the soul continues to exist after death seems to be assumed near the outset of Socrates' defense when he proposes a definition of death and a definition of being dead:

T2. *Phaedo* 64c4-8:

[i] 'Can we believe that it [death] is anything other than the separation of the soul from the body? [ii] And do we believe that being dead is the following: the body has been separated from the soul and come to be apart, alone by itself, and the soul has been separated from the body and is apart, alone by itself. Can death be anything other than that?'

T2.i defines the event of *death* (θάνατον, 64c2) as the separation of body and soul, a definition assumed throughout the *Phaedo*. In T2.ii we have a definition of the state of *being dead* (τεθνάναι). D. Gallop (1975: 186) complains that this definition prejudges the question of the immortality of the soul, for it says that after death the soul will *be* apart, alone by itself. This does convey the idea that the soul will continue to exist after death. C. J. Rowe (1993a: 136-7) comments that, although the definition of being dead presupposes that a thing called "soul (ψυχή)" continues to exist once it has been separated from the body, there is no commitment yet with the identification of this "soul" with the *mind*, which is capable of reasoning and wisdom, hence the definition "does not presuppose the survival of ψυχή in any significant sense" (*ibidem*: 137). The problem, according to Rowe, arises only later in Socrates' Defense, when Socrates begins to draw the identification of soul and mind. But I see no reason to deny that Socrates assumes the immortality of the soul from throughout his defense.

Indeed, when the definition of death in T2 is explicitly taken up in 67d4-5, in addition to "separation" (χωρισμὸς) we also read "liberation" (λύσις) of the soul from the body, and two lines earlier Socrates speaks of the soul being "released (ἐκλυομένην) from the body as if from bonds" (67d1-2). The term "liberation" and the metaphor of release imply that the soul is not annihilated, but continues to exist once separated. Hence I think it is hard to avoid the conclusion that when Socrates proposed the definition in T2 he was assuming a positive answer to the question of the immortality of the soul. And I do not see why we interpreters should make any effort to exempt T2 from this assumption. Socrates certainly cannot be accused of begging the question in T2, for the immortality of the soul is not put into question until

later in T1. Rather, it is precisely because Socrates makes this assumption throughout his defense that this assumption will be questioned in T1, setting off the whole argumentation that follows. Therefore it is accurate to say that the arguments in the core of the *Phaedo* aim at further supporting Socrates' defense of his serenity toward death, by supporting a basic assumption in that defense, namely that the soul continues to exist after death.

Now, the hope of getting wisdom in the afterlife is critical for justifying not only Socrates' present serenity in the face of death (as the accusation against him requires), but also the way he has led his life, for he has devoted serious effort to philosophy, and if philosophers fare better after death, then his life's work is reasonable and justified. Socrates stresses that his disposition toward death is nothing but coherent with the fact that he has spent his life philosophizing (67d12-68b7), for a genuine philosopher rehearses death (64a4-9; 67d4-11) and dies willingly, without resentment (61d4-8; 68b8-c4). In the course of his defense it becomes clear that, when Socrates says that in the afterlife the good fare better, by "the good" he means the people who genuinely practice philosophy, for only these are really courageous, temperate and just (68c5-69e3, on which see subsection 2.2.2 below), and by "faring better" he means not only obtaining the wisdom sought by genuine philosophers, but also dwelling with gods and possibly meeting good companions. None of these things may be accomplished by people who die without having duly practiced philosophy: these fare worse. It is evident, therefore, that the hope in the afterlife is important for defending the philosophical life (i.e. a life devoted to the right practice of philosophy). Thus the question whether the soul is immortal does not affect only the reasonableness of Socrates' particular disposition toward death; it also affects the reasonableness of anyone's choice to live a philosophical life.

I hope to have shown that Socrates' defense of his serenity toward death and of the philosophical life he has led is the reason why we find a discussion about the immortality of the soul in the *Phaedo*. In the next section I will analyze Socrates' Defense in order to get a better understanding of its arguments and conclusions.

2. The Structure of Socrates' Defense

In this section I consider what Socrates is defending himself against and what arguments he presents in his defense. I emphasize that Socrates is actually responding to *two* things: an objection and an accusation (both interrelated). Without this emphasis one is at risk of supposing that the larger part of Socrates' Defense is exactly not to the point.

2.1. What Socrates is defending himself against

In this passage, Socrates defends himself against the accusation that he is facing his imminent death too lightly, as though there was nothing easier for him than to abandon life and his friends. Thus Socrates' offense is what we may call his "serenity" – or even "cheerfulness" – in the face of death. The most basic claim Socrates makes in his defense is that he is simply acting like a true philosopher.

White (2006: 445) distinguishes two arguments in Socrates' Defense. The first one, which he names the "philosophical argument" (hereafter "PA"), is the largest and goes from 64c2 to 68c4, while the second one, which he names the "religious argument" (hereafter "RA"), runs from 68c5 to 69e3. These passages do have different conclusions and thus I concede that they can really be taken as distinct arguments. PA concludes that genuine philosophers do not resent death, but meet it gladly (ἄσμενος), because they hope to encounter wisdom in the afterlife (67e6-68c4). RA concludes that it is reasonable for Socrates not to be resentful at leaving his friends as well as his supervisors or masters, the gods, for he believes that in the afterlife too he will meet good masters and companions (69d7-e2). But White also claims that PA, despite being larger and presented first, does not constitute the defense properly speaking because it does not answer the charge against Socrates; according to White, this task is properly accomplished by RA alone. I will challenge such view and show that these two arguments, though distinct from one another, work together against the position that Socrates has to undermine.

White is led to this view because he thinks that the only thing that Socrates has argue against is in the lines 63a4-9, where Simmias charges Socrates with accepting too lightly his own departure both from his friends and from the gods. If this charge is all that Socrates needs to defend himself against, then, given RA's

and PA's specific conclusions, it seems that RA is the proper response, whereas PA is not exactly to the point. However, I will show that that charge by Simmias is just part of what Socrates needs to respond to. Socrates is also presented with an objection by Cebes to one of his thesis, the thesis that philosophers are readily willing to die (62c10-d1). Since PA's conclusion clearly answers to Cebes' objection, PA is properly part of Socrates' defense.

In fact, one should not read Simmias' lines in 63a4-9 in isolation from Cebes' speech in 62c9-e7. First because Simmias explicitly presents his charge as an interpretation of Cebes' intention in saying what he says (see below). And second because Socrates addresses both Simmias and Cebes when, right after Simmias' lines, he says: "what *the two of you* are saying is fair; I suppose you mean that I must defend myself in answer to these charges, as if in court" (63b1-2). Although it is tempting to take only Simmias' speech (63a4-10) as prompting Socrates' Defense, the fact is that Socrates himself understands that he must answer Cebes as well. In what follows I look closely at Cebes' objection and claim that PA is designed to meet it.

2.1.1. Cebes' Objection

The discussion begins when Socrates asks Simmias to tell Evenus that, if he is wise, he should follow Socrates (to death) as soon as possible (61b8-c1). To this request Simmias answers that Evenus is not going to listen to such advice (61c2-5). Socrates then asks: "Really? Isn't Evenus a philosopher?" (61c6). This question implies that the suitability of Socrates' advice to Evenus depends on whether or not he is a philosopher. After Simmias confirms that Evenus is a philosopher, Socrates explains that every worthy philosopher is willing to follow that advice, and adds that nonetheless it is not sanctioned to do violence to oneself (61c7-d2). Cebes reacts with puzzlement, worried that these two claims might not be accordant with each other: "what do you mean by this, Socrates – that it isn't sanctioned to use violence on oneself, but that the philosopher would be willing to follow someone who is dying?" (61d3-5). Socrates opens his reply to this question by speaking about suicide. He explains that "it is gods who take care of us [human beings]" (62b7-8),

hence “it isn’t unreasonable that one should not kill oneself until god imposes some necessity” (62c6-7). It is this explanation that prompts Cebes’ objection.

T3. *Phaedo* 62c9-d3:

‘Yes,’ said Cebes, ‘*this, at least, seems plausible*. On the other hand, what you were saying just now, that philosophers would be ready and willing to die, *that looks odd* (ὀτόπω), Socrates, if in fact what we were saying just now is reasonable: both that it is god who takes care of us and that we are his possessions.

According to Cebes in T3, on the one hand, the thesis that Socrates has just put forth, about the relationship between gods and humans and its consequences for the question whether it is sanctioned to commit suicide, is plausible. On the other hand, the thesis that Socrates presented previously, about how philosophers face death, seems odd. It will be useful for the following discussion to number Socrates’ theses:

- (1) True philosophers are readily willing to die.
- (2) Gods supervise and take care of (living) human beings.

For Cebes, thesis (1) looks odd because it seems to be incompatible with thesis (2), which he deems plausible. This means that he is doing more than just pointing an incompatibility between two of Socrates’ theses: he is manifesting a clear opinion about which of the two theses should be rejected to reestablish consistency. Indeed, according to Cebes’ reasoning in T3, given (2), (1) is implausible. So, if it was his call, Cebes would clearly reject (1) and keep (2). Here is how he explains such position:

T4. *Phaedo* 62d3-8:

“For it is unreasonable that the wisest people shouldn’t resent leaving this ministration, in which they are supervised by the best supervisors there are, namely gods. Because, I take it, such a person doesn’t think that he will take better care of himself after he has become free. An unintelligent person, however, might well think so (...).”

Cebes’ point is straightforward: only foolish people presume that they are better than the gods at taking care of themselves. Sensible people, namely those who take part in philosophy, wish to continue under the supervision and care of gods as long as possible, for they are aware that no one (not even themselves) could take better care of them than the gods. That is how Cebes supports his reasoning that, given (2), (1) is implausible. There is no doubt that Cebes is formulating an objection to (1). This is also evident in the conclusion of his speech:

T5. *Phaedo* 62e4-8:

'And yet put like this, Socrates, it's likely that the truth is the opposite of what was just said: it's fitting that the wise should resent dying, the foolish welcome it.'

Here Cebes repeats his conclusion that actual philosophers resent death. This conclusion is stronger than a negation of (1), for in order to deny (1) it would suffice to hold that philosophers face death with *indifference*. However, it is precisely the stronger conclusion, that philosophers meet death with *resentment*, that Cebes thinks that follows from thesis (2) (if only it be added that philosophers are aware that no one could take better care of them than the gods).

It is therefore completely expected that Socrates, presented with such a speech by Cebes', formulates an argument such as PA in order to support thesis (1).⁹ This argument is clearly designed to answer Cebes' objection, for its conclusion, that philosophers do not resent death (68b8-c4), is the negation of Cebes' conclusion in T5. Furthermore, a key word in Cebes' objection, "resent (ἀγανακτεῖν)", occurs five times in PA (in 64a8, 67e2, 67e10, 68b1 and 68b9), indicating that Socrates never lost sight of Cebes' objection; rather, this was his target throughout the argument since its very outset. But Socrates' position in PA, like that of his objector, Cebes, is stronger than the assumption that the philosopher meets death with indifference, for according to Socrates it would be strange if philosophers did not die gladly (ἄσμενοι, 68a1 and 68b1). Thus PA is really a defense of the philosophers' readiness to die, which is stated in (1).

Of course, in order to fully rebut Cebes' objection it is not sufficient to just defend (1) on its own terms, without regard for its compatibility with (2), as PA does; it is also necessary to show that the incompatibility between (1) and (2) is merely apparent, for Cebes questions (1) on the basis of this incompatibility – remember his reasoning is that, given (2), then (1) is implausible. Showing that this incompatibility is only apparent is the role of RA, which supports the conclusion that true philosophers will meet good gods and companions in the afterlife too, a conclusion that renders (1) plausible even if (2) is true. But if RA dissolves the incompatibility on which Cebes' objection is built, could not Socrates have answered Cebes well enough by presenting just RA, without PA? Actually, just dissolving the incompatibility

⁹ Pace White (2006: 448), for whom in 63e8ff. (the outset of PA) "Socrates *unexpectedly* returns to the general theme of the philosopher's willingness to die" (my italics).

is also insufficient, for in this case Cebes could have retorted that, even if (1) is not incompatible with any other of Socrates' theses, it still lacks support. Indeed, thesis (1) is not at all intuitive and RA does nothing toward establishing it. In particular, RA's conclusion is compatible with the weaker thesis of indifference toward death, for why would Socrates or any other philosopher choose the gods and friends in the afterlife over the gods and friends in this life? The hope that people there are better than people here is mentioned by Socrates only to be signaled as an object of less conviction (63c1-2), and no indication is ever given that the gods there are better than the gods here. Hence if Socrates had presented just RA, Cebes could have easily kept questioning the plausibility of (1) – he would only be unable to question (1) on the basis of its incompatibility with (2), as this is dissolved by RA. Therefore, that besides RA Socrates formulates an argument such as PA is not only expected but required (*pace* White 2006), given that Cebes' quarrel is with thesis (1).

2.1.2. Simmias' charge

T6. *Phaedo* 63a4-10:

Simmias said, 'Well, Socrates, this time, at least, I too think that there's something in what Cebes is saying. With what motive would truly wise men try to escape from masters better than themselves and give them up without a fight? And I think that Cebes is aiming his argument at you, because you are accepting without a fight your departure both from us and from those good rulers, as you yourself agree they are, the gods'.

Simmias is providing an interpretation of Cebes' speech. First, judging by the question he asks in T6, Simmias is assuming Cebes' reasoning that, given (2), (1) is implausible. For Simmias wants to know why a wise person, like a philosopher, is readily willing to die, even though she knows that gods care for her while she is alive. His question is "why (1), given that (2)?" Thus, although he does not say so, it is clear that Simmias, like Cebes, holds both that (2) is plausible and that the incompatibility between (1) and (2) entails the implausibility of (1). What Simmias does with his question, therefore, is to reiterate and call attention to the seriousness of Cebes' questioning of thesis (1).

Second, Simmias interprets Cebes' objection as not directed only to a thesis, but above all to the concrete attitude that Socrates, precisely a philosopher, is displaying in the face of death. It is in this way that what was an objection in Cebes'

speech becomes an accusation in Simmias' speech: Simmias takes Cebes' objection and applies it to the particular case of Socrates. The only substantial novelty of Simmias' speech in relation to that of Cebes is its inclusion of Socrates' friends among those that Socrates is about to abandon.¹⁰ Thus, Socrates is accused of facing death too lightly, as if it were too easy for him to abandon his *friends* and the gods who take care of him in the best possible way. Although Simmias does not express himself in these words, he implies that Socrates' is being a *fool*, since a really sensible person would be angry at having to abandon the gods who care for him according to the thesis (2).

Therefore, Simmias shares with Cebes both the assumption of thesis (2) and the questioning of thesis (1) on the grounds that it seems incompatible with (2). This shared position is what Socrates has to undermine by argument. Thus Socrates needs to present an argument in favor of (1). This argument is PA, which responds not only to Cebes' objection but also to Simmias' accusation, since at the heart of both of them is the questioning of (1). Hence PA does belong, in the strict sense, to the defense presented by Socrates. At the same time, defending (1) is not enough: it is also necessary to show that there is no real incompatibility between (1) and (2). To show this, Socrates argues in RA that for those who seriously practice philosophy there is great hope of finding other good gods in the afterlife and perhaps other good friends as well.

2.2. Socrates' arguments in outline

Once we have seen what it is that Socrates' has to defend himself against, let us outline the arguments he presents in his defense. A sustained discussion of some of the points we are about to see will be provided in Chapter II.

2.2.1. The Philosophical Argument (PA): 64c2-68c4

Socrates' basic allegation is that the serenity or even cheerfulness of true philosophers in the face of death is nothing but consistent with the way of life

10 As D. Reed (2021) remarks, with this addition Simmias expresses a *new* question about Socrates' willingness to die, a question about him leaving his friends. Reed claims "this question should be read as expressing a worry his friends have about how they will go on after his death" (*ibidem*: 175). But Socrates does not address this question in his defense. And my concern here is with the *original* question about Socrates' willingness to die, the question about him leaving the gods.

adopted by them, which consists in trying to separate (ἀπαλλάσσομαι) the soul as much as possible from the body and to investigate reality with the soul itself by itself (αὐτὴν καθ' αὐτήν). Socrates argues that, given death is the separation (ἀπαλλαγὴν) of the soul and the body (64c4-5), it would be odd (ἄτοπον) and absurd (γελοῖον) if philosophers were resentful at death, for they spend their lives practicing such separation (64a6-9; 67d12-e3). Here is the structure of PA:

(P1) Death is equivalent to the separation of soul and body.

(P2) Philosophers practice the separation of soul and body.

(C1) Therefore philosophers practice death. [From (P1) and (P2)].

(C2) Therefore it would be odd if philosophers resented death. [From (C1)].

Before commenting on the soundness of this argument, it should be noticed that conclusion C2 is incompatible with Cebes' claim in T4 that it is unreasonable that philosophers resent death, which is more evidence that this argument is a defense against Cebes' objection. Now, for C2 to follow from C1, philosophers must be aware of P1, which is simply the definition of death given in 64c4-5. If philosophers were unaware of that definition, they would thereby be unaware that by practicing the separation of soul and body they are in fact practicing death, so their practice of death, expressed in C1, would be merely accidental and involuntary, and C2 would not follow from it.¹¹ Thus, although nowhere in the *Phaedo* Socrates explicitly claims that philosophers are aware of the definition of death, charity requires us to interpret him as implicitly making this claim, since he evidently takes the above argument to be sound.

As for P2, Socrates presents two pieces of evidence for it in 64c10-66a10. First, philosophers disdain both (the obtention of) bodily pleasures and other ways of serving or attending the body (περὶ τὸ σῶμα θεραπείας), such as the acquisition of fine clothes and shoes (64d2-65a3).¹² Second, philosophers do not recruit the body in

11 I am indebted to Evan Keeling and Paulo Ferreira for pointing this out to me.

12 The reason for this is given only in the Affinity Argument, specifically in 83b4-e4, where Socrates explains that intense bodily pleasures and pains compel the soul to believe that the causes of these sensations are most clear and real, when they are not. Now Socrates' recommendation, in *Republic* III 403-4, that the guardians of the city be carefully trained in gymnastics may be thought to be at variance with his claim here that philosophers do not serve the body. However, the training in gymnastics is not recommended there as a means to serve the body.

the search for wisdom, and this for two reasons: (i) the bodily senses are inaccurate and deceitful, so truth can only be attained by reasoning, and the soul reasons best in the absence of bodily sensations (65c5-9); and (ii) the objects of philosophical knowledge, the Forms, are not accessible through the bodily senses, but only through reasoning (65d4-66a8), an activity proper to the soul. So, besides not attending the body, philosophers make every effort to investigate reality with their souls alone, for the wisdom they want cannot be gained otherwise.

Since the separation of soul and body is equivalent to death, from the fact that philosophers practice separation it follows that philosophers really practice death. One question is what the difference is between the separation that philosophers achieve during life and the separation that occurs at the moment of biological death. In this respect I agree with Pakaluk (2003: 99-102), for whom the difference is one of degree. At death the *full* separation of soul and body occurs, whereas during life this separation can occur only *to some degree*. Both sorts of separation withdraw the soul from the disturbances caused by the body and thereby result in the soul' being able to reason and inquire better, which is crucial to philosophers. But the sort of separation achievable during life is necessarily limited, for the soul's activities of reasoning and inquiry are always susceptible to be interrupted or diverted by bodily matters: "in our investigations it [the body] yet again turns up everywhere, causes confusion and turmoil, and overwhelms us, so as to prevent us from being able to keep the truth in sight" (67d4-7).

Even with a philosophical way of life, it is not possible to fully (ἰκανῶς, 66b7) obtain wisdom before death. The reason is that the body deters reasoning all the time with its needs, desires and sensations (66a4-7, 66b8-d7). Despite philosophers' effort to separate the soul from the body as far as possible, only death can utterly separate these two things and set the soul free from the body (66d7-e4). Therefore, only after death will the soul have – if at all – the possibility of obtaining full wisdom (66e4-67a1). The latter statement will be addressed in Chapter II.

2.2.2. The Religious Argument (RA): 68c5-69e3

This argument shows that there is no real incompatibility between (1) and (2). Socrates argues that some human beings – the true philosophers – may dwell

with the gods after death. Therefore, even if it is true that the gods take care of *living* human beings (thesis 2), it is not odd at all (*pace* Cebes in T3) that philosophers are willing to *die* (thesis 1), for they can reasonably hope to meet with the gods in the afterlife too.

Socrates' argument is that only virtuous people may dwell with the gods in the afterlife, and only philosophers are really virtuous. Socrates adds that he has done everything in his power to live a truly philosophical life, so he has good reason to believe that after death he will meet supervisors or masters (i.e. gods) as good as the ones he has now. Socrates then concludes that he is justified in not resenting leaving his current masters (69d7-e1).

The virtues Socrates mentions in his argument are courage, temperance and justice, all of which he claims should be accompanied by wisdom (μετὰ φρονήσεως, 69b3-4). I discuss the relationship between virtue and wisdom (and the associated practice of purification) in Chapter II, Section 3. Right now I just want to highlight two similarities between some claims in Socrates' Defense, especially in RA, and the so-called "Digression" in the *Theaetetus*. There Socrates also asserts (i) that one should escape from human life to the realm of gods as soon as possible and (ii) that the way to do this is to become as just as possible, with wisdom (μετὰ φρονήσεως, 176b2). Let me quote him:

T7. *Theaetetus* 176a9-c5:

"(...) one ought to try to escape from here [among men] to there [among the gods] as quickly as one can. Now the way to escape is to become as nearly as possible like a god; and to become like a god is to be come just and religious, with wisdom. (...). A god is by no means and in no way unjust, but as just as it's possible to be, and there's nothing more like a god than one of us who has become as just as possible. It's in relation to this point that we find a man's true cleverness, or else his worthlessness and unmanliness. Because knowledge of this point is true wisdom and virtue, whereas ignorance of it is patent stupidity and vice."¹³

Socrates claims that being truly wise and virtuous amounts to knowing that one ought to become as just and religious – with wisdom – as possible. This claim implies that one *is* already *in a sense* wise and virtuous if one values wisdom and virtue above all else, especially above pleasures, pains, desires and fears rooted in the body. So, if one is a philosopher, then for this very reason one is already wise in a

13 Translation by McDowell (1973).

sense, for philosophers dedicate their lives primarily to the search of wisdom.¹⁴ And hopefully, in the course of one's career as a philosopher, as one performs philosophical inquiry, one will also become wise in a further sense. Whereas having wisdom in the former sense depends on valuing wisdom above all else, having wisdom in this further sense depends on being successful in philosophical inquiry. In the next chapter I will show how the former sense in which living philosophers may be said to be wise is connected to their practice of "moral" purification, while the latter sense is connected with their practice of "cognitive" purification.

14 In Hackforth's (1954: 57) words, the "passion for philosophy" is able to "rule a man's whole life and conduct" and "provide a new scale of values".

CHAPTER II

Purification and Pure Knowledge in Socrates' Defense

Plato in the *Phaedo* asserts that it is impossible for embodied beings to know anything purely. He makes Socrates say the following:

T1. *Phaedo* 66d7-67a1:

'But we [genuine philosophers] really have shown that if we are ever to have **pure knowledge** of something (καθαρῶς τι εἶσεσθαι), we must be separated from the body and view things by themselves with the soul by itself. The time when we will have that which we desire and whose lovers we claim to be, namely **wisdom** (φρόνησις), will be when we are dead, as the argument indicates, and not while we are alive. For if it is impossible to have **pure knowledge** of anything (μηδὲν καθαρῶς γινῶναι) when we are in the company of the body, then either knowledge cannot be acquired anywhere, or it can be acquired when we are dead. For then the soul will be alone by itself, apart from the body, whereas before then it will not.'

Before showing how T1 poses an important and difficult question, I must make an observation regarding the phrase "pure knowledge" employed by Sedley and Long (2011) in their translation. Socrates in T1 actually uses the verb "to know" (εἰδέναι in 66d8 and γινώσκειν in 66e5) accompanied by the adverb "purely" (καθαρῶς in both 66d8 and 66e5); he does not use the noun "knowledge" with the adjective "pure". Socrates' choice of words indicates an interest in the way something is known. But the phrase "pure knowledge" is useful as a means to refer to the *epistemic state* that results from having come to know something in a pure way, so let me stipulate that, in the present work, "to have pure knowledge of x" means the same as "to know x purely". Furthermore, since T1 implies that knowing purely is equivalent to having the sort of wisdom (φρόνησις) that philosophers long for, I also use "pure knowledge" interchangeably with "wisdom". So much now for linguistic observations. The concrete meaning of εἰδέναι καθαρῶς and φρόνησις is the subject of section 1 below.

T1 is part of what I have been calling the “philosophical argument” (64c2-68c4), Socrates’ sustained argument for the thesis that true philosophers die willingly (see Chapter I). Near the beginning of this argument, in 64c4-8, Socrates defined death as the separation of body and soul. Now he claims that what *genuine philosophers*¹⁵ long for, namely wisdom or pure knowledge, can only be attained, if at all, when one is dead, for only then the soul is separated from the body. In other words, one cannot obtain wisdom as long as one is embodied.¹⁶

In interpreting this claim it is tempting to suppose that, when Socrates mentions being dead, he is speaking of the separation of body and soul (i) that true philosophers achieve during life through the *practice* of death,¹⁷ instead of the separation (ii) that takes place in *biological* death. If this were right, Socrates would not be denying the attainability of wisdom by embodied beings, but simply restricting it to those that practice death, which is a much less extraordinary claim. But this is not right. On the contrary, Socrates must be speaking of separation (ii), for he clearly means to establish that true philosophers hope to attain pure knowledge after the kind of separation *that he is about to undergo*, namely biological death or disembodiment (67b7c3).¹⁸ Their possession of such hope is part of the reason why true philosophers die willingly and without fear (61c8-9 and 63e8-64a1), which is the thesis that Socrates wants to support with the philosophical argument.¹⁹ Now, if wisdom could be attained just as well while one is embodied, it would be utterly useless to argue that philosophers die willingly *because* they hope to attain wisdom when disembodied. Therefore Socrates in T1 is surely affirming the unattainability of wisdom by embodied beings.²⁰

We interpreters cannot, then, deny that T1 contains an extraordinary claim, but must do our best to understand it and its context. In order to contribute to such an understanding, I discuss in this chapter a few questions: what pure

15 They are the referents of “we” in the whole passage of which T1 is an extract, a passage which explicitly describes the opinions of “those who are genuinely philosophers” (τοῖς γνησίως φιλοσόφοις, 66b1).

16 This statement is obviously indented to hold for everyone, not just for philosophers.

17 Socrates in the *Phaedo* famously claim that philosophy is the practice of death (see 64a4-9, but especially 67d7-10 and 80e1-81a2).

18 But, as we will see, philosophers can obtain some degree of wisdom while alive.

19 I have argued in Chapter I, Section 2, that White (2006: 458) is wrong in claiming that this argument constitutes “no part of the defense [Socrates’] narrowly understood”.

20 Yet this unattainability is not something that Socrates claims to *know*. T1 is part of a speech that intends to convey the genuine philosophers’ *opinion* (δόξαν, 66b2). Thus, we should understand Socrates’ claim in T1 as the claim that wisdom or pure knowledge seems to be – “as the argument indicates” (ὡς ὁ λόγος σημαίνει, 66e3-4) – unattainable by embodied beings.

knowledge is (Section 1), why it is unattainable by embodied beings and why philosophers seek to attain it anyway (Section 2), what is the practice of death or “purification” by means of which philosophers seek to attain it (Section 3) and what is the epistemic achievement, if any, that philosophers do attain in this life through purification (Section 4).

1. What pure knowledge is

To understand what it means to know something purely, it is helpful to start by asking what things are considered “impurities”, that is, what things, when present, give knowledge an impure quality. T1 says that it is impossible to know something purely in the company of the body, and the context shows that this is due to the bodily senses. As I discuss in subsection 1.1 below, the reports from the senses are some of the “impurities” that need to be absent for knowledge to take place in a pure way.

1.1. Pure knowledge and inquiry through the senses

The very first thing that Socrates says about wisdom in the *Phaedo* is regarding its acquisition (κτῆσιν, 65a9). He claims that the bodily senses are an impediment (ἐμπόδιον, 65a10) to the acquisition of wisdom if one employs them in inquiry (ἐν τῇ ζητήσσει, *ibidem*), for they are neither *accurate* nor *clear* (μὴ ἀκριβεῖς εἰσιν μηδὲ σαφεῖς, 65b5). This claim is not explained in Socrates’ Defense, but is picked up and expanded in the following passage of the Affinity Argument:²¹

T2. *Phaedo* 79c-9:

‘Now weren’t we also saying some time ago²² that whenever the soul additionally uses the body for considering something, whether through seeing or through hearing or through some other sense – for to consider something through the body is to do so through sense-perception – at those times *it is dragged by the body into things that never stay in the same state*, and the soul itself wanders and is disturbed and giddy as if drunk, *because the things it is grasping have the same kind of instability?*’

‘Certainly.’

Socrates’ statement in T2 that sensible items “never stay in the same state” (οὐδέποτε κατὰ ταῦτὰ ἔχοντα) implies that the problem is not that the senses fail to faithfully capture sensible items; the problem with employing the senses in inquiry is

21 The Affinity Argument (78b4-84b8) elaborates on many of the claims found in Socrates’ Defense.

22 Gallop (1975) and Hackforth (1954) agree that (i) Socrates is referring to his claim in Socrates’ Defense that the senses hinder inquiry and that (ii) therefore T2 explains that claim.

actually that sensible items are unstable. So, the reason why Socrates deems the reports of the senses neither accurate nor clear is that such reports are *about unstable things*. We find confirmation that this is the actual reason in the following passage of the *Philebus*, where the instability of sensible objects is explicitly taken as responsible for the lack of clearness and accuracy of whatever is asserted about them:

T3. *Philebus* 59a11-b2:

‘So how could we assert anything *clear* (σαφές) about these things [i.e. sensible things] with *accurate* truth (τῆ ἀκριβεστάτῃ ἀληθείᾳ) if they never (μήτε... πώποτε) did stay nor will stay nor now stay in the same state (κατὰ ταύτᾳ)?’

‘Quite so.’²³

Hence the senses cannot report anything clear because their objects never stay in the same state.²⁴ That sensible items never stay in the same state means (probably among other things) that they change over time. As a consequence, the truth-value of most statements about them is dependent on time. For example, what is *now* a true statement about a sensible state of affairs can *later* be false in virtue of a change in that state of affairs. If such a statement is neither explicitly nor implicitly accompanied by any time indications at all, its truth-value cannot be determined – that is what it means to say that its truth-value depends on time. But time is not the only circumstance on which the truth-values of statements about sensible items depend. Take for example the statement “Helen of Troy is beautiful”. This statement is true if one is speaking about *humans alone* and at the same time false if one is speaking about *gods too*, for Helen is ugly in comparison with the gods.²⁵ Thus, the truth-values of such statements also depend on the classes of things being considered or compared. And these truth-values also depend on the *aspect* being considered: for example, “this stick is larger than that one” can be true considering the sticks’ *length*, but false considering their *width*.²⁶ Therefore the truth-values of statements about sensible items depend on several *circumstances*, including but not limited to time. This point is probably contained in Socrates’ claim in both T2 and T3 that sensible objects never stay in the same state

23 All translations of the *Philebus* are by Dorothea Frede in Cooper (1997), occasionally with small adaptations.

24 Notice that though the sense-perception is heavily disparaged in these passages, it is nonetheless said to be necessary for knowledge in the Recollection Argument. I will deal with this apparent inconsistency in Chapter III.

25 This example is from the *Hippias Major*. For an insightful discussion of it, see Politis (2021: 17-22).

26 This example is inspired from the equals argument in the *Phaedo* (T7 in Chapter III).

(which is why I wrote above that this claim probably means other things besides that sensible objects change over time, these “other things” being the further circumstances that need to be considered in order to determine the truth-value of most statements about such objects). I will return to this point in Chapter III when I discuss the so-called “equals argument”.

In addition to saying that they are neither accurate nor clear, Socrates also claims that the soul is *deceived* (ἐξαπατᾶται, 65b11) by the senses. The idea is clearly that, as far as the acquisition of wisdom is concerned, the senses are not merely unhelpful or innocuous, but actually *detrimental*. Why?²⁷ Resorting to extracts from the Affinity Argument, Ebrey (2017) has convincingly argued that, because the senses convey pleasure and pain to the soul, and these sensations can be extremely impressive and captivating, the senses can deceive the soul into thinking that what they present to it is significantly *more valuable* than the *objects of pure knowledge* (on which see below).

Just as Socrates disparages the use of the senses in inquiry, he claims that it is exclusively through the soul’s reasoning that truth is grasped (65b9-c4), and that the soul reasons best when it is alone by itself (65c5-10), that is, when it is not considering reality by way of the senses. Clearly, coming to know something purely demands inquiring into it purely through reasoning.

1.2. Pure knowledge, its objects and their inquiry

The second thing that Socrates says about wisdom in the *Phaedo* is that its objects are things that cannot be apprehended through the senses, namely the Forms (65d4-10).²⁸

When Socrates introduces the Forms in the *Phaedo*, he mentions the “just itself (δίκαιον αὐτὸ, 65d4-5)”, as well as “the beautiful” and “the good”. These are the most frequently mentioned Forms in the *Phaedo* (perhaps in the *corpus*), and this is the first time that any Forms are mentioned in this dialogue. A few lines below, Socrates mentions the Form of largeness (μέγεθος, 65d12) and two other Forms,

27 One insufficient answer is that, although the senses cannot access Forms, and so cannot furnish our soul directly with falsehoods about Forms, inquiry through them may still deceive us in relation to the Forms: precisely because the senses never tell us anything at all about, say, the Form of piety, they may lead us into thinking that there is nothing more to piety than the many sensible pious things. For an answer along these lines, see the brief remarks on Gallop (1975: 91-2).

28 Socrates does not provide any argument for this claim in the *Phaedo*. Politis (2021: 24-48) convincingly argues that there is an argument for it in the *Hippias Major*.

and we should pay close attention to how he refers to them in those lines, for it may tell us something about what these things are and what it is to know them:

T4. *Phaedo* 65d12-e5:

I am talking about all of them, such as Largeness, Health, Strength and, to sum up, about the being (οὐσία) of all the rest – what each of them really is (ὃ τυγχάνει ἕκαστον ὄν).

On any interpretation of T4, the philosopher wants to know the being or essence (οὐσία) of each of these things such as largeness, health and strength, as well as justice, beauty, goodness and so on. Recently, Politis (2021) has defended the thesis that Forms are essences of qualities. I find his defense convincing and accordingly assume his thesis.

My present concern is with these two phrases in T4: “the being of [them]” and “what each of them is”. They have the same referent, and the latter explains the former, as pointed out by Burnet (1911: 34). In this way, the wisdom sought by philosophers consists in knowing the beings or essences – i.e. the Forms – of each quality or, *equivalently*, knowing what each quality is. These phrases and their variants are frequently connected with the Forms throughout the *Phaedo*. Most remarkably, in 78d1-2, Socrates speaks of “the being which is said to be the object of our account when in our questions and answers we explain what it is”. Such language is most reminiscent of the Socratic what-is-*F* question, as has been widely noted in the literature. It is indeed almost certain that the objects of wisdom (Forms) are the objects of the what-is-*F* question asked by Socrates in earlier dialogues such as the *Charmides*, the *Euthyphro* and the *Laches*.²⁹ Accordingly, wisdom is that which is achieved by a successful inquiry into the what-is-*F* question.³⁰ Being “successful” here means, of course, finding a *fully adequate* definition, that is, an answer to the what-is-*F* question that satisfies all of Socrates’ strict requirements, like the requirements that the answer must not be through example and exemplar.³¹

That the Forms cannot be apprehended through the senses fits in with the former claims that it is exclusively through the soul’s reasoning that truth is grasped

29 Though in these dialogues Socrates does not attribute to these objects the other distinctive features that he mentions in other places such as the Affinity Argument.

30 Socrates and his interlocutors in those dialogues never succeed in answering that question, but this does not mean that they never make any cognitive achievement through their joint inquiries, only that they never achieve pure knowledge. I will suggest in Section 4 that Socrates’ interlocutors do make a cognitive achievement: acknowledging their ignorance regarding the matters about which Socrates questions and refutes them.

31 This requirement means that one cannot rightly answer what largeness is by mentioning a large thing, even if this thing happens to be a paradigmatic case of largeness such as Mount Everest. For a thoroughly discussion of the requirements for definition, see Politis (2015: 44-62).

(65b9-c4) and that the soul reasons best when it is alone by itself (65c5-10), that is, when it is not considering reality through the senses. This idea is picked up and expanded in following passage of the Affinity Argument (which is the direct continuation of T2 above):

T5. *Phaedo* 79d1-9:

‘But that whenever the soul considers alone by itself, it gets away into that which is *pure*, always in existence, and immortal, and which *stays in the same condition*; that the soul, because it is akin to this, always comes to be with it whenever alone by itself and able to do so; that the soul is then at rest from its wandering, and in relation to those entities stays always in the same state and condition, because the things it is grasping have the same kind of stability; and that this state of the soul is called “*wisdom*”?’

‘That’s completely right and true, Socrates,’ he said.

Socrates’ statement in T5 that the soul is in a state of wisdom when in contact with what “stays always in the same state and condition” (ἀεὶ κατὰ ταῦτὰ ὡσαύτως ἔχει) implies that pure knowledge is about Forms. Again, we find confirmation of this in the. In that dialogue Protarchus and Socrates try to determine what pure knowledge is:

T6. *Philebus* 52d10-e7:

I want to omit nothing in the investigation of both pleasure and knowledge (ἐπιστήμης). I want to ask if one part of them is pure (καθαρόν), another impure (οὐ καθαρόν), so that both of them may come to trial in their pure form, and so make it easier for you and me and all those present to come to a verdict in this trial.

Six pages later, Socrates describes the endeavor to determine what pure knowledge is as the attempt to pinpoint “what art or knowledge (τίς τέχνη ἢ τίς ἐπιστήμη) excels all others”, 58c1), that is, “*which one aims for clarity, accuracy, and the highest degree of truth* (τίς ποτε τὸ σαφές καὶ τὰκριβές καὶ τὸ ἀληθέστατον ἐπισκοπεῖ, 58c2-3)”. And what knowledge does Socrates take to be the most clear and accurate?

T7. *Philebus* 58a1-6:

Clearly everybody would know what knowledge I am referring to now! For I take it that anyone with any share in reason at all would consider *the one concerned with being and with what is really and always in every way the same* (τὴν... περὶ τὸ ὄν καὶ τὸ ὄντως καὶ τὸ κατὰ ταῦτὸν ἀεὶ πεφυκὸς πάντως) by far the truest of all kinds of knowledge.

Just as in T5, Socrates says in T7 that, unlike sensible items, Forms (he is undoubtedly speaking about them) stay always in the same state. But T7 adds that this feature of Forms is what makes knowledge of them *pure*. This passage therefore confirms that pure knowledge – the truest, most clear and accurate knowledge – is

about what is always in the same state, namely the Forms.³² The purity (and the clearness and the accuracy) of a sort knowledge depends on its subject matter, therefore what makes pure knowledge *pure* (and supremely clear and accurate) is precisely the fact that its objects always stay in the same state.³³

After this second brief excursion into the *Philebus*, let us go back to the *Phaedo*.

1.3. The state of *pure knowledge or wisdom*

Although I have not discussed it so far, T2 contains a description of the state the soul gets in whenever it investigates with the senses. According to Socrates, at those times, “the soul itself wanders (πλανᾶται) and is disturbed and giddy as if drunk, because the things it is grasping have the same kind of instability” (79c7-8). Now notice the contrasting description that Socrates gives in T5 of the state of the soul called “*wisdom*”. Wisdom, which is attained when the soul investigates by way of reasoning alone and approaches the Forms, is described in T5 as a state of rest and stability, as opposed to the wandering caused by investigating through the senses.

This is reminiscent of passages outside the *Phaedo* where Socrates associates a kind of wandering in the soul with lack of knowledge. In the *Euthyphro*, Euthyphro’s statements are said to “run away” and be “unwilling to stay where they are put” (11b9-c7), and to “walk” and “go round in a circle” (15b7-c1). In the *Meno*, true opinions that fall short of knowledge “are not prepared to stay with one for long. Instead they run away from the person’s soul” (98a1-2).³⁴ And in the *Sophist*, the opinions of people without knowledge “are like those of men who wander (πλανωμένων)” (230b5 in T10 below). These passages are different from the *Phaedo* passage (T2) in that they do not say that the *soul* wanders, but only that the *soul’s opinions* wander or, in the *Euthyphro*, the *statements*. They also do not say that the wandering is caused by contact with sensible things. However, it seems that these differences are too small, thus we may safely assume that the familiar

32 About T7 Bobonich (2002: 170) says that, “although Plato does not explicitly call these items Forms here, it is reasonable to hold that this is what he has in mind (...)”.

33 In Bobonich’s (*ibidem*) words: “The purest and most accurate sort of knowledge thus grasps objects that are themselves pure and determinate. Nor is this link accidental: it is the fact that such objects are themselves pure and determinate that allows the knowledge that grasps them to be pure and determinate”.

34 All translations of the *Meno* in this dissertation are by Sedley and Long (2011). The *Euthyphro*’s is mine.

opposition between the stability of knowledge and the instability of opinion is present at the *Phaedo* and is useful to understand what pure knowledge is. So, what does it mean to say that the soul is in a state of stability as opposed to a state of wandering? What exactly does it mean to say that opinions are unstable?

Readers of the *Meno* are aware that, for Plato, knowledge, unlike true opinion, is stable (μόνιμοι, 98a6), and the stability of knowledge makes it more valuable than true opinion. The relevant passage (97d-98b) compares merely true opinions to untethered statues of Daedalus: since these statues can move themselves, they are easily lost if untethered. The point is that mere true opinions are easily lost too – in this consists their instability. Conversely, the claim that knowledge is stable means that knowledge is not easily lost (except of course if one's cognitive faculties are impaired).

But what is it to lose a true opinion? Irwin (1995: 143) says that Plato must take into account two kinds of cases: (1) the subject no longer believes in p ; and (2) the subject still believes in p , but p is not true any longer. These are really kinds of cases where the subject does not have a true belief in p , for in (1) p is not believed and in (2) p is not true. However, nothing in the *Meno* passage supports that Plato is concerned with the second kind of case. *True* opinions are said to run away from the soul (98a2), a claim that suitably illustrates (1) and is incompatible with (2). Not only is there no evidence of Plato's concern with the second kind of case, but Irwin himself does not seem to make relevant use of (2) in his account of the *Meno* passage. In that passage, therefore, to lose the true opinion that p is simply to cease to believe p while p is true. Plato's point is that this happens much more easily if the subject merely believes p than if she knows p . In the words of epistemologist Timothy Williamson (2002: 79), "the probability of your believing p tomorrow is greater conditional on your knowing p today than on your believing p truly today".

And what typically makes a subject drop her belief in p while p is true? When answering this question, we should not consider cases in which one's holding an opinion or withdrawing it are either irrational or caused by cognitive impairment. Instead, we should consider cases where the abandonment of true belief is due to evidence or criticism (in the form of counter-argument) and therefore rational. Thus, the difference at issue between knowledge and mere true opinion is that knowledge is less prone to be shattered by future criticism or evidence. Of course, no evidence can *directly* imply the negation of p if p is true, and since truth is a condition of both

true belief and knowledge, no evidence can *directly* undermine either true belief or knowledge. But there are *indirect ways* in which evidence can undermine true belief. One kind of situation in which this happens, according to Williamson (2002: 78), is the following: suppose one's belief in p is essentially based on false beliefs r and q ; in this case, as soon as one finds evidence that either r or q or both are false, one ceases to believe p .³⁵ Since knowledge of p cannot be essentially based in false beliefs, otherwise it is not knowledge, knowledge of p is not prone to be undermined in this kind of situation.

I will return to the stability of knowledge in my discussion in Section 4 of the epistemic achievement available to philosophers while they live, and in my discussion in Chapter IV of the mode of inquiry recommended by Socrates.

Putting together the conclusions of the present section, we have that pure knowledge or wisdom (i) is acquired not through the senses but only through reasoning, (ii) has as its objects the Forms, which are known by discovering an adequate answer to the Socratic what-is- F question, namely an adequate definition of the quality F , and (iii) is a stable epistemic state, which means it is unlikely to be shattered by future criticism or evidence.

2. Why wisdom is unattainable and why philosophers seek it anyway

Even though, as we have seen, the employment of the senses in inquiry prevents one from acquiring pure knowledge, this by itself does not entail that embodied beings cannot attain pure knowledge. According to what Socrates has said so far, one could still acquire pure knowledge if one simply inquired with the soul's reasoning alone, without employing the senses. So why is pure knowledge unattainable by the embodied?

The reason is given a few lines before T1, where Socrates claims that the body imposes too many distractions (ἀσχολίας, 66b8), such as loves, desires, fears and fantasies, not to mention the need for sustenance and the attack of diseases (66b8-c4). Even when a genuine philosopher gets some time away from all these, and tries to investigate with the soul alone, the body "again turns up everywhere, causes confusion and turmoil, and overwhelms us" (66c-d). This seems to mean that

35 Another kind of situation mentioned by Williamson (*ibidem*: 78-9) is this: suppose one is surrounded by plenty of *misleading* evidence against p ; in this case, as soon as one finds such evidence, one drops the belief in p . Both situations depend on one's acting rationally and being with one's cognitive apparatus in good order.

one can, a few times, start an inquiry with the soul alone, but the body will soon show up and disrupt the inquiry before it is completed. The body, therefore, presents insurmountable practical obstacles to the attainability of pure knowledge, in the opinion of genuine philosophers. Once a genuine philosopher is dead and her soul is thereby fully away from her body, her soul can finally know the Forms purely because it can finally inquire into the Forms without being disturbed by the body.

Now, if pure knowledge is unattainable by the embodied, why do philosophers bother to seek it during their embodied life? Socrates asserts repeatedly that only those who die purified are allowed, in the afterlife, to know Forms and dwell with gods (67a6-b1; 69c6-7; 81a4-10).³⁶ Those who die unpurified are born again at some time and have another embodied life (81b1-82b10). The required purification is only accomplished by the right practice of philosophy or, equivalently, the practice of death, which is constituted by the search for truth and knowledge (and by the practice of real virtue, on which see Section 3 below). So philosophers have a good reason to seek pure knowledge even if they cannot fully attain it while they live.

This is consistent with Socrates' attitude in all the dialogues, for he is always eager to search for truth and knowledge. By way of example, one might quote his words in the *Meno*:

T8. *Meno* 86b6-c2:

In defense of the argument [against Menos' paradox of inquiry] I would not affirm the other points very strongly, but that we would be better, more manly and less lazy by believing that one should search for what one doesn't know than if we believed that we cannot discover what we do not know and should not even search for it – that is something over which I would fiercely contend, if I were able, in both word and deed.

Benson (2000: 180-5), after considering T8 along with passages from the *Apology*, the *Euthyphro* and the *Gorgias*, rightly asserts that Socrates “does not sound like a man who is resigned to the human condition and the unobtainability of the knowledge he lacks” (*ibidem*: 185). However, given T1, which Benson does not consider in his study, the reason for Socrates' being unresigned must be not the belief in the attainability of knowledge, as Benson would have it, but rather the belief

36 Unlike Sedley and Long (2011), I take μετὰ τοιοῦτων in 67a8 to refer to Forms. As White (2006: 458 n. 36) remarks, “the context (...) contains nothing to warrant a conclusion concerning persons”. In any case, in the very next line Socrates speaks of knowing all that is unalloyed, which can only apply to Forms, so knowledge of them is surely part of what awaits the purified soul in the afterlife.

that the search for knowledge purifies the soul and thereby enables it to go to a good destination in the afterlife, as he explains in the *Phaedo*. One should search for what one does not know even though one believes that one cannot fully discover it in this life.

But are we to suppose that philosophers spend their whole lives searching for knowledge without ever making any epistemic achievement, or that they only achieve true opinion, at most? The consideration of this question must wait until Section 4. In the next section, I discuss purification.

3. In what consists the practice of purification

Socrates summarizes the practice of purification by saying that it consists in “parting the soul from the body as much as possible” (67c6-7). This is what purification is in general. But if we look closely, we see that purification, the practice of parting the soul from the body, can be divided in two aspects, a cognitive and a moral one. The repeated attempt to grasp the Forms by inquiring with the soul alone, without the senses, is the intellectual or cognitive aspect of the practice. The abstention from pleasures and pains as well as the resistance to desires and fears is the moral aspect. Human beings must make an effort to become purified on these two fronts if they want to know Forms and dwell with gods in the afterlife. These are aspects of the single practice of parting the soul from the body, but they are described separately.

Moral purification is first described in the passage I have been calling the “religious argument” (68b8-69d3), where Socrates claims that only true philosophers practice real courage (ἀνδρεία), real temperance (σωφροσύνη) and, in general, real virtue (ἀρετή). His argument for this claim is that non-philosophers only face evils or pains when doing this can help them to avoid facing greater evils or pains, which they fear more than the ones they do face. Similarly, when these people abstain from pleasures, they only do so in order to obtain greater pleasures, which they desire even more than the ones they abstain from. Therefore, non-philosophers are not really courageous, nor are they really temperate. Only true philosophers are really courageous and temperate, because they face evils and abstain from pleasures exclusively in pursuance of wisdom. Socrates insists, with a metaphor, that one should not exchange pleasures for pleasures, pains for pains or fears for fears; one

should rather exchange all these things (pleasures, pains and fears) for wisdom (69a6-10).³⁷ Then Socrates says this:

T9. *Phaedo* 69b8-c3:

The reality is, I suspect, that temperance, justice and courage are a kind of purification (κάθαρσις τις) from everything like this [pleasures and fears], and that wisdom itself is a kind of rite to purify us (καθαρός τις).

This crucial extract has received some discussion in the literature. The main question is what is the relationship between virtue, wisdom and purification. Here is how I understand this passage. When Socrates says that the virtues are a kind of “purification (κάθαρσις)”³⁸ from pleasures and fears, he is just giving a concise formulation for the view he has just put forth as to what real virtue is. Real temperance is actually about *purifying* oneself from pleasures, that is, moving oneself away from them, rather than abstaining from some pleasures to obtain greater ones. A similar idea applies to courage, justice and, indeed, to virtue in general: real virtue is a kind of purification as opposed to a path towards greater pleasures, littler pains and so on.³⁹

When Socrates claims in T9 that wisdom is a kind of purifying rite (καθαρός), it is natural to understand “wisdom” as referring to the possession (not the search) of wisdom. Nevertheless, in the Affinity Argument, where a longer and clearer description of moral purification is provided, Socrates asserts that it is *philosophy*, the love (not the possession) of wisdom, that provides the purifying rite (82d5-7). This fits better what Socrates has been saying all along in the *Phaedo*, that philosophers avoid communion with the body (i.e. they practice purification) in their attempt know the Forms (i.e. in their search of wisdom). Can Socrates be implying in T9 that the *possession* of wisdom is also a purifying rite? We can answer affirmatively if we are allowed to borrow from *Theaetetus* 176a9-c5 (T7 in Chapter I). As I have noted in Chapter I, Section 2, Socrates in that passage implies that one already possesses wisdom *in a sense* if one values wisdom or pure knowledge above all else. Wisdom in this sense is a purifying rite because it provides its

37 I agree with the way Bluck (1952[1954]: 155) and Hackforth (1955: 192) interpret the clause in 69a10, assuming that “all these things (πάντα ταῦτα)” picks out pleasures, pains and fears. Socrates means that true virtue is, in the case of pleasures, abstaining from a pleasure in order to gain wisdom (as opposed to abstaining from that pleasure in order to get a greater one).

38 The Greek word could mean either the process of purification or the consummated purification. I believe the former meaning is more adequate in this context, where Socrates seems to be talking about acting virtuously.

39 Bostock (1986: 33-4) notes that it is difficult to apply this idea to *justice*.

possessor with good reason and motivation for moving away of anything that may hinder philosophical inquiry. Desires and fears rooted in the body are the things that most divert philosophers from their inquiry. And what is worse: these things hold the soul in the bodily realm, so that after death the soul is soon bound to a new body through rebirth. If the philosopher's soul is to be free and enter that other realm,⁴⁰ where it can know Forms and dwell with gods, it must "refrain from pleasures, desires, pains and fears as much as it can" (83b6-7).⁴¹

As for cognitive purification, in the *Phaedo* we are told that one "comes close to knowing each Form" if and only if one investigates "with his intellect alone as far as possible, neither adducing sight in his thinking, nor dragging in any other sense to accompany his reasoning" (65e1-66a1). This is how philosophy points out (φιλοσοφία ... ἐνδεικνυμένη) that inquiry should be conducted (83a1-5). But how philosophical inquiry looks like? Later in this dialogue Socrates says that those who spend their lives "hating and belittling arguments" are "deprived of both truth and knowledge about things" (90d5-7), which implies that the possession of truth and knowledge depends on dealing with arguments. Still later, when Socrates is about to present the method of hypothesis, he implies that one must look for the truth in arguments (99e5), a passage that will be the main topic of Chapter IV. Also, as I have mentioned, Socrates in the *Phaedo* refers sometimes to the practice of question-and-answer in connection with the attempt to find that which each thing is. Hence, philosophical inquiry is a search for truth through arguments, and especially for true and adequate definitions through question-and-answer discussion. There can be little doubt that this mode of investigation is what Socrates calls by the name "dialectic" in *Republic VII*.⁴² Here in the *Phaedo* it is just "philosophy" (or, more precisely, one aspect of philosophy, the other being moral purification).

There seems to be, however, a preliminary cognitive purification that must be completed before one engages in philosophical investigation and attempts to know each Form. The aim of this first step in cognitive purification is acknowledging that one does not know what beauty is, what justice is and so on (i.e., one does not

40 In the language employed in *Theaetetus*: "to escape from here [among men] to there [among the gods]" (cf. T7 in Chapter I).

41 There is a debate in the literature on whether Socrates is recommending that we should abstain from pleasures (Ebrey, 2017) or just devalue them (Woolf, 2004). I think Ebrey (2017) has made a convincing case for holding that Socrates is recommending abstention, which is a form of asceticism. Most of the textual evidence for this is in the Affinity Argument and Ebrey deals with it admirably.

42 Of course *Republic VII* provides a much richer description of dialectic, especially in 531-7.

know the Forms). This is explained by the visitor from Elea in *Sophist* 229b1-230e5 (which includes T10 below). Theaetetus and the visitor are considering two existing ways to correct that which is the worst kind of ignorance, namely “thinking that one knows a thing when one does not know it” (τὸ μὴ κατειδότα τι δοκεῖν εἰδέναι, 229c5). One is the rough way of admonition (νουθετητικήν, 230a3), employed by fathers towards their sons. The other is a smoother way, employed by people who think that “all ignorance is involuntary, and that he who thinks himself wise (σοφὸν) would never be willing to learn any of those things in which he believes he is clever” (230a5-8). The method by which these people try to correct the latter, worst kind of ignorance is described in a somewhat long speech that I would like to quote in full:

T10. *Sophist* 230b4-d4:

They question (διερωτῶσιν) a man about the things about which he thinks he is talking sense when he is talking nonsense; then they easily discover that his opinions are like those of men who wander, and in their discussions they collect those opinions and compare them with one another, and by the comparison they show that they contradict one another about the same things, in relation to the same things and in respect to the same things. But those who see this grow angry with themselves and gentle towards others, and this is the way in which they are freed from their high and obstinate opinions about themselves. The process of freeing them, moreover, affords the greatest pleasure to the listeners and the most lasting benefit to him who is subjected to it. For just as physicians who care for the body believe that the body cannot get benefit from any food offered to it until all obstructions are removed, so, my boy, those who purify (οἱ καθαίροντες) the soul believe that the soul can receive no benefit from any teachings offered to it until someone by refutation (ἐλέγχων) reduces him who is refuted to an attitude of modesty, by removing the opinions that obstruct the teachings, and thus purifies (καθαρὸν ἀποφήνη) him and makes him think that he knows only what he knows, and no more. (FOWLER, 1921, modified).⁴³

This description is interesting for three reasons. First, the method is described as a purification, which is why this passage has to be considered in the present discussion. Second, the method consists in questioning (διερωτάω) and refutation (ἐλέγχων), which are always part of philosophical investigation.

But what is most interesting is, third, that the description in T10 fits almost exactly what Socrates does to his interlocutors in dialogues such as the *Meno*, the *Charmides*, the *Laches* and the *Euthyphro*. There is a single, small difference that should not prevent us from understanding that T10 alludes to Socrates' method of refutation in those dialogues, the so-called “Socratic *elenchus*”. The difference is that

43 Modifications: I replaced “cross-questioning” by “refutation” (ἐλέγχων) and “purge” by “purify”.

in many cases Socrates' interlocutors do not become "gentler towards others" as described in T10.⁴⁴ On the contrary, many of them get angry with Socrates, and such anger is the explanation he gives in the *Apology* for the discord that leads to him being sued. One cannot hold without argument that there is another difference in the fact that Socrates in those dialogues sometimes claims to have shown that an opinion is false,⁴⁵ for the method in T10 is said not only to expose inconsistency among opinions, but also to remove obstructive opinions. That said, it should be emphasized that T10 is claiming that the *elenchus* is a method for purifying people out of the (false) conceit of knowledge. The completion of this purification benefits people by making them ready and, ideally, willing *to learn*, which most probably means taking part in new question-and-answer sessions, now aiming at obtaining knowledge. In the *Apology* (20d6-e3 and 23b2-4) the absence of the conceit of knowledge is taken to be itself a kind of wisdom, "human wisdom (ἄνθρωπίνη σοφία, 20d8)", the only kind which Socrates there admits to have.⁴⁶ Clearly, possession of such wisdom is a requirement for being a true philosopher, since without it one would not bother to investigate what is beauty, what is justice and so on. Therefore, the purification out of the conceit of knowledge, produced by the Socratic method of refutation, may be considered a kind of cognitive achievement, even though it is not itself the acquisition of knowledge (see *Meno* 84a3-c6).

Socrates does not employ that method in the *Phaedo* because his interlocutors here, unlike the ones in those other dialogues, do not manifest the opinion that they know what they in fact do not know. They most probably have already been purified *from the conceit of knowledge*, so Socrates' present concern is joining them in the next and main step in cognitive purification: the search for positive knowledge through philosophical inquiry. In the next section, I will discuss the final epistemic achievement, if any, of such investigation. And in Chapter IV I will discuss how philosophical inquiry ought to be performed.

44 One exception occurs in the *Theaetetus*. Though it is a later dialogue, it is remarkable that, as mentioned by Cornford (1935: 180 n. 1), the language in T10 "closely resembles the (...) effect of Socrates' art on Theaetetus", which is described in 210b11-c4: "Then supposing you should ever henceforth try to conceive afresh, Theaetetus, if you succeed, your embryo thoughts will be better as a consequence of today's scrutiny; and if you remain barren, you will be *gentler and more agreeable* to your companions, having the good sense not to fancy you know what you do not know" (Cornford's translation, my emphasis).

45 An explanation for this feature of the Socratic *elenchus* is given by Vlastos (1983).

46 I agree with Benson (2000: 170) that "it is clear from Socrates' discussion of his human wisdom that he understands it to reside solely in his recognition of his ignorance".

The second stage of the purification process, that is, philosophical inquiry, which seeks positive knowledge about the Forms, also essentially involves refutation, in the form of presenting and facing objections. Anyone who thinks she has arrived at a reasonable thesis or theory on some subject must expose that thesis to all reasonable objections that can be raised against it. As evidence of this, we can cite Socrates' first reaction to the objections that Simmias and Cebes present to his thesis that the soul is immortal,⁴⁷ which he has been supporting with the Cyclic Argument, the Recollection Argument and the Affinity Argument. Socrates welcomes his interlocutors' objections and even encourages them to object to his thesis with all the arguments that they can conceive: "if you think I say something true, agree with me, and if not, use every argument to resist me" (91c2-3). He then proceeds to answer each of the two objections in detail. This reaction shows that presenting and facing objections is essential to philosophical investigation. As Cooper (2007: 31) remarks, no one can know if one has seen all the reasonable challenges there can be to one's current position, therefore one has to philosophize continuously all one's life.

That is why philosophical investigation is best undertaken through dialogue, especially with a capable interlocutor. In order to expose one's thesis to as many objections as possible, it is most helpful to establish a dialogue with a person capable of formulating objections.

Of course, in a philosophical dialogue, one should not employ "arguments used in disputation" (90c1). With this phrase Socrates is probably referring to eristic arguments such as those put forward by Euthydemus and Dionysodorus in the *Euthydemus*. In an eristic context, there is no commitment to the truth, but only to winning the discussion and making oneself appear wise to the participants and witnesses. Philosophers, on the other hand, are interested in finding out how things really are and thus becoming really wise. They argue for the sake of truth and not just to defend one view or to refute another. For this reason, arguments designed for disputation or eristic do not belong in philosophical investigation. Both the person presenting an objection and the one answering to it should argue in a way that is appropriate to the pursuance of truth.

47 These objections and Socrates' first reaction to them appear in 84c1-91c6. It was Anderson Borges that pointed out to me the importance of this passage for understanding how Plato sees philosophical inquiry.

Although in 91a1-3 Socrates warns his friends that he is in danger of desiring to win the discussion, by doing this he is not conceding that a philosopher is sometimes allowed to desire victory over wisdom. The circumstances surrounding this warning are very specific given that Socrates is about to die and the matter under discussion is the existence of life after death. In such circumstances, Socrates says, the belief that there is an afterlife would be beneficial to him even if it is false,⁴⁸ so he will strive to convince himself of it (i.e. make it seem true to himself). If along the way he manages to convince his friends of it, that would be just a byproduct of his effort to convince himself (91a8-b1). But we should not think that Socrates would welcome deception. It is not like Socrates to ignore how things are and try to produce an appearance of truth in order to convince. Socrates' warning about his desire to win the discussion is probably just a peculiar way of excusing for a possible bias in his argument, for he is so close to death that it may be hard for him not to worry at all about himself while he argues about the matter at hand. His friends, however, should worry little about him and greatly about the truth (91c1-2). Therefore the overall message of the passage is still that philosophers should aim at truth above all, and with this aim in mind they should expose their beliefs to all objections made in the same spirit and try to answer them.

The importance of facing objections or counter-arguments is also emphasized in the following passage of the *Republic*:

T11. *Republic* VII, 534b8-c5:

“Then the same applies to the good. Unless someone can distinguish in an account the form of the good from everything else, can survive all refutation (ἐλέγχων), as if in a battle, striving to judge things not in accordance with opinion but in accordance with being, and can come through all this with his account still intact, you'll say that he doesn't know the good itself or any other good.”⁴⁹

In this passage, one cannot be said to know the Form of goodness unless one's definition of goodness can survive all counter-arguments or refutations. The same reasoning certainly applies to all other Forms (and possibly to every object of

48 This belief is beneficial to him now even if it is false because (i) this belief makes him less burdensome in his final hours and (ii) he is going to die very soon, so if his belief is false it will cease to be held by him very soon too. Commenting on (ii), Socrates says that it would be bad to hold a false belief for a long time (91b5-7), which implies that it is not so bad to do so for a short time. So the point of (ii) seems to be that, since the time he has left in this life is indeed short, it would not be so bad for him to believe falsely that there is an afterlife – but for his friends it would be indeed very bad to do so, because they have much more time ahead of them, so they should worry much more than Socrates about finding out the truth of the matter.

49 All translations of the *Republic* in this dissertation are by G.M.A. Grube (with revisions by C.D.C. Reeve) in Cooper (1997).

knowledge: perhaps one cannot be said to know p if one has not answered all relevant arguments against p). The relevant refutations against which a thesis or definition should be examined are not the refutations made in accordance with opinion, but the ones that are made in accordance with being. Possibly, the latter are the refutations that aim at correcting ignorance and finding out how things actually are, while the former aim merely at making a claim *seem* false whether or not it is so, like the refutations of the eristics.

The idea that refutation is essential to philosophical inquiry is consistent with the idea that such inquiry is an aspect of the practice of purification or separation of soul from body, for in order to formulate and answer objections one needs to reason, and reasoning is an activity proper to the soul.⁵⁰

4. The philosopher's epistemic achievement

We have seen that, according to Socrates in the *Phaedo*, it seems to be impractical to know the Forms *purely* as long as one has a body. There are two reactions to this in the literature: some interpreters take this statement to mean that the embodied cannot obtain any knowledge of the Forms, while others take this statement to be about only the knowledge that is pure; they hold that there is some knowledge that is not pure and can be obtained by the embodied. In this section, I will argue that the latter interpretation is plausible, provided we understand pure and impure knowledge not as distinct types, but as different degrees of the same type of knowledge (Subsection 4.1). I will then ask what the difference is between these two degrees of knowledge (Subsection 4.2). Gail Fine (2016) has proposed that in the highest level (she speaks of “levels” instead of “degrees”) the knower knows all the Forms, whereas in the lower level the knower knows only some Forms, so that the difference lies in how many Forms are known. I will contend that this proposal, though possibly correct, fails to mention another difference between the two degrees of knowledge. My aim is to show that these degrees are also distinguished by how exactly or adequately each individual Form is grasped. I will suggest that, in the highest degree, the subject has a fully adequate *logos* or definition of each quality,

50 Regarding T10, it also is interesting that, when a person with the conceit of knowledge is being cross-questioned, her opinions are discovered to be wandering (see my comments on T2 and T10 above). Thus, it seems that a second benefit that this person gets by being refuted, besides losing the conceit of knowledge, is that her opinions become more stable, though not because she has acquired positive philosophical knowledge.

whereas in the lower degree his definition falls short of being fully adequate, though comes close to being so.

4.1. There is an “impure” knowledge of Forms, attainable by the embodied

The question whether knowledge is possible at all for the embodied has not been addressed by many interpreters of the *Phaedo*. In general, when interpreters focus on Socrates’ Defense, they do not engage much deeply with questions regarding knowledge and the Forms, at least not nearly as much as they do when they focus on the Recollection Argument or the Final Argument. Nonetheless, there is in the literature some debate about this particular question and each side has gained its adepts. Thus Bobonich (2002: 34), siding with those who think that some knowledge is possible for the embodied, pointed out that “the *Phaedo*’s denial of the possibility of having wisdom while embodied is usually qualified: before death, we never ‘adequately’ or ‘purely’ attain wisdom”. Such qualification seems to imply that the embodied can attain wisdom to some extent; more precisely, it seems to imply that the embodied can know Forms “impurely”. Pakaluk (2003: 101), though more concerned with the practice of death than with the acquisition of knowledge, does manifest the same view. More recently, Gerson (2014: 163), taking the opposite side, argued that there is not a “type of knowledge that is ‘impure’”, for “a putative ‘impure’ knowledge of Forms would be something other than ἐπιστήμη”, but there is not “a cognition of Forms other than ἐπιστήμη”. Gerson is right that holding the view that some knowledge is attainable by the embodied entails admitting such a thing as “impure” knowledge, so we should start our assessment of this view by asking whether there can be impure knowledge, that is, whether its existence is compatible with Plato’s theory. If there *cannot* be impure knowledge, then Socrates’ denial of the possibility of pure knowledge to embodied beings straightforwardly means they cannot have any knowledge at all. On the other hand, if there *can* be impure knowledge, perhaps this might be attained by the embodied.

Due to the force of Gerson’s argument, a distinction in terms of levels – or “degrees”, as I prefer – rather than *types* is needed for holding that there can be impure knowledge in Plato. For a central assumption in Gerson’s argument against the existence of impure knowledge is that impure knowledge is a *type* of knowledge

other than episteme. If this were the case, since for Gerson the Forms are objects only of *episteme* and not of opinion,⁵¹ there could not be impure knowledge of Forms. However, we need not take impure knowledge as a different type of knowledge: we can take it as a different level or degree of the same knowledge type. In general, if something loses its purity, it does not become a different type of thing, thus impure *episteme* can still be *episteme*. Therefore, even if Forms can be objects only of *episteme*, as in Gerson's view, there is still the possibility that both pure and impure knowledge exist as distinct levels or degrees of that type of knowledge (*episteme*).

So far, only the *possibility* of impure knowledge of Forms is assured. Now, the best evidence for its actual existence can be found in T5 above, where Socrates says that the soul considers the Forms “whenever (...) able to do so”, as though he were supposing that the soul is not always able to do so. However, as there is no reason why the soul would not be able to do so if it were disembodied, the description of the state of wisdom in T5 must apply to the embodied soul. If this reasoning is correct, then embodied beings can, at some times, obtain some knowledge of the Forms. Such knowledge must be not pure, given that Socrates denies that pure knowledge is attainable by embodied beings. It seems, then, that Socrates in T5 indirectly admits the existence of “impure knowledge”, even though he never uses this label in the *Phaedo*.⁵² Such knowledge has a relative stability (as opposed to the instability of true opinion), for it puts the soul “at rest from its wandering” (in T5), though, it seems, only momentarily.

4.2. What distinguishes impure from pure knowledge

Fine (2016) has suggested that the difference between pure and impure knowledge lies in *how many* Forms the subject knows. Perhaps this has to do with her taking pure and impure knowledge as different “levels” of knowledge. According

51 I do not share this view, but since I think my point holds even on this view, I do not argue against it here. My own view is that, although *pure* knowledge (which is only attainable after death) is only of Forms, *impure* knowledge (which is attainable during life) encompasses both Forms and other things. In *Philebus* 55c-59c, Socrates distinguishes between sorts of knowledge according to their *purity*, and while he places knowledge of Forms (dialectic) as the purest kind, he considers numbers too as objects of knowledge, holding in high regard the “arithmetic of philosophers (ἀριθμητικὴν ... τὴν τῶν φιλοσοφούντων, 56d4-6)”. So it seems that one can *know* – even though only *impurely* – other things besides Forms. Now, whether Forms, which are the only objects of (absolutely) pure knowledge, can also be known impurely, is the question of the present section, to which I will answer positively.

52 This line of reasoning is by Fine (2016: 9).

to her, in the highest level (pure knowledge), obtainable only after death, the subject knows all the Forms, whereas in the lower level (impure knowledge), obtainable in life, the subject knows only some Forms. In support of this suggestion, Fine points to 67a8-b1, where Socrates says that, if we die pure, “we will know through our very selves all that is unalloyed (παν το ελικρινης)”. But although this is perhaps evidence that having pure knowledge involves knowing all the Forms, it is not evidence that the quantity of Forms known is the *only* difference between pure and impure knowledge.⁵³ Besides, I see an alternative interpretation, according to which there is also a difference in *how adequately* the Forms are known.

In order to support this alternative interpretation, I quote a passage (the continuation of T4) where Socrates says that, with the proper training, philosophers can come close to knowing each Form. I will argue that, by “coming close to knowing each Form”, Socrates does not mean coming to knowing *some* Forms (as opposed to knowing *all* the Forms); he rather means coming to knowing each *individual* Form *to some degree* (as opposed to knowing each Form *to the fullest degree*). As I will show, that this is the correct reading of the passage is supported, on the one hand, by Socrates’ use of superlatives and, on the other, by Socrates’ use of “each”. These phrases are in bold print below.

T12. Phaedo 65e1-66a10:

“Are they [Largeness, Health, Strength and the rest [(cf. T4)] viewed at their truest through the body, or is the following rather the case: that whichever of us trains himself **most**, and **with the greatest precision**, to think about **each** thing investigated as an object in its own right, *he* would come **closest** to knowing **each** of them?”

“Certainly.”

“So wouldn’t the man who did this **most purely** be one who **so far as possible** used his thought in its own right to access **each** reality, neither adducing the evidence of his sight in his thinking nor bringing any other sense at all along with his reasoning, but using his thought alone by itself and unalloyed, and so attempting to hunt down **each** real thing alone by itself and unalloyed, separated **as far as possible** from eyes and ears and virtually from his entire body (...)?”

“That’s eminently true, Socrates,” said Simmias.

About Socrates’ use of “each”, we should start by noting that this word is used to refer to the Forms as objects of investigation. I am going to suggest that in all its four occurrences in T12, the word is used in a distributive sense, picking out each Form individually. If this is right, then Socrates is speaking about getting to know each individual Form. Of course, the true philosopher wants *to know all the*

⁵³ In her 2016 and 2021 papers, Fine does not mention any other difference besides the quantity of Forms known.

Forms, but instead of making this obvious point T12 is rather saying that the true philosopher strives (and fails as long as he is embodied) *to attain the fullest possible knowledge of each individual Form*. Now, an objector could contend that the occurrences of the word “each” in T12 have a collective meaning and therefore Socrates is indeed speaking about the effort needed to get the closest to knowing all the Forms. However, the very first occurrence of the word in the context of T12 clearly has a distributive meaning. I am speaking of the occurrence in T4 (which immediately precedes T12), where we find the crucial phrase “what each [quality] is”. This phrase clearly refers to *individual* Forms, so the word “each” has a distributive meaning in T4. Is there a reason why we should not assume that all the following occurrences of “each” in the same context have a distributive meaning too, picking out Forms individually? I am not aware of any reason that does not beg the question under discussion regarding the difference between pure and impure knowledge.

About Socrates’ use of superlatives, Pakaluk (2003: 101) has rightly noted that these phrases are typical for expressing a difference of *degree*. Although Pakaluk is concerned with the difference between death and the separation of body and soul that can take place in life, he is aware that Socrates’ language suggests a parallel interpretation of the difference between the knowledge only attainable after death and the cognitive achievement attainable in life through philosophical investigation. Pakaluk comments, moreover, that the imagery of purity itself also suggests that the relevant difference is one of degree, given that purity comes in degrees.

I submit, therefore, that the correct reading of T12 is the one proposed above, according to which coming close to knowing each Form means coming to know each individual Form to some degree. This must be what having *impure* knowledge is, whereas knowing each Form to the fullest degree must be what having *pure* knowledge is. The difference, then, lies *also* in the degree to which each Form is known, not *only* in how many Forms are known.⁵⁴

54 According to an influential interpretation, Plato takes knowledge to be structured as a web of interrelations (see Fine 1979). In this scenario, it seems that, if one knew all the Forms, then one would have the highest knowledge of any individual Form, since one would know how it interrelates with all the others. The view I am defending is neutral regarding this interpretation, for it allows (but does not require) that, in order to know each individual Form purely, one must have known all the Forms. My view is simply that what is distinctive about a subject that has wisdom or pure knowledge is not that she knows all the Forms, but that she has the most exact grasp of each individual Form.

In the attempt to be more specific about the difference between the two degrees of knowledge, I suggest that the degree to which one knows a Form, say the Form of piety, corresponds to how close one's proposed definition of piety is to being fully adequate. Consequently, it corresponds to how long one is able to sustain a definition of piety, through various sessions of question-and-answer, without this definition being refuted.⁵⁵ In other words, the degree of one's knowledge of the Form of a quality is in direct proportion to how stable is one's belief in a definition of that quality – assuming that the more stable a belief, the less likely it is to be rationally dropped in face of counter-argument (compare Section 1.3 above).

Remember that, in *Republic* 534b-c (T11 above), one is *not* said to know a Form *unless* one's definition survives all refutations, all the ones that can be made in accordance with being (excluding the ones in accordance with opinion). However, different definitions may perform differently in these refutations: some may be quickly shown to be false or inadequate, while some may stay intact after many lengthy sessions of question-and-answer, even though they end up being revealed as inadequate later. We have seen that knowing the Form of piety *to the highest degree* (i.e., *having* pure knowledge of it) is equivalent to having the adequate definition of piety, namely the only answer to the question "what is piety?" that is true and fully meets all Socratic requirements for answers of this kind. Such an ideal definition is impossible to refute in accordance with being. Following such a line of thought, we may suppose that knowing the Form of piety *to some degree* (i.e., *coming close* to having pure knowledge of it) would be equivalent to having a definition of piety that comes close to being adequate, namely a definition that comes close to fully meeting all requirements. The latter sort of definition would be very hard to refute in accordance with being, and could actually pass unrefuted for quite a few question-and-answer sessions. In the meantime, whoever is able to defend this definition in

55 Vlastos (1985 [1994]) famously distinguished between knowledge[e], whose content is elenctically justifiable, and knowledge[c], whose content is certain. For him, the Socrates of the so-called "Socratic" dialogues has knowledge[e] of a few propositions that have survived elenctic examination over years. One important difference between Vlastos' distinction and mine is that Vlasto' is made on the basis of the method used to acquire knowledge (the elenchus in the case of knowledge[e]) and the resulting "quality" of the knowledge so acquired (certainty in the case of knowledge[c]), whereas my distinction is made on the basis of how close a cognitive state is to having as its content the essence of a quality. Moreover, Vlastos' distinction is meant to explain a paradox involving Socrates' disavowal of knowledge and the elenchus, whereas my distinction is supposed to make knowledge somehow available to embodied practitioners of philosophical investigation or dialectic.

question-and-answer discussions⁵⁶ could be deemed knowledgeable about the matter at hand – even though only to a limited degree – for her soul would be in a state of relative stability regarding that matter. Of course, if she is a true philosopher, she will never stop investigating the matter and will subject her definition to as many relevant tests and refutations as she can.

Looking ahead to the Recollection Argument (discussed in Chapter III), I exhibit below how my suggestion about the difference between the degrees of knowledge might help to dissolve a seeming contradiction between two statements in that passage. The first, made in 74b, entails that some embodied beings know the Form of equality. I quote just the most relevant piece of text:

T13. *Phaedo*, 74b2-3:

‘(...). Do we also know what it [the Equal] is?’
‘Certainly,’ he [Simmias] said.

Since *pure* knowledge is unattainable by the embodied, some interpreters think that the knowledge that Socrates and Simmias agree to have of the Form of equality can only be *impure* knowledge (Bobonich 2002; Fine 2016 and 2021). These interpreters even think that this passage can be taken as evidence that Plato admits the existence of impure knowledge of Forms. But though this admission is real, T13 is not solid evidence for it, for two pages below Simmias seems to contradict what he has just said:

T14. *Phaedo* 76b5-12:

‘(...) If a man has knowledge, could he or couldn’t he give an account (*logos*) of what he knows?’
‘He must be able to, Socrates,’ he said.
‘And do you really think that everyone can give an account (*logos*) of the things we just mentioned [Forms]?’
‘I’d certainly like that to be true,’ said Simmias. ‘But I’m far more afraid that this time tomorrow there will no longer be a single human being who can do this **properly** (ἀξίως).’

It is almost certain that by a “*logos*” Socrates and Simmias mean a definition, namely a statement of what a thing or quality is, so Simmias in T14 is most probably denying that he can define any of the qualities they have been talking about, including equality. But this contradicts T13, where Simmias claimed to know what equality is. I do not want to dismiss this problem by claiming that Simmias in T13 knows what equality is, but is unable to state what it is. In order to support such

56 This qualification is needed because just being able to state a definition is not enough. One can state it without actually understanding it at all, and even if one understands it at some level, one cannot be said to know it impurely if one cannot defend it against a number (reasonable) counter-arguments.

a claim, any interpreter would have to assume that the verb “to know” shifts in meaning from T13 to T14, for in the latter passage it is clear that one must be able to give a definition of what one knows. But I think it is preferable to assume that, in both passages, knowledge requires a definition.

Here is how Fine (2016 and 2021) deals with the problem. First, Fine (2016) holds that having pure knowledge is knowing all the Forms, so, for her, the fact that Simmias, in T13, knows what equality is does not entail that he has pure knowledge. Second, Fine (2021), as well as Sedley (2007), holds that not every Form is equally difficult to know and believes that Simmias, in T14, only denies being able to give a *logos* of the more difficult Forms like the Form of beauty, the Form of justice and the Form of goodness (which were mentioned by Socrates between T13 and T14); in her view, Simmias is not denying being able to give a *logos* of easier Forms such as the Form of equality.

But Fine’s solution depends on her way of distinguishing pure from impure knowledge: having pure knowledge is knowing all the Forms, while having impure knowledge is knowing only some Forms. Now, I have argued that there is another way of making this distinction,⁵⁷ according to which having pure knowledge is having a fully adequate definition, while having impure knowledge is having a definition that comes close to being fully adequate. Employing such a distinction, the solution I endorse to the problem is simply this: in T13 Simmias and Socrates claim to have impure knowledge of the Form of equality, whereas in T14 Simmias denies having pure knowledge of any of the Forms. This solution seems to fit better what Simmias says in T14, for there he denies being able to give a definition *adequately* (ἀξίως), which indicates that he is not denying being able to give a definition that comes close to being adequate. This latter, humanly attainable sort of definition must be exactly what he has in mind when he agrees that “we” know what equality is in T13. Both Socrates and him must have such a definition of equality, one that has so far survived examination through question-and-answer, but that still cannot be said to be fully adequate (as it might be refuted in the future when it gets to be tested against new arguments). Therefore, knowledge requires definition (*logos*) in both T13 and T14, but in T14 the definition must be *fully* adequate, whereas in T13 it can be *close* to adequate.

⁵⁷ Again, Fine’s distinction is possibly correct and there is no need to dismiss it, given that it is compatible with the distinction I have suggested.

Conclusion

Knowing a Form purely consists in having the only fully adequate definition of it. Such knowledge is an ideal to which philosophers strive to approximate during life. Strictly speaking, they can only achieve this knowledge after death, and only if they live a genuine philosophical life, a life devoted to the “practice of death” or, equivalently, the purification of the soul. This purification has a moral and a cognitive aspect. Moral purification involves abstaining from bodily pleasures and amounts to practicing real virtue. Cognitive purification has two steps, both of which take the basic form of question-and-answer inquiry and employ refutation. The first, preliminary step aims at removing a person’s conceit of knowledge, thereby getting her ready for the second, main step, philosophical inquiry, which employs only reasoning and aims at obtaining the fully adequate definition of each Form. True practitioners of philosophical investigation come close to knowing the Forms purely, which means that they get definitions that are close to being fully adequate and thus very hard to refute. Getting such definitions is an epistemic achievement that falls short of being knowledge to the fullest degree (pure knowledge), but that may be still knowledge to some degree (“impure” knowledge”), for it has a relative stability, given that it is less liable to be refuted.

CHAPTER III

Knowledge in the Recollection Argument

The Recollection Argument in the *Phaedo* intends to show that people's souls existed before people were born. The crucial premise for that conclusion is that people must have had knowledge of Forms before birth. This proposition is presented as required to explain how people, upon sensing F things, come to think of the Form of F-ness and to know it. Such a mental event, though usually considered a case of learning, is described here as being actually a case of recollection, for, according to the Recollection Argument, such an event does not consist in the acquisition of knowledge, but rather in the recovery of knowledge of Forms had before birth (and somehow lost at birth).

In the *Meno*, recollection is introduced to ensure the possibility of inquiry. After Meno presents Socrates with an argument for the thesis that inquiry is impossible, Socrates denies that that is a sound argument, because he has heard a different account from wise men and women (81a1-6). These people have argued that, "since the soul both is immortal and has been born many times, and has seen both what is here and what is in Hades, and in fact all things, there is nothing it has not learned." (81c5-7). Moreover, the processes we call "inquiry" and "learning" are actually nothing but *recollection*, that is, the recovery (not the acquisition) of knowledge. The message Socrates extracts from this argument is that inquiry is possible, and in order for us to recover knowledge of anything, we need only to not be idle and inquire. But inquire how? It is a commonplace that Plato's recommended method of philosophical inquiry – the only method through which he thinks that

Forms can be known – is *dialectic* (see *Republic* VII, especially 531-7). Therefore it would be natural to expect that only dialectic could bring on recollection of Forms.

In the Recollection Argument in the *Phaedo*, however, Plato seems to present a different route to recollection of Forms. He makes Socrates claim that recollection of the Form of F-ness occurs upon sensing F things. This claim seems to contradict the *Republic's* idea that knowledge of Forms comes exclusively through dialectic.

Our best hope of solving this issue is to distinguish recollection 1, which is accomplished by using the senses, from recollection 2, accomplished by practicing philosophical or dialectical or inquiry, and to distinguish between knowledge 1, the knowledge of Forms that is recovered in recollection 1 (using the senses), and knowledge 2, the knowledge of Forms recovered in recollection 2 (practicing dialectic). Now, it is uncontroversial that knowledge 2 is *philosophical* knowledge, which is very *sophisticated* and as close as possible to a full-fledged knowledge of Forms (which, as we have seen in Chapter II, means its possessor can have definitions that come as close as possible to being fully adequate). But how should we characterize knowledge 1? On the one hand, since knowledge 1 depends on the senses, and these are disparaged as unclear and inaccurate (65b5), knowledge 1 should be *unsophisticated* and as far as possible from a full-fledged knowledge of Forms. On the other hand, since it is still of Forms, and these are known by just a few people, there is a *limit* to how unsophisticated knowledge 1 can be. Characterizing this knowledge is therefore a challenge. In sum, the sort of knowledge recollected thanks to the use of the senses (knowledge 1) cannot be too sophisticated – for the more sophisticated knowledge must be the one that comes through dialectic (knowledge 2) – but it also cannot be cheap, since it is still knowledge of Forms.

My main question in this chapter is precisely what sort of knowledge is regained when a person comes to think of a Form upon having sensing some of its instances. Another way to put the same question is this: what kind of learning is described in the Recollection Argument as recollection of Forms? A third and briefer way is: what is knowledge 1?

Traditionally, most interpreters hold that coming to think of the Form of F-ness and to know it from sensing F things, in the context of the Recollection

Argument, means forming or acquiring the concept of F-ness and thereby becoming able to judge whether a sensible thing is F.⁵⁸ Thus, in this interpretation, knowledge 1 is the ordinary knowledge of ordinary concepts, and so we may call this the “ordinary” interpretation. Its adepts need to assume that the use of concepts already involves knowledge of Forms (because knowledge of Forms is what is recollected). This assumption is surprising, for, as Gulley (1954: 198) notes, “Plato never assumes elsewhere [apart from the *Phaedo*] that the fact that we employ concepts to describe what we see is (...) a mark of knowledge of Forms”. In order to make this assumption palatable, adepts of this interpretation usually hold that the knowledge of Forms involved in the use of concepts is subconscious or pre-articulate. So the ordinary interpretation claims that, upon sensing F things, one recovers a pre-articulate knowledge of the Form of F-ness – and this would be Plato’s account (in the *Phaedo*) of what is commonly described as apprehending the concept of F-ness. Presumably, if one later engages in philosophy and investigates through dialectic the Form of F-ness, one might after much effort become able to articulate one’s knowledge of this Form in a *logos* or definition of it, thereby accomplishing recollection 2. But this is just a possible later development, which according to the ordinary interpretation is not a concern in the Recollection Argument at all. This interpretation emphatically asserts that recollection of Forms in this passage (i.e. recollection 1), instead of a prerogative of philosophers, is a rather widespread achievement, already made by everyone capable of employing concepts in thought and speech.⁵⁹

On the other hand, there are a few interpreters who think that the kind of learning at issue in the Recollection Argument is the obtention of philosophical knowledge of Forms, which is accomplished by few people.⁶⁰ As I understand this view, which we may call the “sophisticated” interpretation,⁶¹ both recollection 1 and recollection 2 are intimately associated to the process of gaining philosophical knowledge of Forms (knowledge 2); the only difference is that, whereas dialectical reasoning (recollection 2) is demanded in order to carry the process out, sense-

58 This view is held, for example, by Gulley (1954), Ackrill (1973), Bostock (1986), Kelsey (2000) and Franklin (2005).

59 In fact, most of this cognitive achievement would normally take place in infancy while the individual learns how to speak.

60 This view is proposed by Scott (1987; 1995) and endorsed by Bobonich (2002). Gasser-Wingate (2021) also thinks this view is right, but does not argue for it.

61 The labels “ordinary interpretation” and “sophisticated interpretation” are by Franklin (2005).

perception (recollection 1) is needed “to start the process off”.⁶² A crucial claim in the sophisticated interpretation is that recollection 1 is not performed by everyone that can speak, but only by those that are beginning to philosophize. Hence this interpretation has the advantage of not committing us to assuming that the ordinary use of concepts is based on subconscious or pre-articulate knowledge of Forms. Nevertheless, adepts of the sophisticated interpretation do not specify *what a subject gains* when she completes the first stage of recollection, that is, when she thinks of the Form of F-ness upon sensing F things (contrast the rival interpretation, in which it is clear that the subject gains the concept of F-ness). In other words, these interpreters do not specify what knowledge 1 is. They merely say that, upon completion of recollection 1, the subject obtains a kind of knowledge of the Form of F-ness that is more sophisticated than an ordinary, pre-articulate knowledge, but still falls short of a full-fledged philosophical knowledge, since this can only be acquired with recollection 2. It seems to me, however, that the text of the Recollection Argument allows us to be more specific about knowledge 1.

My thesis is that, in the context of the Recollection Argument (where only recollection 1 is at issue), the content that is recollected is the “superiority” of the Form over its instances. More precisely, coming to think of the essence⁶³ or Form of F-ness upon sensing F things means coming to know that the Form of F-ness has a feature that the sensible Fs lack and consequently is distinct from – and “superior” to – them.⁶⁴ This piece of knowledge does not imply the ability to give a *logos* of the Form of F-ness. But it does enable (and, ideally, motivates) the subject to inquire “what is F-ness?” without assuming that the answer can be found among the sensible Fs. In this way, recollection 1 would explain the kind of learning that allows (and, ideally, motivates) one to become a philosopher, that is, a performer of philosophical inquiry. Previously in the *Phaedo*, Socrates has pointed out that true philosophers look into essences through reasoning alone, without the use of the

62 Scott (1987: 355): “[it is the case] that use of the senses is a necessary condition for gaining knowledge, i.e. that *to start the process off*, we must have our memories jogged by sensible stimuli” (my italics).

63 For the view of Forms as essences see below my discussion of T4 as well as Politis (2021).

64 In this context I am using “superiority” as an antonym of “deficiency”. To be clear, I am taking the sentence “the Form is *superior* to its instances because it *possesses* an important feature that the instances lack” as virtually identical in meaning to the sentence “the instances are *deficient* in relation to their Form because they *lack* an important feature that the Form has”.

senses (65d-66a). The reason for this must be that they know that these essences are not sensible things. How do they come to know it? Our passage contains a brief argument for the conclusion that the Form of equality is distinct from the sensible equals, a conclusion which is supposed to generalize to all Forms. I will suggest that this argument, known as the “equals argument”, shows how one typically discovers the distinctiveness of the essence of equality in relation to the sensible equals.

In order to support that thesis, I will examine in detail the Recollection Argument and try to show that the thesis yields a plausible reading of the argument. Along the way I will make and argue for a number of interpretative decisions motivated by the principal suggestion. Here is how the chapter is organized. Section 1 is concerned with the conditions for recollection set out by Socrates in 73c1-74a8. Sections 2 and 3 form a two-part analysis of what is usually taken to be *the core* of the Recollection Argument, a passage which goes from 74a9 to 75b9: Section 2 is concerned with 74a9-74d3, which includes the much debated equals argument, while Section 3 deals with 74d3-75b9, where Socrates argues for the prenatal possession of knowledge of Forms. Finally, Section 4 outlines the relationship between recollection in the *Phaedo* and in the *Meno*.

1. Socrates' conditions for recollection

Socrates starts his argument by remarking that “if someone is going to recollect something, he must know it at some earlier time” (73c1-4). Let us call “A” the item that prompts recollection and “B” the item that is recollected. In this way, Socrates' initial remark means that previous knowledge of B is a necessary condition for recollecting B itself. We may call this condition “PK”. PK is the first of a series of conditions for recollection that Socrates is about to present. Thus, after getting Simmias' agreement to PK, Socrates asks him the following:

T1 *Phaedo* 73c5-d2:

‘Now do we also agree that whenever knowledge comes in the following sort of way, it is recollection? What way do I mean? I'll tell you. Suppose someone [i] sees or hears or has some other perception of one thing, and not only [ii] recognizes that thing, but also [iii] comes to think of something else [iv] which is the object not of the same knowledge but of a different one: aren't we right to say that he recollected this second thing, the one of which he had the thought?’

‘What do you mean?’

T1 presents four conditions for a subject to experience recollection: the subject (i) senses A, (ii) recognizes A, (iii) comes to think of B, and (iv) B is the object of a knowledge different from the knowledge of A. Together, conditions (i) and (iii) entail that, when recollecting B, the subject *senses* A and comes to *think* of B. This conjunction of (i) and (iii) we may call condition “ST”. ST has already received much attention in the literature. In this section I will speak mostly about conditions (ii) and (iv). Before I can do that, however, I have to consider a more general issue regarding T1 as a whole.

The issue is that T1 purports to introduce a sufficient condition for recollection, but no set of conditions is sufficient for *x* if it leaves out any necessary condition for *x*. Thus, since Plato has just said that PK is a necessary condition for recollection, he cannot possibly mean that the set of conditions (i)-(iv), which does not contain PK, is sufficient for recollection. It is true that this is just what Plato seems to mean in T1, and interpreters have blamed him for this.⁶⁵ It should be noted, however, that T1 is followed by two examples that illustrate it; that Simmias only agrees with Socrates’ point in T1 after considering these examples; and that condition PK is met at least in the first example, which I now quote.

T2 *Phaedo* 73d6-11:

‘Now are you aware that whenever lovers see a lyre or cloak or something else that their boyfriends use regularly, they have the following experience: don’t they both recognize the lyre, and come to have in their thinking the appearance of the boy whose lyre it is? This is recollection.

It is evident that the lover in T2 *already* knows his beloved *at the moment* he sees the lyre and comes to think of his beloved.⁶⁶ Hence, part of the point to which Socrates wants Simmias to agree must be this: if, when I see A, I think of B, which I knew previously, then I recollect B. In other words, *provided* a subject has previous knowledge of B (i.e. condition PK), she is said to recollect B *if* she senses A and

65 See especially the complaints made by Ackrill (1970: 186-7), Bostock (1986: 64), and Kelsey (2000: 97-8, n. 14).

66 This is evident because every lover knows his beloved (in at least one sense of “to know”). So, if the subject in T2 was already a lover of that boy at the time when he saw the boy’s lyre, it follows that he already knew the boy at that time. It is also true that the lover already knows that the lyre belongs to his beloved when he sees it, and this is *may* be a problem for Socrates’ example, for if the lover recognizes the lyre *as his beloved’s*, then it *seems* that condition (iv) is not satisfied. But this is not the case if we take that condition to mean that knowing A cannot be by itself sufficient for knowing B. Indeed, knowing a lyre is not by itself sufficient for knowing its possessor.

thinks of B (i.e. condition ST).⁶⁷ But if PK is satisfied in the example of the lover in T2, which is meant to illustrate T1, then it is not fair to accuse Plato of leaving PK out of the set of conditions that is supposed to be sufficient for recollection, even though PK is omitted in T1.

Now, condition (ii) or, as we may call it, condition R, says that a subject must *recognize A* if she is to recollect anything from sensing A. Ackrill (1973: 19) has pointed out that this condition may present a threat to the traditional interpretation that recollection explains concept acquisition. If condition R means that the subject must recognize A as *an F* in order to acquire the concept of F-ness, a difficulty arises for that interpretation, for normally one needs to possess the concept of F-ness to be able to recognize A as an F. In other words, it is the possession of the concept that normally is the necessary condition for recognition, not the other way around. On the sophisticated interpretation such a difficulty never arises, for this interpretation does not assume that recognizing Fs is a condition for the acquisition of *the ordinary concept of F-ness*, but rather of *a sophisticated knowledge of F-ness*. And according to the version of the sophisticated interpretation that I am proposing, recognizing some sensible things as F is a necessary condition for understanding that the essence of F-ness is distinct from and superior to any sensible Fs.

Condition (iv) says that the knowledge of A must be different from the knowledge of B. We may call it “condition of *different knowledge*”, DK. Most interpreters agree that condition DK means that knowing A cannot be by itself sufficient for knowing B.⁶⁸

A few lines after T2, Socrates introduces a distinction between recollection with similar items (which happens when item A is similar to item B) and recollection with dissimilar items (when A is dissimilar to B). He starts by mentioning cases of recollection involving dissimilar items: “seeing a painting of a horse or lyre one recollects a person” and “seeing a painting of Simmias one recollects Cebes” (73e5-8). Then Socrates mentions a single case of recollection with similar items: “seeing a painting of Simmias one recollects Simmias himself” (73e9-74a1). He concludes that recollection can happen with similar as well as dissimilar items (74a2-4). Finally,

67 The example requires previous knowledge of A too.

68 This reading was proposed by Nehamas (1975: 112).

Socrates states what seems to be a necessary condition for recollection with *similar* items:

T3. *Phaedo* 74a:

‘But whenever it is from similar things that one recollects something, is it not true that one inevitably has the following experience as well: that of thinking whether or not in its similarity it in some way falls short of the thing one has recollected?’

‘Yes, inevitably,’ he said.

This passage is very important and has been much discussed in the literature. What makes it important is the fact that Socrates later claims that people realize that the sensible equals *fall short* of the essence or Form of equality (in T9 below), and this claim has a crucial role in his argument for the thesis that people acquired knowledge of Forms before they were born.

One of the main issues discussed about T3 is why, whenever A is similar to B and I recollect B from A, it is *necessary* that I think whether A falls short in its similarity to B. The key to understand this necessity is to take Socrates to be speaking not of A being simply *similar* to B, as my cat may be similar to your cat,⁶⁹ but of A being a *likeness* or image of B, just as Simmias’ picture is a likeness of Simmias.⁷⁰ If A is a likeness of B, then in order for recollection to occur the subject must be aware of at least one difference between A and B so she does not take A for B. That is why it is necessary that the subject have in mind the question whether or not A falls short of B. And her answer to that question must be “yes”, for, if she does not notice any falling short in A when she mentally compares it to B, then she is bound to mistakenly identify A as B. This does not mean that the subject has to *pause* to consider whether A falls short in to B; she may sense A, think of B and notice the falling short *at once*. The point is simply that the subject must realize that A is a likeness of B rather than B itself.

The condition discussed in the above paragraph, which applies to cases of recollection from likenesses, can be derived from a general condition, applicable to every case of recollection, according to which a subject must be able to distinguish A from B, or be aware that A is not identical to B, in order for her to properly experience

69 The cat example is by Ackrill (1973: 26). I think that what makes this example appropriate is the fact that the similarity between two cats is both symmetrical and accidental, unlike the sort of “similarity” between a portrait (i.e. a likeness) and its model. It is the latter sort that must be kept in mind if Socrates’ argument is to work, even though he may seem to mention the former one.

70 This key point was first introduced by Gosling (1965). See also Nehamas (1975).

a *recollection* of B from A, rather than a *mistaken identification* of A as B. Such a general condition is not expressed in the text of the Recollection Argument: it is a hypothetical condition that I call “condition of the *awareness of non-identity*”, ANI. This condition is so obvious that Plato probably had it in mind, but preferred to present only the derived condition found in T3, which applies only to cases involving likenesses, probably because it is in that subgroup of cases that confusion between A and B normally occurs, and because the crucial case that he is about to make Socrates discuss belongs to that subgroup.

2. The core of the Recollection Argument (Part I)

The core of the Recollection Argument starts with the assumption that there is “the equal itself”.

T4. *Phaedo* 74a9-b1:

‘Consider then,’ said he, ‘if this is the case. We say, I take it, that there is an Equal – I don’t mean a stick equal to another stick, or a stone equal to a stone, or anything else of the kind, but something else besides all these, the Equal itself. Should we say that there is such a thing or not?’

‘Indeed we should,’ said Simmias, ‘emphatically so!’

By “the equal itself” Socrates is referring to what one puts into words when one states an adequate answer to the question “what is equality?”. An adequate answer to this question is not only true, but also meets all the Socratic requirements for the what-is-F question, namely the requirement that Socrates associates with this question in dialogues such as the *Euthyphro*, the *Meno* and the *Laches*, such as the requirements that the answer to this question must not be through example and exemplar. The assumption that there is “the Equal itself” is the assumption that there is such a thing as “what equality is” in that sense, an entity which we may call the “being” of equality or, equivalently, the “essence” of equality.⁷¹ Here I employ the latter term and take the Form of equality to be, first and foremost, the essence of equality.⁷²

It is true that the assumption that there is the essence of equality seems innocent at first blush (Kelsey, 2000). But it is definitely not innocent and I do not think that it is meant to be so taken. Simmias and the others present must have

⁷¹ For the equivalency between these two assumptions, see Kelsey (200: 100-1).

⁷² For the understanding of Forms as essences, see Politis (2021).

witnessed Socrates asking his what-is-F question, so they know that it is very hard to find an answer that meets all Socratic requirements. More importantly, they must have noticed at least that these requirements tend to lead to the rejection of any answer in terms of sensible features or things. Furthermore, with a close look at T4 we may see that it contains the idea that the essence of equality is not one of the sensible equals, for it is said to be “something else besides all these”.⁷³ Thus, the assumption that the essence of equality is distinct from the sensible equals, though only argued for in the equals argument (in T7 below), is already assumed in T4.⁷⁴

Right after T4 there is a crucial knowledge claim:

T5. *Phaedo* 74b2-3:
 ‘Do we also know what it [the Equal itself] is?’
 ‘Certainly,’ he said.

What do Simmias and Socrates mean when they agree in T5 that they know what equality is? It is almost always assumed in the literature that the knowledge mentioned in T5 is precisely *the one that*, Socrates will show, *is recollected upon sensing equal things* and is thereby a case of knowledge 1. Now, as we have seen, because sense-perception is disparaged in the *Phaedo*, knowledge 1 must be interpreted as being of little sophistication. Elaborating such an interpretation is difficult because knowledge 1 is of Forms. In T5, for example, the phrase “what it is (αὐτὸ ὃ ἔστιν)”⁷⁵ assures the reader of the fact it is the knowledge of the *essence* or *Form* of equality that Simmias and Socrates are mentioning. This fact makes the interpretative task of limiting the sophistication of the knowledge mentioned in T5 a challenge (an instance of the challenge of characterizing knowledge 1).

There are two ways of dealing with this challenge in the literature; neither of them is successful. The traditional way is to read T5 as *not* mentioning *philosophical* knowledge. This is the approach of the ordinary interpretation, according to which Simmias and Socrates are simply agreeing that they know equality in a humdrum way, just like everyone else that has the concept. In order to

73 Socott (1987) sees a contrast between the essence of equality and the sensible equals in yet another fragment of T4, namely 74a10: “we say, I take it, that there is an Equal – I don’t mean a stick equal to another stick”. He finds in this fragment an ellipsis which, “if filled out, would run: ‘... I don’t mean that we say that a stick is equal to another stick’” (*ibidem*: 354, n.17).

74 So Sedley (2007).

75 The ὃ here does the job of a ὅτι, for the phrase must be equivalent to “ἐπιστήμην αὐτοῦ τοῦ ἴσου ὅτι ἔστιν” (75b5-6). See Rowe (1993a: 168).

accommodate the fact that the knowledge mentioned in T5 is of the *essence* of equality, this interpretation assumes that ordinary knowledge of equality necessarily involves an unconscious or pre-articulate grasp of that essence. However, this apparently *ad hoc* assumption finds no clear textual support in the *Phaedo* or in other dialogues.⁷⁶ Moreover, in light of other passages in the *Phaedo* where similar language is used, the phrase “we know what it is (ἐπιστάμεθα αὐτὸ ὃ ἔστιν)” is most naturally read as referring to *philosophical* knowledge of an essence, and philosophical knowledge is conscious and articulate. Hence I think we should not choose this road.

The second way of limiting the sophistication of the knowledge mentioned in T5 is to assume that the essence or Form of equality is something easy to know.⁷⁷ Unlike the moral Forms, which are elusive and can only be known after much dialectical inquiry (recollection 2), the Form of equality and other mathematical Forms can, in this view, be grasped after the mere employment of the senses (recollection 1). This interpretation allows that T5 be read as referring to *philosophical* knowledge of an *essence* as long as the particular essence mentioned there be such that philosophical knowledge of it can be obtained without sophisticated or effortful inquiry. However, it is not clear that Plato distinguishes between mathematical and moral Forms with respect to how much effort is needed to know them. Besides, it is hard to imagine that one could gain philosophical knowledge of any Form upon just sensing its instances. Therefore I would not assume that the essence of equality is so easy as to be knowable without dialectic (even though this particular essence may be, in a different, unspecified way, easier to know than some others).

Instead of looking for a way to limit the sophistication of the piece of knowledge that Simmias and Socrates agree to have in T5, I think we should seriously consider *withdrawing* the assumption that made this limitation necessary, namely the assumption that that piece of knowledge is a case of knowledge 1.⁷⁸ Withdrawing it amounts to distinguishing between the knowledge of equality mentioned in T5 and the knowledge of equality recollected upon sensing equal

76 Against there being evidence for this assumption in *Phaedrus* 246a-57b, see Scott 1995: 73-80.

77 This assumption is made by Sedley 2007 and Fine 2021.

78 In this way we can dispense with the two solutions above because we are removing the challenge that they were supposed to solve.

things. If we make this distinction, we will not need to hold either that T5 refers to a humdrum knowledge or that it refers to a philosophical knowledge attainable without dialectic. On the contrary, we will be able to hold both that Simmias and Socrates have philosophical knowledge of what equality is (the most natural reading of T5) and that they obtained it through inquiry (as expected whenever philosophical knowledge is at issue). But does the text of the Recollection Argument allow for such a distinction? Let us look at what Socrates says immediately after T5:

T6. *Phaedo* 74b4-7:

‘Having got the knowledge of it [the Equal itself] from where? Wasn’t it from the things we were just mentioning? Upon seeing that either sticks or stones or some other things were equal, wasn’t it from them that we came to think of it, different as it is from them? Or doesn’t it appear different to you? (...)’.

Socrates in T6 asks from where Simmias and he have got their knowledge of the essence of equality and answers that they came to think of that essence upon seeing equal things. I suggest we interpret Socrates’ question in T6 as a question about the *first* origin of their knowledge of what equality is. All that this interpretative move requires is a special interpretation of “from where have we gotten the knowledge of it? (πρόθεν λαβόντες αὐτοῦ τὴν ἐπιστήμην;)” so as to mean something similar to “from where have we *started to get* that knowledge?”. Although dialectic is a *necessary* step on the road to philosophical knowledge, it need not be the first; we may assume that the first, necessary step is taken through the use of sense-perception. Accordingly, we may also assume that coming to think of a Form upon sensing its instances is a *pre-condition* for philosophically inquiring into that Form.⁷⁹ But can we specify the content recollected upon sensing F things, namely the content of knowledge 1? As I have already anticipated, my thesis is that what is at issue is the knowledge that *the Form of F-ness has a feature that the sensible Fs lack and is therefore something different and superior to them*. Once the subject recovers this knowledge, she can inquire into the Forms as a philosopher for the first time, employing her reasoning instead of her senses.

Philosophers know that the essences of at least some qualities are not sensible and so they investigate such essences with their reasoning alone. In

⁷⁹ Remember this is an important assumption in the sophisticated interpretation, according to which recollection 1 is needed in order to start off the process toward knowing the Forms. My view is admittedly closer to the sophisticated interpretation than to its rival.

contrast, non-philosophers, judging by Socrates' interlocutors in dialogues prior to the *Phaedo*, do not usually think that a quality must have a single essence, common to all its instances, much less that the essences of some qualities are not sensible. The transition from being a non-philosopher to being a philosopher certainly involves, as an early step, learning that the essences of at least some qualities are not sensible.⁸⁰ This learning enables one to stop looking for these essences among the objects of sense-perception and begin to investigate with reasoning alone, as a genuine philosopher does according to Socrates (65d-66a). In this way, recollection in the *Phaedo* would explain the kind of learning experienced by the subject who is becoming such a philosopher, given that, at least according to my thesis, the content recollected would be the distinction between the essence of the quality at issue and its sensible instances. I hope that this thesis will seem ever more plausible as I go through the passage.

2.1. The equals argument

Let us go back to T6. There Socrates says that it was from *the visible equals* that Simmias and he thought of *the essence of equality*, "different as *it* is from *them*". After that, Socrates asks Simmias whether this difference is apparent to him. Then, without allowing time for Simmias to answer, Socrates argues, in T7 below (the so-called "equals argument"), for the distinction between the essence of equality and the sensible equals. The fact that Socrates asks Simmias whether these things appear distinct to him does not entail that Socrates' general purpose with the equals argument is to convince Simmias of that distinction.⁸¹ For Socrates may be sure that Simmias is already persuaded of that distinction because he has just conceded it in T4. Moreover, Simmias has told Socrates that he does not need to be convinced that learning is recollection of pre-natal knowledge (73b); rather, he just needs to be

80 This transition does not of course involve becoming able to put these essences into words (giving a *logos* of them), for this is what is aimed at by who is already a philosopher.

81 Since Socrates does not allow Simmias time to answer whether those things appear different to him, we can only make suppositions as to what his answer would be. If we suppose that Simmias' answer would be "no", we have a good explanation as to why Socrates proceeds to argue for that difference (perhaps this is why many interpreters seem to suppose just that). For my part, I suppose that Simmias' answer would be "yes" and so I ascribe above a different purpose to Socrates' argument. My reasons for making this supposition are that (i) Simmias has already agreed in T4 that there is a difference between the essence of equality and the sensible equals, and (ii) being aware of such a difference is necessary for recollection according to the condition presented in T3 and the more general condition ANI.

reminded of the proofs of this thesis (73a) – in a similar fashion, it is quite possible that he just needs to be reminded of the reasoning by which he first became aware of the distinction between the essence of equality and the sensible equals. Thus I will suggest that Socrates' general purpose with the equals argument is rather to show how a subject typically discovers that distinction, in hope of reminding Simmias of how he discovered it.⁸² Before I can elaborate this suggestion, however, I have to discuss the equals argument in some detail, so let me quote it:

T7. *Phaedo* 74b-c

[i] '(...). Consider it in this way as well. Don't equal stones and sticks sometimes, despite being the same ones, appear at one time equal, at another not?'

'Certainly.'

[ii] 'Well, have the Equals themselves in any circumstance appeared to you unequal, or has equality in any circumstance appeared as inequality?'

'No, not yet at any rate, Socrates.'

[iii] 'In that case,' he said, 'these equal things and the Equal itself are not the same thing.'

'Not at all, Socrates, by the look of things.'

How the equals argument works is clear: it supports the distinction between the sensible equals and the essence of equality by simply pointing to a *feature* that differentiates them. The first premise (T7.i) states that the sensible equals *lack that feature* while the second premise (T7.ii) states that the essence of equality *has that feature*, thus warranting the conclusion (T7.iii) that these are different things.

But *what that feature is* is unclear: both premises of the equals argument are critically difficult to interpret and much debated. In the attempt to identify the feature that these premises mention, namely the feature that the sensible equals lack and the Form of equality has, we must enter the debate. I will focus here on the first premise and leave a more detailed discussion of the second to another occasion. Now, since the difficulties surrounding the first premise (T7.i) are not merely exegetical but also textual, let us look at its the Greek text:

T7.i. *Phaedo* 74b7-9:

⁸² Contrast Sedley (2007: 77), for whom "the need to prove this non-identity between Form and participant, rather than just continue to assume it, arises from the need to satisfy Socrates' first criterion of recollection (73c7-d1), which among other things specified that the reminding object must be different (ἕτερον, 73c9) from the item recollected."

ἄρ' οὐ λίθοι μὲν ἴσοι καὶ ξύλα ἐνίστε ταῦτ' ὄντα τῷ μὲν / τότε μὲν ἴσα φαίνεται, τῷ δ' / τότε δ' οὔ;

There is a difficulty here concerning the verb φαίνεσθαι. This verb admits either the complementary participle or the infinitive, with a marked difference in meaning: with the participle it usually means the same as “to be plainly” or “manifestly”, whereas with the infinitive it usually means “to seem” or “appear”.⁸³ The former sense is traditionally called “veridical” and the latter “non-veridical”, but as these labels may become confusing it is better to adopt Tuozzo’s (2018) suggestion that the former sense be called “ontological” and the latter “epistemic”.⁸⁴ Now, none of the occurrences of “φαίνεσθαι” in T7 is explicitly complemented by either a participle or an infinitive (the complement is tacit), so it is harder than usual to decide which sense the verb has in this context.

One difficulty with taking “φαίνεσθαι” in the ontological sense is that the sticks and stones are assumed to be “equal (ἴσοι, 74b7)”, and it would be strange if Socrates were asking if *equal* sticks are, in certain cases,⁸⁵ manifestly *unequal*.⁸⁶ Another difficulty is that, in T6-7, the several occurrences of “to appear (φαίνεσθαι)” are, with one exception (in T7.i), coupled with either “to you (σοι)” or “to me (μοι)”, which strongly indicates an epistemic use of the verb. On the other hand, if φαίνεσθαι is taken in the epistemic sense, the worry is that the argument becomes invalid, for its conclusion is that the essence of equality *is* different from the sensible equals, but a conclusion about how things *are* does not follow from premises about how things *appear*. How can we reply to this worry?

An interesting solution is to suppose that the sensible equals *are* so as to appear sometimes unequal, whereas equality *is* so as to never appear to be inequality (Sedley 2007). In other words, *the perceiving subject* is not *the only* one to blame for the fact that sensible equal things sometimes appear unequal to *her*; rather, *the sensible equal things* are also at least partially responsible for that fact. Likewise, the fact that equality never appears to be inequality is at least partially

83 Cf. Smyth (1920, §§ 2123 and 2143)

84 These labels become confusing when we speak about veridical and non-veridical *appearances* in connection with the so-called non-veridical *sense*.

85 The phrase “in certain cases” is meant to be neutral between “τῷ μὲν ... τῷ δὲ” and “τότε μὲν ... τότε δὲ”.

86 This difficulty is pointed out by Sedley (2007). Further difficulties with the ontological reading are mentioned by Tuozzo (2018).

explained by a feature of *equality*. Since the way equality and its instances appear is therefore at least partially explained by the way they are, the equals argument can infer something about their *beings* even though it speaks only about their *appearances*.⁸⁷ Therefore there is no reason for rejecting the epistemic reading, as there is for rejecting its rival. Now, what feature of sensible equal things could be partially responsible for their appearing unequal? I take it that Socrates gives us a clue when he claims in 79c6-7 (see T2 in Chapter II) that sensible objects never stay in the same state. This feature of sensible objects may be what is responsible for the fact that the truth-values of statements about them depend on time and other circumstances (for more on this, see below and see Chapter II, Section 1.1).

But T7.i is also difficult to interpret because its Greek text has two variants. The evidence of the manuscripts is slightly in favor of “τότε μὲν ... τότε δὲ”, for this reading is attested in both family T and **δ** (manuscripts WPQΛ), while “τῷ μὲν ... τῷ δέ” is only attested in family **β**.⁸⁸ Even so, we should ponder linguistic and philosophical considerations before deciding between these readings. (I will keep considering both the ontological and the epistemic reading even though I have already manifested my preference for the latter).

Now, if we choose to read this text with:

1. τῷ μὲν ... τῷ δέ, then we have three options:

- a. If τῷ is masculine (and read with φαίνεται), it refers to the subject that is observing some sticks. The premise would then mean the sticks are or appear equal (to each other) to one observer and unequal to another

87 For another interesting solution, see Zuppolini (2015: 93-5). Very briefly put, his solution borrows from the account of sense-perception in the *Theaetetus*, according to which sensible qualities do not belong to sensible objects themselves; they only arise on the encounter between these objects and a perceiving subject. On this account, what sensible objects are like is equivalent to what they appear to be like, so the distinction between the epistemic and ontological readings of φαίεσθαι (in connection with sensible objects) collapses.

88 The OCT (Duke et. al., 1995) reports that “τῷ μὲν ... τῷ δέ” is mentioned as an *alternative* reading in two manuscripts from family **δ**, namely Q and W. But this is poor evidence in favor of this reading. Regarding manuscript W, Paulo Ferreira has pointed out to me that it usually presents, in the margin of the page, the variants found at the time in manuscripts *other than* the one being copied. And this is precisely the case here: “τῷ μὲν ... τῷ δέ” is written in the margin of the page. But the variants in the margin are weaker readings, for presumably the scribe chose to copy the manuscript that he considered the strongest, and simply registered in the margins what he found in manuscripts he considered weaker. So the appearance of “τῷ μὲν ... τῷ δέ” in W is poor evidence in favor of this reading.

observer.⁸⁹ This version is problematic on both the ontological and epistemic readings because in the second premise there is only one observer, Simmias, and it seems innocuous to contrast how *x* sometimes is or appears differently *for different people* with how *y* never is or appears differently *for one and the same person*.

b. If τῶ is neuter (and read with ἴσα), it can refer to the thing in relation to which the sticks are or appear equal. The premise would then mean that the sticks are or appear equal to a certain stick, but unequal to some other stick. However, on both the ontological and epistemic readings it is strange to say that *a plurality* of sticks – let us say *a pair* – is or appears equal to a third stick and unequal to a fourth one; it would be more natural to say that *a stick* (singular) is or appears equal to a second one and unequal to a third, and yet Socrates does use the plural “ἴσοι”. There is a further difficulty for 1.b on the ontological reading, for it is *always* the case that a pair of sticks is equal to a stick and unequal to another, whereas Socrates asks if this is the case *sometimes* (ἐνίοτε).

c. If τῶ is neuter (and read with φαίνεται), it can have an adverbial sense and thus express the *respect in which* some sticks appear equal or unequal to each other; for example, a pair of sticks may appear equal *in length*, but unequal *in width*. But, again, this is not the sort of thing that happens only *sometimes* (ἐνίοτε), for sticks that are equal in one respect are *always* unequal in another, so the present version fares badly on the ontological reading.⁹⁰ Furthermore, it is doubtful whether 1.c is even possible in the first place. In order to seriously support it, one would have to find another, less controversial instance of “τῶ μὲν ... τῶ δέ” in the adverbial sense, but this has not been accomplished so far.⁹¹

And if we choose to read the text with:

89 This reading is defended by N. P. White (1987).

90 The only way to avoid this objection is to hold that the (supposed) adverbial force of τῶ μὲν ... τῶ δέ is broader, so that it encompasses not only the *respects*, but also the *circumstances* in which the sticks are equal to each other, such as the *time* at which they are equal. But this interpretation fits reading 2 much better.

91 Plato normally uses the feminine when he wants the article to have an adverbial force. See for example “τῆ μὲν ... τῆ δέ” in *Symposium* 211a (a passage that is very important in this connection).

2. τότε μὲν ... τότε δέ, then we apparently have a single option:

If τότε is an adverb of time, it expresses the time at which some sticks are or appear equal to each other. The premise would then mean that the sticks are or appear equal at a one time and unequal at another. The problem here is that “τότε μὲν ... τότε δέ” is odd after “ένίστε”. But, as pointed out by Verdenius (1958: 209) “ένίστε qualifies the whole sentence, (...) the meaning simply is that under certain conditions (ένίστε), (...) they [the sticks] in turn (τότε μὲν ... τότε δέ) seem equal and unequal”.⁹² Although Verdenius was assuming the epistemic reading, his solution to the problem seems to apply to the ontological reading as well.⁹³

The above survey of our options indicates that reading 2 is the most plausible. In addition, due to the presence of “ένίστε” in the sentence, “τότε μὲν ... τότε δέ” is the *lectio difficilior*, so it is more probable that this phrase was replaced by “τῷ μὲν ... τῷ δέ” than vice versa.⁹⁴

Hence I agree with Sedley (2007) that reading 2 (τότε μὲν ... τότε δέ) is a better reading. An important rationale for his choice is that the argument’s second premise (T7.ii) mentions time:

T7.ii. *Phaedo* 74c1:

τί δέ; αὐτὰ τὰ ἴσα ἔστιν ὅτε ἄνισά σοι ἐφάνη, ἢ ἡ ἰσότης ἀνισότης;

The adverb ὅτε is indeed used mostly of *time*. So, Sedley (2007: 78) infers that with reading 2 “the emphasis throughout [the argument’s premises] is on the way that appearances do or do not change *over time*” (his italics). His reasoning is that options 1.a, 1.b and 1.c do not provide the same degree of coherence to the equals argument, since with any of them the emphasis must *shift to* time in the second premise. Such a worry with the coherence of the argument seems a good reason for preferring reading 2 over reading 1.

92 In this Verdenius (1958) is followed by Tuozzo (2018).

93 On the ontological reading, one would have to say that under certain conditions the sticks or stones are *really* sometimes equal, sometimes unequal, while on other conditions they *really* do not change from being equal to being unequal. But remember we have already chosen the epistemic reading.

94 This point is mentioned by Verdenius (1958: 209), but it was Paulo Ferreira who clarified it to me.

As for Sedley's construal of reading 2, I think there is room for improvement. For τότε may express not only the *time* in which some sticks appear equal, but also *other circumstances* that may have influence on that appearance,⁹⁵ for example the relative *position* of the sticks and their observer (a change in this may easily make equal sticks appear unequal and vice versa). Other circumstances that can influence the appearance are: the subject to which the sticks appear equal (as in 1.a), which stick appears equal to which (as in 1.b), and in which aspect they appear equal (as in 1.c), so this reading encompasses all options.⁹⁶ The translation of T7.i need not change to accommodate this improvement, for in English the phrase "at one time ... at another" can also have this broader adverbial sense, which is not exclusively of time.⁹⁷ About the second premise, the term ὅτε is a correlative of τότε and it may be likewise indicating the whole set of circumstances at which the appearance occurs rather than just its time. Therefore, with this improved construal of reading 2 the argument stays just as coherent, the only difference is that now the emphasis throughout the argument's premises is on the way that appearances do or do not change *across different circumstances*.⁹⁸

The result of the above discussion is the following. On the one hand, the first premise (T7.i) means that the sensible equals *in some circumstances* appear equal, *in other circumstances* appear unequal. We may summarize this by saying that their appearance as equal things is *dependent on circumstances*. On the other hand, bypassing much of the debate about the equals argument's second premise (T7.ii), we can suppose it means that the essence of equality *in no circumstances* appears to be something other than the essence of equality. We may summarize this by saying that its appearance as the essence of equality is *independent of circumstances*. Therefore, *independence of circumstances* in this sense is the

95 In English, the term "sometimes" can have this broader adverbial sense, which is not exclusively of time, but also of place, condition and other circumstances.

96 But since the latter three options were rejected above, perhaps only time and relative position can plausibly be thought of as expressed by τότε in T7.i.

97 If reading 1.c is possible, then τῶ may have the same broad adverbial sense, that is, it may express not only the respect in which some sticks appear equal, but also other circumstances involved in that appearance). See note 88.

98 In *Symposium* 211a, Diotima explains that the difference between the essence of beauty and the beautiful things is that the beauty of the former does not depend on any of series of circumstances that she mentions using several adverbial phrases (such as πρὸς μὲν... πρὸς δὲ). It is possible that Plato in T7 uses the phrase τότε μὲν... τότε δὲ, together with ὅτε, in order to evoke in a brief manner the same series of circumstances. See Brandão (2018: 52-3).

feature that we were trying to identify, namely the feature that the sensible equals lack and the essence of equality possesses.⁹⁹ It is by pointing to that feature that the equals argument supports the distinction between the sensible equals and the essence or Form of equality.

This distinctive feature of Forms makes them superior to sensible things as far as the acquisition of wisdom is concerned. For we have seen in Chapter II that wisdom is about what “stays always in the same condition”, and this is aptly understood as another way of referring to what is independent of circumstances. Therefore the superiority of Forms is connected to the fact that cognition of them is more relevant to philosophical knowledge than cognition of sensible things

Now I can return to my suggestion that the equals argument shows the route through which its conclusion is normally reached for the first time. Given the argument has two premises, this route should accordingly have two parts: (i) the subject sees equal things and so becomes aware that they lack a certain feature, then (ii) she thinks of the essence of equality as something that has that feature and therefore as something distinct from the equals she sees. By finishing this hypothetical route, a subject realizes that the Form of equality *exists* (apart from the sensible equals) and that she does not know it (she does not know what equality is apart from its sensible instances). This subject should now be able (and, ideally, motivated) to philosophically inquire into the Form of equality – the destination of the route is philosophy. Two considerations might lend plausibility to this suggestion.

First, the fact that part (i) of the hypothetical route involves *sensing F things* while the second part involves *thinking of the Form of F-ness* indicates that by going through such a route a subject meets condition ST for recollection. Indeed, the subject that goes through that route easily meets almost all conditions for recollection 1. For the subject senses equal things (first half of condition ST), recognizes them as equal (condition ii) – realizes that they lack a certain feature (not a condition for

⁹⁹ Some readers could ask why I decided to write that *independence of circumstances is what the sensibles lack and the Forms have* if the same thing can just as easily be described by writing that *dependence of circumstances is what the Forms lack and the sensibles have*. The answer is that I wanted my description to fit most clearly the fact, introduced in T9 below, that *the sensibles are deficient in relation to the Forms*. As I will claim when I comment on T9, the deficiency of the sensibles consists precisely in their lack of independence of circumstances. Of course, I could have described their deficiency by focusing on what they *have*, namely susceptibility to change under different circumstances – but a deficiency is more clearly described by focusing on what the deficient item *lacks*.

recollection) – thinks of the Form of equality (second half of condition ST) as having that feature, and distinguishes between the sensible equals and the Form of equality (condition ANI).¹⁰⁰ That this Form has precisely the feature (i.e. independence of circumstances) that its instances lack is the content recovered through recollection 1, at least according to my thesis that what is recollected is the distinctiveness and superiority¹⁰¹ of the Form of F-ness in relation to the sensible Fs.

Second, the route to inquiry into Forms that is hypothetically shown in the equals argument corresponds roughly to the route to the same destination exhibited in *Republic VII* 522e–525a, the so-called “summoners” passage. There Socrates distinguishes between perceptions that *do not* summon the mind to investigate, for the judgment formed on the basis of them seems adequate, and perceptions that *do* summon the mind to investigate, for they generate “nothing sound (οὐδὲν ὑγιές, 523b3)”. We have a case of the latter kind “whenever sense perception doesn’t declare one thing any more than its opposite” (ἐπειδὴν ἡ αἴσθησις μηδὲν μᾶλλον τοῦτο ἢ τὸ ἐναντίον δηλοῖ 523c1-2). For example, a finger may appear to be great and small. Such a conflicting appearance puts the soul in a state of *aporia*. The soul then summons reasoning to consider whether what it perceives is one and the same quality or two distinct ones. Once it realizes that they are distinct qualities, the soul gets for the first time in position to ask *what* each of them *is*. In summary, the route exhibited in this passage is such that whoever finishes it performs the following actions in the following order: (1) perceives x as F and un-F; (2) enters a state of *aporia*; (3) summons reasoning to consider the matter; and finally (4) asks what F-ness is. Notice that (1) corresponds to (i) and (4) corresponds to the destination of the former route, namely philosophical inquiry.

Reading the equals argument with the summoners passage is not a rare strategy. The strategy is admirably employed, for example, by Gasser-Wingate (2021: 58-61) and Polits (2021: 77-8). Both assume that the summoners passage clarifies how sense-perception of F things can ultimately “lead” to knowledge of Forms. But they disagree over the nature of this “leading”. Gasser-Wingate claims

100 The remaining crucial condition PK is discussed in Section 3.

101 Although the equals argument does not explicitly attribute a *superiority* to Forms (or, equivalently, a *deficiency* to sensible equals), we will soon see that the distinctive feature it attributes to Forms does make them superior to sensible things.

that, for Plato, our knowledge of the Form of F-ness is not epistemically but only *causally* dependent on our awareness of the deficiency of F things. In other words, our knowledge of Forms is not based on any evidence from sense-perception. For sense-perception never provides evidence of Forms, it merely causes the soul to think of them. Politis, on the other hand, argues that perceiving the deficiency of sensible things motivates and justifies us to *inquire* into the Forms. Philosophical knowledge of the Form of F-ness is always the result of philosophical inquiry into it – now, if what *justified* me to inquire into the Form of F-ness was the deficiency I *perceived* in the sensible Fs, then clearly my knowledge of that Form is not only causally but also *epistemically* dependent upon that perception.

To me, if the above analysis of the summoners passage in four actions is correct, then Politis is right that perceiving x as F and un-F (action 1), instead of providing just a causal stimulus to asking what F-ness is (action 4), provides also good reasons for formulating such a question and inquiring into it. For if (4) is the result of the soul's summoning of reasoning (action 3), then (4) is certainly a *reasoned* action (not an unreasoned response to a stimulus), the reasons for which must be somehow connected to actions (1) and (2).

Before ending this section, let us see what use Socrates makes of the conclusion of the equals argument, that the Form of equality is distinct from its instances.

T8. *Phaedo* 74c-d:

'But still,' he said, 'it's from these equal things, though they are different from that Equal, that you have nonetheless thought of and got the knowledge of it?'

'Very true,' said Simmias.

'Now it is either similar to them or dissimilar, isn't it?'

'Certainly.'

'Yes, but it makes no difference,' he said. 'So long as upon seeing one thing you come from this sight to think of something else, whether similar or dissimilar, it must,' he said, 'have been recollection.'

'Quite so.'

Socrates' language at the beginning of T8 is clearly meant to convey the impression that it is *surprising* that Simmias and he have had the experience of thinking of the essence of equality upon *seeing* equal things. This surprise may be

taken as an affirmation that that experience meets condition DK. In fact, Socrates thinks that sense-perception of equals is not sufficient to explain how people come to think of the essence of equality. The full explanation of that experience, according to him, depends on a further element: prenatal knowledge of the essence or Form of equality. When Socrates proves its existence, he will be able to explain that experience by describing it as a case of recollection. Not only that: he will also be able to infer that the soul exists before birth. Both things depend on the proof that the experience of thinking of the essence of equality upon seeing equal things meets the previous knowledge condition, PK.

At the end of T8, Socrates claims that it makes no difference whether A is a likeness of B, for if the sense-perception of A inspires the thought of B, then there is recollection. This claim seems to indicate that Socrates is unexpectedly taking ST as a sufficient condition for recollection and already inferring that that experience is a case of recollection, as some interpreters disapprovingly remark. Instead of interpreting his claim in this way, however, we may take Socrates to be saying simply that whether A is a likeness of B does not affect the question whether thinking of B from sensing A is a case of recollection. What really affects the latter question is the satisfaction or non-satisfaction of the conditions for recollection. So far, Socrates has shown that the experience of thinking of the essence of equality from seeing equal things meets conditions ST and DK. He must be aware that without proving that this experience meets PK he cannot conclude that it is a case of recollection. In the next section I will discuss Socrates' argument for the existence of prenatal knowledge of the essences or Forms.

3. The core of the Recollection Argument (Part II)

Remember that in T6 Socrates asks from where Simmias and he have begun to get knowledge of the essence of equality, and answers that it was upon seeing equal things that they came to think of that essence. Socrates' goal now is to show that this experience is a case of recollection. The experience clearly satisfies conditions ST and DK, but Socrates still needs to show that it satisfies the other conditions too, especially the crucial condition PK (the previous knowledge condition).

After the equals argument (T7) Socrates is about to bring back the point he made in T3 about what happens to people when they recollect something from a likeness of it. In such a case, the subject undergoing recollection must necessarily notice that the likeness falls short in its similarity in relation to the item recollected. Still taking equality as his example, Socrates says the following:

T9 *Phaedo* 74d4-8

‘Well then,’ he said, ‘do we experience something like the following as regards what happens in the case of sticks and, more generally, the equal things we just mentioned? Do they seem to us to be equal in the same manner as what Equal itself is? Alternatively, do they in some way fall short of it when it comes to being like the Equal? Or in no way?’

‘They fall far short,’ said Simmias.

The experience described in this passage is a case of the kind of noticing that necessarily happens in addition to recollection from a likeness. The sensible equals are being taken as likenesses of the Form or essence of equality, so the subject undergoing recollection needs to notice that the former “are not equal in the same manner” as the latter is equal. The meaning of this must be that the sensible equals are such that they only appear equal on certain circumstances, whereas the essence of equality is such that it always appears to be itself, independently of circumstances,¹⁰² as remarked in the equals argument in T7. Here in T9 Socrates is saying that when people think of the essence of equality from sensing equal things they are aware that this essence *is not identical* to the sensible equals and consequently they satisfy condition ANI.¹⁰³ More than that, they are also aware that the essence of equality is *superior* to the sensible instances of equality. Again, this superiority is connected to the fact that cognition of Forms is more relevant to philosophical knowledge than cognition of sensible things, but now this point is made in another way. Sensible items are said to be likenesses of Forms, which may imply

102 It was Nehamas (1979: 95) who suggested that statements like “the Form of F-ness is F” should be taken as equivalent to “the Form of F-ness is what it is to be F”, but it was Vlastos (1981: 76-8) who demonstrated that doing so amounts to reading those statements as identity statements, a reading that Cherniss (1957: 258-9) seems to have been the first to defend.

103 This awareness of them does not need to come subsequently to their seeing of equal things and their thinking of the essence of equality described in T6. Instead, the experience of T9 may happen at the same time as the experience of T6, for, in fact, the suggestion I have been making consists in assuming that this awareness of non-identity is not only a necessary condition for recollection of that essence from the sensible equals, but also part of the content that is recollected.

that knowing Forms somehow improves one's grasp of sensible items just as knowing Simmias improves one's appreciation of a portrait of him.

Now Socrates will argue that condition PK is met by the experience of thinking of the essence of equality upon sensing equal things. He appeals to the plausible principle that whenever a subject thinks that X wants to be like Y but X falls short of Y, the subject must have known Y before (74d-e). Then Socrates claims that people have precisely this kind of thought regarding equal things and the equal itself (74e), and this allows him to conclude: "in that case, we must have known the Equal before the time when we first, upon seeing equal things, came to think: 'All these are seeking to be like the Equal, but fall short of it'" (75a). Let "FS" stand for this thought, the thought that all sensible equals *fall short* of the essence of equality. While in T9 Socrates simply established that some people do entertain FS, now he concludes, by application of the principle just mentioned, that one must have previous knowledge of the Form of equality in order to be able to entertain FS. Since the experience of FS necessarily accompanies the experience of thinking of the essence of equality upon sensing equal things, it follows that the latter experience meets condition PK for recollection.

Although showing that condition PK is met by that experience is a step toward proving that that experience is a case of recollection, it is *not* a step toward proving that the soul had any knowledge *before birth*, for it is still possible that knowledge of the essence of equality is obtained at some time between birth and the experience of FS. It is only in what follows that Socrates will argue that such knowledge must really be obtained before birth.

But before I consider that argument, I want to return to the chapter's main question – what is the knowledge that is recollected through the experience of thinking of the essence of equality upon sensing equal things – i.e. what is knowledge 1. The reason I return to this question at the present juncture is that its answer must coincide with what one must know about the essence of equality in order to be able to entertain FS. We wanted to limit the sophistication of knowledge 1 as much as possible, and now we find that knowledge 1 must be sufficient to allow that FS be entertained, for the experience of FS necessarily accompanies the experience of undergoing recollection 1. Indeed, there is no reason to suppose that

the content recovered in recollection is anything more or less than just what is minimally necessary in order to be able to entertain FS. And what is minimally required to think that sensible equals fall short of the essence of equality (FS)? As we have seen, sensible equals are deficient precisely insofar as they lack the independence of circumstances that the essence of equality has. So, to be able to entertain FS, the minimal content that one must know about the essence of equality is its independence of circumstances (expressed in the equals argument's second premise). It follows that knowledge of just this content is what is recollected through the experience of thinking of the essence of equality upon sensing equal things (recollection 1).

3.1. The prenatal possession of knowledge of Forms

Here is how Socrates argues for the thesis that people must have had knowledge of the essence of equality before birth.

T10. *Phaedo* 75a5-c6:

[i] 'Now we also agree that we haven't come to think of it (αὐτὸ ἐννενοηκένα), and indeed can't come to think of it ([αὐτὸ] ἐννοῆσαι), from anywhere other than from seeing or touching or from some other sense – I count them all as the same.'

'Yes, because they are the same, Socrates, at least in relation to what the argument aims to show.'

[ii] 'Now then, it is from the senses that one must come to think that everything in the reach of the senses both seeks that thing which Equal is and falls short of it. What do we say?'

'Just that.'

[iii] 'Then before we started to see and hear and use the other senses, presumably we must in fact have got knowledge of what the Equal itself is, if we were going to refer to it the equal things deriving from the senses, saying they all are eager to be like it, but are inferior to it.'

'Necessarily, given what has already been said, Socrates.'

[iv] 'Now was it from the moment we were born that we started seeing and hearing and having use of the other senses?'

'Certainly.'

'Right, and we must, as we're saying, have got the knowledge of the Equal before these?'

'Yes.'

'In that case, it seems we must have got it before we were born.'

'Yes, so it seems.'

Socrates' intermediate conclusion in T10.iii is that we need to have got knowledge of the essence of equality before we started to use the senses, and the

main reason for his conclusion is expressed in the “if” clause in T10.iii. The most common way to understand this clause is to take it as basically mentioning the ability to entertain FS.¹⁰⁴ On this reading, which I think is correct, people need to have knowledge of the Form of equality *before* beginning to use their senses in order for them to be able to entertain FS. But why?

Many interpreters think that there is *a further premise* implicit in the argument, the premise that people entertain FS as soon as they begin to use their senses. Since FS requires previous knowledge of the essence of equality, this implicit premise does ensure that Socrates’ conclusion in T10.iii follows. From this conclusion Socrates can very easily infer in T10.iv that knowledge of the essence of equality is prenatal: given that people begin to use the senses *as soon as* they are born, and that people need to have knowledge of the Form of equality *before* beginning to use their senses, people therefore need to know the Form of equality before they are born.

But is this further premise really *necessary*? M. L. Morgan (1984) thinks so. He claims that in the *Phaedo* even the primitive kind of sense-perception experienced by new-born infants *must* lead to the realization of the deficiency of the sensible items in relation to Forms (FS), because otherwise the argument in T10 for the prenatal possession of knowledge of Forms would be a *non sequitur*. He explains:

If knowledge were to require elaborate education, as the *Republic* recommends, then one could only infer that if learning is recalling, the soul, prior to its education, and not necessarily prior to its incarnation, must have known the Forms. (MORGAN 1984: 238).

And he adds:

Either the *Phaedo* and the *Republic* are inconsistent or the argument for the soul’s prenatal existence is a non sequitur. (*Ibidem*: 239, n. 4).

In order to rescue the soundness of the Recollection Argument, Morgan accepts the inconsistency between the *Phaedo* and the *Republic* and attempts to explain how a new-born infant, an individual with no education at all, can think of the

¹⁰⁴ Contrast Franklin (2005: 312-3), who advances a new understanding by taking ὄτι in that clause in a different sense.

Form of equality and entertain FS. In order to explain this he is, of course, obliged to hold these thoughts are not conscious, and as I have remarked, this *ad hoc* assumption finds no support in the *Phaedo* or other dialogues.

I believe Socrates' argument in T10 for the prenatal possession of knowledge of Forms by the soul does not require that people entertain FS as soon as they begin to use their senses. For Socrates' intermediate conclusion in T10.iii follows smoothly with a different premise, namely that people cannot obtain knowledge of the essence of equality between birth and recollection, that is, between peoples' birth and the moment when their sense-perception of equal things leads them to think of the essence of equality and entertain FS. This premise is practically explicit in T10.i, where Socrates says that we cannot "come to think of it ([αὐτὸ] ἐννοῆσαι)" except from sense-perception. Assuming that "it (αὐτὸ)" refers to the essence of equality,¹⁰⁵ and that "come to think (ἐννοῆσαι)" here means "to think for the first time in life",¹⁰⁶ T10.i is saying that we cannot think of the essence of equality for the first time in life except from sense-perception. But since Socrates is showing that coming to think of an essence from sense-perception is not acquiring knowledge of it, but recollecting it, T10.i implies that we cannot think of the essence of equality for the first time in life *except by undergoing recollection*.¹⁰⁷ Now, if it is impossible for a subject to *think* of that essence between birth and recollection, then of course it is also impossible for her to *acquire knowledge* of it between birth and recollection. Therefore, in order for Socrates conclusion in T10.iii to follow, there's no need to interpret that a subject thinks of the essence of equality and entertains FS at her very *first* sense-perception of equals. Even if such sensory-inspired thoughts would occur only after thousands of such sense-perceptions and much education, it would still follow that knowledge of that essence must be had before birth, since it cannot be

105 As I see it, my present argument works regardless of whether αὐτὸ refers to the Form or to the content of FS. So, instead of addressing this question here, I just assume it refers to the Form.

106 I am not aware of any objections to this assumption about the sense that ἐννοῆσαι has in this context.

107 I do interpret T10.i as expressing the premise that we cannot think of the Form of equality for the first time in life except through recollection, a premise that is not supported by anything in the *Phaedo*. So, in my view, Socrates' argument does have this falling short: it employs a premise for which no reason is given. I believe, however, that this result is somewhat superior to the alternatives available, which are: (i) holding that the *Phaedo* and the *Republic* are inconsistent or (ii) holding that the argument for the soul's prenatal existence is a non sequitur. These two were the only options discerned by Morgan (1984). I am proposing a further one.

acquired between birth and the occurrence of those sensory-inspired thoughts – as I am suggesting is implied in T10.i.

If recollection in the *Phaedo* occurs right after birth, it occurs to virtually everyone. Only if it is performed later in life is it possible that fewer people perform it. I need the assumption that recollection 1 is performed later because I claim that the sort of learning described in the *Phaedo* as recollection is the one accomplished by only those people that are becoming philosophers. And I have just shown that there is no problem with making that assumption: by doing so we do not render the argument in T10 invalid.

4. Recollection in the *Meno* and the *Phaedo*

Recollection in the *Meno* has more than one stage. All the stages of recollection in the *Meno* require *questioning* in order to be completed. In the *Phaedo*, recollection of the Form of F-ness is independent of questioning; it is accomplished by *sensing* F things.

Let us see the extent to which these dialogues might be seen as compatible. It has been suggested that, in the *Phaedo*, the sensing of F things may replace questioning as an alternative provoker of recollection. But we should not suppose that the sensing of F things provokes the whole of recollection, but only its first stage, for later stages do require a shift from sense-perception to reasoning. Let me show how this can be.

Recollection in the *Meno* may be thought to have three stages, the first of which is the *aporia* that brings the recollecting subject to realize she does not know what she believed she knew.¹⁰⁸ The enslaved boy completes this stage when he sees that he does not know how to construct a square with double the area of a given square. Socrates comments that now the boy has much more chance of inquiring into the matter than before and is in a better epistemic state. I have claimed that, in the *Phaedo*, recollection brings the subject to distinguish, for the first time, between the sensible Fs and the Form of F-ness, which is F (in the sense of being what F-ness is) independently of circumstances. One result of making this distinction for the first time is the realization that one does not know what F-ness is. Thus the result of

108 The three stages of recollection in the *Meno* are clearly distinguished by Scott (1995: 35-6).

recollection in the *Phaedo* (recollection 1) is analogous to the result of the first stage of recollection in the *Meno*: in both cases the recollecting subject gets in *aporia*, a state in which one judges truly that one does not know the answer to a question. Although there is no mention of *aporia* in the *Phaedo*, it is clearly the case that, after discovering that the essence of equality is different from the sensible equals, the subject must acknowledge that right now she does not know that essence, that is, she cannot adequately answer what equality is.

One may object that the boy in the *Meno*, prior to the first stage of recollection, believed that he knew the answer to the mathematical question, whereas in the *Phaedo* apparently no mention is made of any presumption of knowledge preceding recollection. Notwithstanding, prior to recollection 1 the subject must be able to recognize sensible Fs as F, so she must possess the concept of F-ness, that is, she must be able to classify what she senses as either F or not-F. On account of having this ability, this person likely to presume that she knows what F-ness is. For example, when asked “what is beauty?”, such a person is likely to articulate an answer in terms of salient features commonly present in eminent cases of beauty, such as the precision of the lines in a vase painting by Exekias. Another answer of the same kind is mentioned by Socrates in 100d, namely “bright color”, only to be rejected as an inappropriate explanation for why something is beautiful. Whoever gives an answer of this kind presumes to know what beauty is, but in fact does not yet know that the essence of beauty is distinct from the many sensible things that are beautiful and is not itself a sensible thing. Hence it seems that nothing prevents us from interpreting the accounts of recollection given in the *Meno* and the *Phaedo* as compatible.

CHAPTER IV

Inquiry and knowledge in the Final Argument

In the *Phaedo*'s Final Argument (95-107), Socrates rejects the type of explanation (*aitia*)¹⁰⁹ that his predecessors, the physicists, offered to becoming, perishing and being. Many interpreters think that Socrates rejects that type of explanation on the basis of his strict requirements for something to be an explanation. This is correct, but I intend to emphasize a more basic condition for that rejection. Indeed, counter-arguments to the physicists' explanations may be built upon those requirements for explanation. However, it is the adoption of a new mode of inquiry that provides the context in which the acceptability of a thesis depends on its success in a specific sort of argumentative test, not on its conformity to what sense-perception tells us. My point is that Socrates' new mode of inquiry, inquiry in *logoi*, is fundamentally characterized by the opposition of arguments in question-and-answer discussion. The view that inquiry in *logoi* amounts to dialectic was put forth by David Sedley (2004).¹¹⁰ He neither elaborated nor argued for this view – but I will do both things here. I will also rebut van Eck's (1994; 1996) reading, which attributes a different procedure to inquiry in *logoi*. In the last section of the chapter I discuss the relationship between inquiry in *logoi* and knowledge, specifically in connection with the impossibility of knowing the Forms purely while one is embodied, mentioned by Socrates in 66d7-67a1 (T1 in Chapter II). The literature about the Final Argument is

109 The word "*aitia*" in this context refers to a causal factor. The term "explanation" often refers to a linguistic entity, but it may also refer to a causal factor and this is the use I have in mind here.

110 Sedley (2004: 108): "(...) Socrates [in the *Phaedo*] autobiographically describes his decision in his 'Second Voyage' to study reality in discourses (*logoi*) rather than in things (99d4 –e6): *in context, this is naturally read as a move from empirical science to dialectic.*" (my emphasis). Unfortunately this interpretation does not come naturally as Sedley would have it, not at least in light of van Eck's (1994; 1996) reading.

too vast and the present chapter does not introduce a significant novelty;¹¹¹ its contribution consists in giving greater emphasis to the characterization of Socrates' method of inquiry and to the relation between this method and Socrates' view on the attainability of "pure knowledge" of Forms.

It will be useful to begin by describing Socrates' own experience with the mode of inquiry of the physicists and the explanations offered by them (Socrates' Intellectual Autobiography up to 99d). This will provide a contrast with the new mode of inquiry adopted by Socrates and the new type of explanation he proposes. It will also be helpful to discuss the requirements for an appropriate explanation that Socrates apparently takes to be valid. Both these things are done in Section 1.

When Socrates adopts the inquiry through *logoi*, he presents the method of hypothesis, whose aim is clearly to regulate the new mode of inquiry. Socrates then proceeds to present his new type of explanation, in which the Forms are the only explanations of becoming, perishing and being. Discussing the method of hypothesis and Socrates' new type of explanation is the job of Section 2.

In section 3, I argue that the fundamental character of Socrates' new mode of inquiry is the opposition of arguments in question-and-answer discussion, and I explain how the method of hypothesis distinguishes this approach from eristic, the art of the practitioners of disputation (ἀντιλογικοί).

Finally, Section 4 discusses the relationship between inquiry in *logoi* and knowledge.

1. Socrates' Intellectual Autobiography up to 99d

Socrates tells that when he was young he wanted "to know the causes of each thing, why each one comes to be, why it perishes, and why it is" (96a8-9). However, Socrates' progress in this endeavor was anything but smooth, as he narrates in the following passage:

T1. *Phaedo* 96a9-c9:

111 Bailey (2014: 1): "The existing literature on this passage is vast and highly sophisticated, so much so that one might reasonably despair of saying something new at this stage". Politis (2021: 112): "So much has been written on this argument from the *Phaedo*, especially in the past fifty or so years, that the reader may naturally wonder how there can be anything new or significant left to say".

“Time and again I would shift in different directions (ἄνω κάτω μετέβαλλον), considering first the following sort of questions. Is it when the hot and the cold start to decompose, as some people were saying, that living things grow into a unity? Is it because of blood that we think, or air, or fire? Or is it none of these, but is it rather the brain that supplies the senses of hearing, seeing and smelling, and do memory and opinion come to be from them, and when memory and opinion become stable, does knowledge come to be from them along these same lines? Next I considered the way in which these things cease to be, and the events that affect the heaven and the earth. And in the end I myself came to think that I was uniquely unqualified for this inquiry (πρὸς ταύτην τὴν σκέψιν ἀφυῆς εἶναι ὡς οὐδὲν χρῆμα). I’ll give you ample evidence for this: I was so utterly blinded by that inquiry with regard to the very things that, at least as I and others supposed, I had previously known clearly that I unlearned those very things that earlier I had thought I knew, on many subjects, but in particular why a human being grows. Because earlier I thought it obvious to everyone that it is on account of eating and drinking.”

The first sentence in T1 means that Socrates was unsure about the explanations of things like the ones he proceeds to mention: life, thought, sense-perception, memory, opinion and knowledge. He says he would “shift in different directions” (ἄνω κάτω μετέβαλλον). This statement has not received much attention, but it can naturally be related to the wandering that affects the soul when it investigates reality through the senses (79c2-9). In fact, later Socrates will indicate that this is just what he had been doing before he turned to inquiry through *logoi* (99e2-3). Socrates mentions many different explanations of thought – blood, *or* air, *or* fire, *or* the brain – implying that they cannot all be true, but are competing alternatives. As we will see, he believes that each *explanandum* has a single *explanans*.¹¹² So, he probably considered each of these alternatives without figuring out if any of them was *the* true account; each of them may have had a grip on him for some time, until it was abandoned in favor of the next one, and he could never decide which was *the* explanation of thought.

So, Socrates tells, in the end he realized that he was “*uniquely* unqualified for this inquiry” (πρὸς ταύτην τὴν σκέψιν ἀφυῆς εἶναι ὡς οὐδὲν χρῆμα), meaning that he had much more difficulties with the inquiry into nature than usual. This statement is so strong that Socrates feels he has to present evidence for it: he says that he was so blinded by that inquiry that he unlearned even things that he and others thought he knew clearly. The main example is that a human grows because she eats and

112 This point was made by Politis (2010; 2021) and Ebrey (2014). I briefly discuss it below.

drinks, something Socrates supposed was evident to anyone. This answer to the question “why do a human grows?” belongs to common sense, whereas the answers to the questions mentioned in T1 (questions such as “why we think?”) are given by the physicists.¹¹³ Notice that there are two sets of questions, and when Socrates first joined the physicists for answers to one set of questions, he was satisfied with the commonsensical answers he had for the other set. But, after spending some time considering the several competing answers offered by the physicists to the former set of questions, Socrates became so puzzled that his puzzlement contaminated even the commonsensical answers that he had to the latter set. He ended up in a seemingly worse epistemic situation than when he started, and I think this – the fact that he apparently lost knowledge in the process – is what is unusual or even unique about Socrates’ experience with physical science. We should remember that getting rid of the false presumption of knowledge is actually an epistemic improvement according to Socrates (*Meno* 84a3-c6).

However, when Socrates says that he unlearned things he (and others) thought he knew, it should be clear that he did not really know any of those things, for it is not possible to lose actual knowledge, unless under extraordinary conditions, such as when one has suffered brain injury. Hence it turns out that he (and the others) falsely presumed that he knew those things. As I have mentioned in the discussion of *Meno* 97e-98a in Chapter II, Section 1.3, the stability that Plato deems knowledge to be a *stable* epistemic state, which means that the true opinions that constitute knowledge stay in place and are not reasonably abandoned in the face of criticism or presumed evidence (see the aforementioned section for how a true opinion or piece of knowledge can be dropped in face of evidence).

When Socrates says that he found himself to be “unqualified for this inquiry”, we might want to know what exactly he means by “this inquiry” (ταύτην τὴν σκέψιν). Is he referring to the explananda that he had been inquiring into, and saying that it is hopeless to search for their explanations? Or is he referring to the mode of inquiry that he had been employing? The former question should not be answered affirmatively. For after abandoning ταύτην τὴν σκέψιν Socrates kept himself

¹¹³ Other commonsensical explanations formerly held by Socrates were: that one person is larger than the other because of a head, that ten is more numerous than eight due to having two added to it, and that two cubits is larger than one in virtue of its exceeding the other by half (cf. 96d8-e8).

interested in at least some of the explananda over which he had been puzzled, such as this person being larger than that person (on which see below), and *hopeful* that he may find their explanations. Hence he is most probably referring to the mode of inquiry, and saying that he cannot get to know anything *by it*.

In what consists the physicist's mode of inquiry? We may be certain that sense-perception is of chief importance to it, but Socrates does not tell us more than that. All he says is that he had been "observing things with my eyes and seeking to get hold of them with each of my senses" (βλέπων πρὸς τὰ πράγματα τοῖς ὄμμασι καὶ ἐκάστη τῶν αἰσθήσεων ἐπιχειρῶν ἄπτεσθαι αὐτῶν, 99e2-3), and studying things in facts (ἐν ἔργοις) instead of studying them ἐν λόγοις (100a1-3). Without a more detailed description of that mode of inquiry everything else we say is bound to be speculative, but I think it would be fairly uncontroversial to suppose that the physicists would evaluate the acceptability of an explanation (or any thesis) primarily according to its conformity to what is most evident to sense-perception, without much critical evaluation. The same would be valid for common sense.

Common sense would have an even greater tendency to appoint as explanations things or features that are conspicuous to the senses. We may find an example of that when Socrates considers the commonsensical explanation that *one person is larger than another by a head*.¹¹⁴ He is explicitly referring to a situation where two people are standing side by side and the former is taller than the latter. The height difference between them is approximately equal to the height of the taller person's head, so to an observer it *looks like* the taller person is larger *because of* her head. Another commonsensical explanation, which Socrates used to take as

114 Socrates' discussion of this attempted "explanation" (in T3 below) bypasses a basic problem that it contains. Notice that the phrase "by a head (τῆ κεφαλῇ)" is in the dative case. In Greek, phrases in the dative may indeed express a cause, in which case the phrase is a "dative of cause" (Smyth 1920 §1517). In addition, phrases in the dative may also express the measure or degree of difference between things, in which case the phrase is a "dative of measure of difference" (*ibidem*: §1513). Now, context makes it clear that the sentence "one person is larger than another by a head" is an attempted reply to the question about the *cause* because of which one person is larger than the other. But, given that the phrase "by a head" is also – and perhaps more naturally – taken as marking the *measure* by which one person is larger than the other, the reply could be criticized on the grounds that it fails *altogether* to explain the explanandum. What is odd is that Socrates says that the reply fails because it presents an inappropriate explanans, when he could have said that it fails because it does not present an explanans at all. (Something similar happens in Socrates' treatment of other commonsensical explanations). If Socrates is not interested in pointing out this more basic problem, why did he choose to discuss a reply that contains it? Right now I cannot answer this, but I am also not comfortable with supposing that Socrates has just made a bad choice.

“even more obvious”, is that *ten is greater than eight because of two*. He probably has in mind a situation where two sets of things, like sticks, are being looked at. The set of ten sticks *appears* to the observer to be greater than the set of eight *because of two sticks*.

Socrates had been satisfied with these commonsensical explanations until he dove into physical science and emerged puzzled. When asked what he thinks of these explanations now, he declares: “I’m no doubt a long way indeed from thinking that I know the cause of any of these” (96e6-7, right before T1). By “these” Socrates means the set of *explananda* he just mentioned, to which he used to accept commonsensical explanations. But a few lines below he professes that his ignorance is general: “I can no longer persuade myself that by using this approach I know (...) why *anything* else comes to be, or perishes, or is” (97b4-6, right after T1).

After rejecting traditional explanations from both physical science and common sense, Socrates took notice of a claim by physicist Anaxagoras, the claim that intelligence (*νοῦς*) is responsible for all being and becoming. Socrates narrates that this gave him hope of finding in Anaxagoras’ book a type of explanation that interested him very much: teleological explanations based on what is good. For example, with respect to the position of the Earth in the cosmos, a good-based explanation would show us that it is better for the Earth to be in its position rather than in any other.¹¹⁵ Socrates did not expect that Anaxagoras’ book would present any other explanations than good-based ones. But his expectation was frustrated since Anaxagoras appointed as causes air, ether etc. For Socrates, things like these are not causes, but “things without which causes *cannot be causes*” (99b), that is, cannot cause their effects. Therefore he rejected Anaxagoras’ theories as he did with the explanations of other physicists.

1.1. Socrates’ requirements for an appropriate explanation

What did Socrates find puzzling about the explanations from physical science and common sense so as to make him reject all of them? The answer is that they were in breach of certain requirements for an appropriate explanation that Socrates assumes. Let us go through the evidence for this.

¹¹⁵ It is controversial whether good-based explanations would meet the two requirements for explanation.

T2. *Phaedo* 96e7-b3:

“I don’t allow myself to say even that, when somebody adds one to one, either the one it was added to has become two, or the one that was added and the one it was added to became two, on account of the addition of the first to the second. For I find it astonishing that when each of them was apart from the other, each turned out to be one, and they weren’t two at that time, but when they came near each other, this supposedly became a cause of their coming to be two, namely the union that consisted in being put near each other. No, nor can I still persuade myself that if somebody divides one, this, the division, has now become a cause of its coming to be two. *For then there comes to be a cause of coming to be two that is the opposite (ἐναντία) of the earlier cause.* Back then, you see, it was because they were brought together into proximity with each other, and one was added to the other, but now it is because they are brought apart, and one is separated from the other.”

Socrates in T2 claims not to be convinced that the explanation of *coming to be two* is the juxtaposition of two items, or that it is the division of an item into two parts. His reasoning seems to be that, if these explanations were accepted, there would be two opposing explanations for *coming to be two*, namely juxtaposition (or addition) and division. Politis (2021) has remarked that when Socrates speaks of one explanation as the “opposite (ἐναντία)” of another he means that one is different from and incompatible with the other. Thus Socrates denies that the possession of one and the same quality can be explained by two different and incompatible *explanantia*.¹¹⁶ He assumes that each *explanandum* has a single *explanans* – this is his first requirement for explanation.

The same interpretation can be arrived at by a different route. It is now common to understand the argument in T2 against the commonsensical explanations as an indifference argument.¹¹⁷ In this kind of argument, from a premise of the form “there is no more reason for *p* than for *q*” it follows “either *p* and *q*, or not-*p* and not-*q*”.¹¹⁸ And the reasoning in T2 seems to be that, since it makes no difference whether a thing becomes two because of addition or division, then neither of the two processes can be the explanation or cause of its becoming two. Ebrey (2014: 251)

¹¹⁶ Politis (2021) explains the notion of *incompatibility* as follows. “In general, two kinds of things are incompatible if, and only if, one and the same particular thing cannot instantiate both kinds. For example, the explanations in terms of the appeal to addition and division (...) are contrary in this sense. For the same particular thing, in this case it is a particular process, cannot at once be the process of addition and process of division.” (Politis, 2021: 124).

¹¹⁷ The view that Socrates makes use of indifference arguments in 96c3-97b3 was first put forth by Menn (2010: 46). His view is adopted by Bailey (2014) and Ebrey (2014).

¹¹⁸ About indifference arguments and their use by ancient thinkers see Makin (1993).

has pointed out that this argument “only works if we assume there is only one cause per change”. And Socrates does seem to make such an assumption,¹¹⁹ which amounts to saying that *each explanandum is explained by a single explanans*. This is Socrates’ first requirement for explanation. It is satisfied if, and only if, the explanans is a necessary condition for the explanandum.

Later Socrates seems to assume more requirements.

T3. *Phaedo* 101a5-b3:

‘For I suppose that, if you say that it is because of the head that someone is larger and someone smaller, you would be afraid of being met with a counter-argument: first (πρῶτον) that it is *because of the same thing that the larger is larger and the smaller smaller*, and secondly (ἔπειτα) that, *even though the head is small, the larger person is larger because of it*, and that this would be *bizarre*, somebody’s being large because of something small. Or wouldn’t you have those fears?’

Cebes laughed at that, and said: ‘Yes, I would.’

Socrates in T3 is considering, as an answer to the question “why is person A larger than person B?”, the statement “A is larger than B by a head” and, as an answer to “why is person B smaller than person A?”, the statement “B is smaller than A by a head”. He objects that a head cannot be the cause both of person A’s being larger than person B and of B’s being smaller than A, or else two opposite (different and incompatible) qualities would be explained by the *same* factor.¹²⁰ Socrates denies that the same explanans can account for two different and incompatible explananda and thus clearly assumes that *each explanans explains a single explanandum*. This is his second requirement.

But Socrates seems to assume yet a third requirement for explanation. Against the commonsensical explanations considered in T3 Socrates mentions two arguments: one introduced by “first (πρῶτον)” and the other by “secondly (ἔπειτα)”. We have just seen that the πρῶτον argument brings a requirement for explanation (the second requirement we found in the *Phaedo*). Now the “ἔπειτα” argument says

¹¹⁹ See *Phaedo* 100c9-13.

¹²⁰ Socrates’ objection can be answered. In Rowe’s (1993a: 244) words, “If two individuals are involved, as they are (...), there is nothing to prevent the same *aitia* having an effect on the second which is opposite to the one it has on the first (...)”. The availability of such an answer has led Vlastos (1969: 351 n. 64) to reckon that Socrates’ objection is spurious. Nevertheless, such an answer is not available if it is assumed that (i) that there is only one explanans per explanandum and that (ii) A’s being larger than B is a different explanandum than B’s being smaller than A. See also Gallop’s (1975: 185-6) reply to Vlastos.

that a head cannot be the cause of a person's being larger than another because a head is small. Apparently, *c* cannot be the cause of *x*'s being *F* if *c* is un-*F* (that is, if *c* is *G* and *G* is opposite to *F*). This is a *putative* third requirement for explanation.

Sedley (1998) has pointed out that this requirement seems to be a negative statement of the ancient principle that *like causes like* (the cause of *x*'s being *F* must itself be *F*). Thus he agrees with those who think Plato endorses a transmission theory of causation (such as Annas 1982 and Fine 1987), according to which causation is a matter of causes transmitting their characters to their effects.¹²¹ Nevertheless, the positive principle that like causes like is clearly not implied by the negative requirement that *c* cannot be the cause of *x*'s being *F* if *c* is un-*F*, for this requirement is equally met if *c* is either *F* or neither *F* nor un-*F*. That Plato holds the transmission theory of causation is therefore not corroborated by the putative third requirement for explanation in T3.

Besides T3, those who think Plato endorses a transmission theory of causation also resort to 105b-c, a passage where Socrates *seems* to assert that *fire* is the *cause* of a thing's being *hot*, and read this passage as implying that the thing became hot precisely because fire transmitted its heat to it. But when we look closely at 105b-c, we notice that Socrates is careful not to assert that fire is a *cause* of hotness.¹²² He only says that, if present in anything's body, that thing will be hot (105b8-c2), for fire always brings up or imports (ἐπιφέρειν, 104e10; 105a3-4; 105d10) the Form of hotness. Thus it is not straightforward that 105b-c supports that Plato envisages a transmission theory of causation.

It seems more likely that nothing but participation in the Form of hotness is the true cause of anything's being hot. Nor is it the case that the Form of hotness makes things hot by transmitting its hotness to them, for this would require that the Form of hotness be itself hot. Although Socrates often speaks of the Form or essence of *F*-ness as being *F*, we should not take such statements at face value. How can the essence of hotness be hot if it is not physical in the first place? Although such statements seem at face value to be *predications*, we should take them as

121 For a sustained and convincing argument against reading Plato as endorsing this theory in the *Phaedo*, see Politis 2021: 112-6.

122 Bailey (2014) notes that the term "*cause (aitia)*" is not used in this stage of the argument. For him, Socrates is no longer trying to specify causes.

statements of identity meant to attribute the essence F-ness to F-ness. The presence of fire does not properly speaking *cause* hotness, it only *brings up* the Form of hotness.

And even if the putative third requirement implies a transmission theory of causation, which I have just argued is wrong – is Plato really asserting that requirement for explanation in T3? Notice that, in reaction to Socrates' question in T3, Cebes *laughs*. Rowe (1993a: 244) and Benson (2015: 196, n. 40) have suggested that Cebes' laughter casts doubt on whether both the second and third requirements for explanation should be taken seriously. But what is Cebes laughing at? The requirement (each *explanans* must have a single *explanandum*) brought by the *πρῶτον* argument in T3 is very similar to the requirement (each *explanandum* must have a single *explanans*) found in T2, where there was no laughter. Also, note that Socrates says it would be monstrous or bizarre (τέρας, 101b1) if a person was larger because of something small, but he does not use that word only in connection with the *πρῶτον* argument in T3. It is therefore highly likely that Cebes's laughter has to do with the “ἔπειτα” argument alone, the one which brings the putative third requirement for explanation. Hence it is only this requirement, if anything, whose seriousness should be doubted in virtue of Cebes' laughter.

If we put together the first two undoubtedly genuine requirements, the result is that each explanandum has a single explanans (T2) and each explanans has a single explanandum (T3). In Politis' (2021: 119) words: “if same explanans, then same explanandum” and “if same explanandum, then same explanans”. Interpreters have noted that this means that the explanans is a necessary and sufficient condition for the explanandum. Bailey (2014: 27-8) has written that the explanans is commensurate with the explanandum.

The thesis that the explanans is necessary and sufficient for the explanandum, expressed by Socrates' two requirements for explanation, has been deemed controversial by some interpreters. But Aristotle seems to endorse that thesis. According to Angioni (2018), Aristotle defends it in *Posterior Analytics* I, 13: 78b13-28. In this passage, Aristotle considers the question “why do walls not breathe?” and denies that it is because walls are not animals. “If this were the cause of [wall's] not breathing, being an animal would have to be the cause of [wall's]

breathing”, says Aristotle (78b16-7, adapted from the translation by Angioni 2018: 165).¹²³ Behind Aristotle's rejection of the answer “because walls are not animals” is the requirement that the cause must be a sufficient condition for its effect. Given that, for Aristotle, being an animal is *not sufficient* for breathing,¹²⁴ it is also *not the cause* of it. That is why the fact that walls are not animals cannot answer why they do not breathe. Hence for Aristotle in *Posterior Analytics* the explanans must be sufficient for the explanandum, just as dictated by Socrates' second requirement for explanation, the one exhibited in T3.

Aristotle also asserts that “if B's being asserted of x is the cause of A's being attributed to x, then B's being *denied* of x would be the cause of A's *not* being attributed to x” (78b20-1, adapted from the translation by Angioni 2018: 168).¹²⁵ The antecedent of this conditional statement can be read as expressing Socrates' second requirement for explanation.¹²⁶ But right now I want to focus on the *consequent* of the conditional, for it articulates Socrates' *first requirement*, that the explanans is a necessary condition for the explanandum, as exhibited in T2. To see this, let us take again (from T2) Socrates' rejection of addition and division as explanations for x's becoming two, and fill out the schema in Aristotle's conditional statement by replacing A for “two” and B for “division”. With such a replacement, the conditional would read: if x's being divided is the cause of x's becoming two, then x's *not* being divided would be the cause of x's *not* becoming two. The consequent of this conditional contains the assumption that the absence of the cause is sufficient for the absence of its effect or, equivalently, the cause is a necessary condition for the effect. Thus, since division is unnecessary for anything's becoming two (for addition can also do the work, cf. T2), it is *false* that x's *not* being divided is the cause of x's *not* becoming two. That is why x's being divided cannot explain why it becomes two. A parallel argument can be

123 And Aristotle generalizes the point: “that is, if the B's being denied of x is the cause of A's not being attributed to x, then B's being asserted of x would be the cause of A being attributed to x” (*Posterior Analytics* I, 13: 78b17-20, adapted from the translation by Angioni 2018: 168). (The example of the walls is a particular case of this general point: x is walls, A is breathing, and B is animal). In his translation, Angioni reformulates the original predications in a helpful way by introducing the letters B, A and C (I have replaced C with “x” in quoting him). The original Greek text that I consulted is by Ross (1949).

124 “Indeed, not every animal breathes” (*Posterior Analytics* I, 13: 78b22-3).

125 Angioni again helpfully exhibits in this translation the predications in the original text by introducing the letters B, A and C (I have replaced C with “x” in quoting him).” See note 120 above.

126 For this reading of the antecedent, see Angioni 2018: 169.

made against an explanation in terms of addition. Hence, borrowing from Aristotle we reach the same result as Socrates in T2: neither addition nor division explain something's becoming two.¹²⁷ This is because for Aristotle in *Posterior Analytics*, just as for Socrates in T2, the explanans must be a necessary condition for the explanandum.

Of course, Aristotle and Plato are aware that being a necessary and sufficient condition for the explanandum is merely a *sine qua non* requirement for being a primary cause (πρῶτον αἴτιον) or explanans – it is by no means sufficient for it, for the explanans must also be explanatorily prior to the explanandum.¹²⁸ Since explanation is an asymmetric relation (i.e. either A explains B or B explains A, but not both), there must be a criterion for deciding which item is the explanans and which is the explanandum, and this criterion is explanatory priority, a feature peculiar to the explanans. The *Phaedo* is not incoherent with this idea, for it contains no indication that if something satisfies those requirements then it is automatically an appropriate explanation; it only contains the assumption that if it does *not* satisfy them, the putative explanation must be rejected as inappropriate. And Plato acknowledges explanatory priority elsewhere. Socrates in *Euthyphro* 10a-11b shows that although being loved by the gods is necessary and sufficient for being pious, it is not the case that what is pious is so because it is loved by the gods; it is rather the other way around (what is loved by the gods is so because it is pious), for being pious is explanatorily prior to being god-loved.¹²⁹

Socrates does not provide justification for these requirements. In fact, he does not even expressly state them, he only displays them by means of examples of their breach. However, these requirements are the basis for Socrates' rejection of explanations from physical science and common sense, and for his satisfaction with

127 I am not claiming that Aristotle would agree with this result. I am just pointing out that, on Angioni's (2018) illuminating reading of the relevant passage, Aristotle does endorse the requirement on which this result depends, namely the requirement that the explanans must be necessary for the explanandum.

128 Aristotle shows this in *Posterior Analytics* I, 13 when he considers the propositions (i) "planets are near" and (ii) "planets do not twinkle". Although any of these could be a premise in a sound deduction of the other, he insists that in a demonstration (ἀπόδειξις) only (i) can be a premise and only (ii) can be the conclusion, i.e. the explanandum. For it is not the case that the planets' not twinkling explains their being near – it is rather the other way around, given that their being near is explanatorily prior.

129 For this reading of the *Euthyphro* passage see Sharvy (1972) and Ferejohn (2013: 51-60).

the new model for explanations that he proposes. It has been suggested that Socrates can assume these requirements because they are reasonably intuitive.¹³⁰

These requirements are also responsible for the rejection of the explanations offered by Anaxagoras. Interpreters usually hold that Socrates rejects material explanations because they are not rational or teleological.¹³¹ But Ebrey (2014) argues that Socrates rejects them for the same reason he rejected other traditional explanations: they fail to meet the two requirements, so it is possible to pose indifference arguments against them too. To see this, take for example the fact that Socrates is in prison and suppose that we try to explain it materialistically by referring to Socrates' bones and tendons as causes. Since there is no more reason for his bones and tendons to cause his being in prison than for them to cause his being in Boethia (i.e. they are neutral or indifferent as to where he is), and given that each cause has a single explanandum (second requirement, T3), Socrates' bones and tendons cause neither his being in prison nor his being in Boethia.

2. Socrates' second voyage: new method, new explanantia, same explananda

After rejecting Anaxagoras' account, Socrates says the following.

T4. *Phaedo* 99c6-d2:

'Now I would gladly become anyone's pupil (μαθητής) to learn just what the truth is about that sort of cause (τοιαύτης αΐτίας). But since I was denied it and haven't been able either to find it myself (οὔτ' αὐτὸς εὐρεῖν) or to learn it from someone else (οὔτ' αὐτὸς εὐρεῖν οὔτε παρ' ἄλλου μαθεῖν), would you like me to give you a demonstration, Cebes, of how I've pursued my second voyage (δεύτερον πλοῦν) in search of the cause (ἐπὶ τὴν τῆς αΐτίας ζήτησιν)?'

Socrates states that, since he was unable to discover for himself or learn from others the type of explanation that most interested him, namely good-based explanations, he then undertook a "second voyage (δεύτερον πλοῦν)". It is widely accepted that this expression signifies a *second-best* thing. In Socrates' view, the

130 Politis (2021) illustrates their being reasonably intuitive with a story about his daughter and him: "She asked me why I was wearing rubber shoes in the pool. I said, because of the need to avoid foot infections. She objected (...) that in the sea I would swim barefoot. (...) It appears that what my daughter said was an expression of some grasp of the requirement, if same explanans (*the need to avoid foot infections*), then same explanandum (*the wearing of rubber shoes*)." (Politis, 2021: 128).

131 Annas (1982); Bostock (1986); Menn (2010).

best thing would be to obtain knowledge¹³² – by either finding it oneself or learning it from someone else – of “that sort of explanation (τοιαύτης αἰτίας)”, which in the context can only refer to good-based explanations.¹³³ Knowledge of them enables one to explain why x is F by showing that it is best for it to be so. Socrates could not obtain such knowledge and still does not have it, for the new explanations that he is about to introduce do not invoke what is good (but they are at least compatible with good-based explanations).

The destination of the second voyage is “the search of the cause (τὴν τῆς αἰτίας ζήτησιν)”. The reference is almost certainly to Socrates’ inquiry into the causes of becoming, perishing and being, which is being narrated since 96a. As I have mentioned, Socrates kept himself interested in least some of the explananda over which he got puzzled when he was employing the physicists’ approach. Socrates’s second voyage is therefore a new attempt to explain the *same* explananda.

What is different in this new attempt, besides the fact that it leads to a new model of explanation, is that it replaces the physicists’ approach with a new method or mode of inquiry.

T5. *Phaedo* 99e1-6:

‘(...) I started to worry that I might be utterly blinded in my soul through observing things with my eyes and seeking to get hold of them with each of my senses. So I decided that I should take refuge in arguments (εἰς τοὺς λόγους) and look into the truth of things in them (ἐν ἐκείνοις σκοπεῖν τῶν ὄντων τὴν ἀλήθειαν).’

Socrates in T5 tells us that he adopted a new mode of inquiry: inquiry in *logoi*. What does he mean by inquiring (σκοπεῖν) in *logoi*? This is a difficult question because the term “*logos*” has multiple meanings. I will not here defend a choice of translation between the preferable options – which in this case would be “theories”, “arguments” and “statements”. Instead, I want to point out that the use of “*logos*” in this context also carries the reference to a specific sort of argumentative test. This

¹³² That some degree of *knowledge* is at issue in T4 is indicated by Socrates’ use of “learner” or “pupil (μαθητῆς)” and “to learn (μαθεῖν)”.

¹³³ Ebrey (2023: 227-8) emphasizes that Socrates’ second-best option is to proceed *without knowledge* of that sort of explanation. He points out that the expression “second voyage” is used in the *Philebus* to refer to the act of going forward even though one lacks knowledge of things that it would be great to know: Protarchus says that “while it is a great thing for the wise man to know everything, the second voyage is not to be mistaken about oneself, it seems to me” (19c1-3).¹ For Ebrey, something similar would be happening in the *Phaedo*. Here the second voyage is made *in absence of knowledge* of good-based explanations, as in the *Philebus* it is made *in absence of knowledge* of everything.

test is run by considering arguments for a thesis as well as objections or counter-arguments to it – a procedure that we may call “opposition of arguments”.¹³⁴ The refutation of the thesis being tested is always a possible outcome, but never an end in itself, for the goal is not to defeat the thesis no matter what, it is rather to find truth or at least discard falsity. How such an essentially argumentative or logical procedure may reveal truth or falsity will be discussed at the end of Section 3, the section in which I defend the characterization of inquiry in *logoi* as opposition of arguments.

2.1. Method of Hypothesis (Part I)

In his second voyage, Socrates abandons the method of the physicists and adopts inquiry in *logoi*. This mode of inquiry is regulated by the method of hypothesis, which is described in two passages: 100a3-8 and 101d3-102a1 (respectively T6 and T11 below). The present subsection considers the first passage.

T6. *Phaedo* 100a3-8:

‘In any case, that is how I started out: on every occasion I hypothesize (ὑποθέμενος) whatever *logos* I deem strongest (ἔρρωμενέστατον), and then I set down as true whatever I think harmonizes (συμφωνεῖν) with it – both about cause and about everything else – and as false whatever doesn’t.’ (Adapted).

Socrates says that he takes as hypothesis the *logos* he considers strongest (ἔρρωμενέστατον). Again, “*logos*” in T6 can be rendered as either “theory”, “argument” or “statement”. What is most important, however, is that the meaning of “strongest” is closely related to the meaning of “safest (ἀσφαλέστατον, 100d8)” in T9. When we look at T9 in Section 3, we will see that Socrates deems safest the answers that are most difficult to refute. Thus the strength or safety of a *logos* is equivalent to its *resistance or immunity to counter-argument*. This is related to Simmias’ attitude in 85c7-d1: “one ought surely to achieve one of the following”, says him, “either to learn or discover how things are, or, if it is impossible to do that, at least to take the best among human *logoi* – the hardest one to disprove (δυσεξελεγκτότατον)”. Socrates is taking a similar path in his second voyage: since he could neither learn nor discover the truth, he is looking for the *logos* that is hardest to refute.

¹³⁴ In a way, such a procedure has already been recommended in the *Phaedo* when Socrates says to Simmias and Cebes “if you think I say something true, agree with me, and if not, *use every argument to resist [or oppose] me* (παντὶ λόγῳ ἀντιπείνετε)” (91c).

Socrates also says in T6 that he takes as true whatever harmonizes with the hypothesis and as false whatever does not harmonize with it. The propositions that harmonize with the hypothesis are later called “the things that spur from it [the hypothesis] (τὰ ἀπ’ ἐκείνης [ὑποθέσεως] ὀρμηθέντα, 101d4-5)” – or, in Sedley and Long’s (2011) translation (see T11 below), the hypothesis’ “consequences”. There is much debate about the meaning of the verb “to harmonize (συμφωνεῖν)”. Interpreters have repeatedly considered and finally rejected taking this verb in this context as having a *strict logical sense*, such as “to entail” or “to be compatible with”.¹³⁵ I believe the best suggestion about how to interpret the verb is given by Ebrey (2023). For him, the meaning of the verb in this context involves more than just logical relations. He claims that the process of carefully considering what would be true and what would be false if an hypothesis is right is “a process we frequently go through when we think through theories: we examine not merely their logical consequences but, more broadly, what anyone accepting the theory would accept or deny” (*ibidem*: 232). He explains his suggestion more fully thus:

My suggestion is that, when someone considers whether a claim harmonizes with a logos, they consider whether this claim makes sense as part of a larger theory based on this logos; similarly, when someone considers whether two claims harmonize with one another (where each of these claims derive from a single logos), they consider whether these claims can both be part of a larger theory based on this logos. (*ibidem*: 244).

As a final note on T6, although there are differences in the use of hypotheses between the *Meno* and the *Phaedo*, I want to emphasize one important similarity: in both dialogues an hypothesis is employed in a context where the piece of knowledge that would enable one to settle the question in view is absent. In the *Meno*, the question in view is whether virtue is teachable, and knowledge about what virtue is would be enough for settling the question. In the absence of such knowledge, Socrates proposes that they look into the matter by an hypothesis, for this should help them to answer whether virtue is teachable without their knowing what virtue is. In the *Phaedo*, the purpose is similar: the hypothesis should help one to answer what is the cause of x’s being F without one’s knowing what F-ness is.¹³⁶

¹³⁵ A comprehensive and illuminating discussion of the logical interpretation of συμφωνεῖν is provided by K. M. Sayre (1969: 15-20).

¹³⁶ In holding that the second voyage is made without knowledge, I am following Erey (2023) – see note 130 above. Now, the hypothesis used in the *Meno* is the answer to the question “what must

2.2. Socrates' New *Aitia*

Socrates introduces his new explanation by taking as an example the quality of beauty. He says that if anything is beautiful, it is solely because of its participation in the Form of beauty (100c4-6). In a later passage he generalizes by saying that participating or having a share (μετέχειν) in the Form or essence (οὐσία) of a quality is the only cause or explanation for possessing that quality (101c2-4). Socrates deliberately leaves the relation of participation, that holds between particulars and Forms, undefined. But it is important to note that the causes are not, strictly speaking, the Forms, but the participation of particulars in Forms, whatever that may be.¹³⁷ Thus the relation of causation holds between a particular's having a quality (explanandum) and that particular's participating in the Form of that quality (explanans). In other words, Socrates' new model of explanation is: x is F because x has a share in the Form of F -ness. Although Socrates in 100e-101b temporarily drops all mention of participation, and speaks of x 's being F simply because of the Form of F -ness, we should take this as a shorter way to express the same idea. He resumes mentioning participation in 101c.

3. Inquiry in *logoi*

In this section I argue that inquiry through *logoi* is characterized by the opposition of arguments. The section is divided in three parts. Each of the first two parts supports one of my premises, thus in 3.1 I show that, contrary to van Eck's opinion, inquiry through *logoi* is illustrated in 101b1-102a3; and in 3.2 I show that this passage is about the opposition of arguments. In 3.3 I present and elaborate my conclusion about what characterizes inquiry *logoi*.

3.1 Inquiry through *logoi* is illustrated in 101b1-102a3

That inquiry in *logoi* is illustrated in 101b1-102a3 is assumed by Hackforth (1954: 142) and many others. Evidence for this assumption is the fact that, right after Socrates describes in T6 the method of hypothesis (designed to regulate

virtue be like if it is to be teachable?", to which Socrates and Meno reply that virtue must be a sort of knowledge if it is to be teachable (for an illuminating sketch of the structure of this reasoning, see Benson 2015: 114-5). But in the *Phaedo* structure is different, for there the hypothesis is not presented as the answer to a question.

¹³⁷ For a defense of this view, see Yonezawa (1991). Contrast Sedley (1998: 116).

investigation in *logoi*), and immediately before 100b1-102a3, we read the following exchange:

T7. *Phaedo* 100a7-9:

I want, though, to tell you more clearly what I'm talking about. I think that at the moment you don't understand.'

'Indeed I don't' said Cebes, 'not altogether.'

Then, immediately after 100b1-102a3, we read:

T8. *Phaedo* 102a4-9:

'That's very true,' said Simmias and Cebes together.

Echecrates: Indeed, Phaedo, and reasonably so. For I think he put that wonderfully lucidly, even for someone with little intelligence.

Phaedo: Quite so, Echecrates, and everyone there thought so.

Echecrates: Yes, and so do we, who weren't there but are hearing it now.

This strongly indicates that between T7 and T8 Socrates must have said things that clarified the description he gave, right before T7, of the method of hypothesis for inquiry through in *logoi*. We may therefore expect to find a discussion or illustration of the method between T7 and T8, that is, in 100b1-102a3.

Nevertheless, Job van Eck (1994: 32 and 1996: 217-8) does not see the method of hypothesis illustrated or employed in 100b1-102a3. He thinks inquiry in *logoi* is only exemplified much later, beginning in 102b3-d3. For van Eck, in our passage Socrates is merely being "clear on his new type of αἰτία and the reason to cling to it, and on the difference between aim and method of the philosopher and the ἀντιλογικός" (1994: 32). In examining his position, I would like to focus on 100c9-101d3, a passage where, according to van Eck, Socrates is simply clarifying why we should *cling to* his new model of explanation, that is, why we should use that model to answer questions like "why is x F?". I have asserted that the reason to cling to the model is that *answers based on it are immune to a type of count-argument*. Van Eck agrees, but claims that this *tells against* finding the method of hypothesis in the passage. His reasoning appears to be that, if Socrates were employing the method here, he would not recommend his new answers *because* they are immune to a type of counter-argument, as he does, but rather *because they harmonize with the hypothesis*, and he would not reject other answers *because* they fall victim to that type of counter-argument, as he does, but *because they do not harmonize with the hypothesis*.

At least two considerations speak against this reasoning. First, there should be no doubt that, since Socrates' model of explanation is the hypothesis, *the answers that conform to this model are the things that harmonize with the hypothesis*. Evidence for this is found in the last time that Socrates recommends his new answers over the commonsensical ones (101b10-d3). There, again, the question is why something is two, and the commonsensical answers are answers in terms of addition and division. One should not answer why something is two in such terms, says Socrates. He emphasizes that one should answer that question in conformity to his new model, that is, in terms of something's having a share of the Form of twoness. And he closes the discussion by remarking that one should "cling to that safe part of the hypothesis, and answer accordingly (ἐχόμενος ἐκείνου τοῦ ἀσφαλοῦς τῆς ὑποθέσεως, οὕτως ἀποκρίναιο ἄν, 101c9-d1)". Socrates clearly means that answering in conformity to his new model is equivalent to giving an answer that accords or harmonizes with the hypothesis.¹³⁸

Second, that an answer harmonizes with the hypothesis is by itself sufficient reason for *considering* it, but *not* presumably for *clinging* to it. For both the hypothesis and its consequences (i.e. the things that harmonize with it) must be subjected to scrutiny, each at its own turn, before they can be deemed safe to cling to. Therefore, van Eck's *expectation* that Socrates should recommend his new answers precisely because they harmonize with his hypothesis *cannot be fulfilled*, so its fulfillment should not be a condition for finding the method of hypothesis in our passage.

Hence in our passage Socrates is *considering* certain answers *because* they harmonize with his hypothesis and *recommending* these answers *because* they are safe. Socrates moves so quickly from (i) presenting the consequences of the hypothesis to (ii) displaying their immunity to counter-arguments, that it seems like he is performing only (ii). But (i) is really a distinct action: (i) corresponds to the putting

¹³⁸ There is disagreement over whether Socrates' hypothesis is solely the existence of the Forms or the conjunction of their existence and the model of explanation that points Forms as causes. The former view is held by Eck (1994; 1996: 215-7) and Benson (2015: 198-98), the latter by Gallop (1975) and Rowe (most fully in his 1993a: 51-3; and more shortly in his 1993b). In any case, there is no reason to doubt that Socrates understands harmonizing as a transitive relation, so that if A harmonizes with B and B with C, then A also harmonizes with C. If this is right, we can still think of the specific explanations in our passage as harmonizing with the hypothesis even if the hypothesis is only the existence of Forms, for their existence would harmonize with the explanation model and the model with the specific explanations that conform to it.

down as true the propositions that harmonize with the hypothesis, while (ii) provides reason to cling to those propositions. This distinction is clearest in 100e-101b, where it is only after Socrates (i) obtains Simmias' agreement to his new explanations (100e1-101a5) that Socrates proceeds to (ii) show that his new explanations are immune to objections that defeat traditional explanations for the same explananda (101a5-b2). Therefore, contrary to van Eck' opinion, it is not the case that Socrates performs exclusively (ii) in our passage.

3.2. 101b1-102a3 is about opposition of arguments

In general, this passage is about how well an answer to a question performs in face of counter-arguments. Specifically, it shows how Socrates' hypothesis provides a way to answer the question about causes that is not prey to objections based on the requirements for causes.

T9. *Phaedo* 100d8-e3:

'For I think that it is *safest* (ἀσφαλέστατον) *to give this reply* both to myself and to another, and I believe that if I cling to this I *could never fall* (οὐκ ἄν ποτε πεσεῖν), but that it is *safe to reply* both to myself and to anyone else that *it is because of the beautiful that beautiful things come to be beautiful.*'

In T9 Socrates is talking about what is safest (ἀσφαλέστατον) for anyone to answer. He is clearly imagining a context of questions and answers in which arguments are contrasted. He believes that with the kind of answer he is proposing, he will never "fall" (the Greek verb is πίπτω), which here probably means being *defeated by an opposing argument*, i.e. being *refuted*. It is clear from the outset, therefore, that the superiority of the new type of explanation (in comparison with the traditional one) is connected to the mode of investigation adopted, a method of opposing arguments.¹³⁹

The way in which the new way of investigating makes this type of answer preferable over the previous one is linked to the two requirements for an appropriate explanation that we saw in section 1. In a context of refutation, brought about by the new way of investigating, those requirements could be used as premises to refute

¹³⁹ Two arguments are in opposition if their conclusions cannot both be true. (See the interesting discussion about the opposition of arguments in ancient skepticism by Morrison 2011). This is not the only way arguments can be said to be in opposition, but right now I am not sure whether Socrates recognizes other ways besides this.

inappropriate response types. But the type of response proposed by Socrates cannot be refuted on the basis of those requirements, for it satisfies them. This is why Socrates can claim in T9 that if a person clings to this kind of answer, she never fails in answering questions about causes.

T10. *Phaedo* 100e8-101a6:

‘So you too *wouldn't agree* (οὐδὲ ἂν ἀποδέχοιο) if someone said that one person was larger than another because of his head, and the smaller one smaller because of the same thing. (...). For I suppose that, if you say that it is because of the head that someone is larger and someone smaller, you would be afraid of being met with a *counter-argument* (ἐναντίος λόγος) (...).’

In this passage, Socrates recommends that we do not concede (ἀποδέχεσθαι) that person A is larger than person B because of A's head and B is smaller than A because of the same thing. He most probably has in mind a context of question-and-answer argumentation in which the questioner asks “is it because of A's head that A is larger than B and B is smaller than A?”, and he recommends that the answerer respond “no” to such question. The reason for this recommendation is that, if we answer “yes”, the questioner might present us with a counter-argument (ἐναντίος λόγος). This would be an indifference argument for the conclusion that A's head is neither the explanans of A's being larger than B nor of B's being smaller than A. Its premises would be: (i) A's head is no more the explanans of A's being larger than B than of B's being smaller than A; and (ii) each explanans has a single explanandum (the second requirement).

Socrates' recommended answer is that A is larger than B solely because A has a share in the Form of largeness, while B is smaller than A for no other cause than B's having a share in the Form of smallness. This answer is immune to the above counter-argument. But what is most important for my present point is that Socrates in T10 is clearly anticipating a situation where an *opposing argument* would be presented during question-and-answer argumentation.

After T10 Socrates continues to speak in the same fashion. The answerer should not say that “ten is more numerous than eight because of two”, or that “two cubits is larger than one cubit because of a half”, for “there would be the same fear” (101b4-7), which must be fear of facing a counter-argument by the questioner. Two cannot be the cause *both* of ten being more numerous than eight *and* of eight being

less numerous than ten. This argument is innocuous against Socrates' recommended answers, namely that ten is more numerous in virtue of its having a share in the Form of numerousness, and that two cubits is larger because it participates in the Form of largeness.

3.3. Inquiry in *logoi* characterized by opposition of arguments

The above considerations support the conclusion that a fundamental feature of inquiry through *logoi* is what I have been calling the "opposition of arguments". The opposition of arguments is useful in inquiry because it is a rational means of testing a thesis. The test consists in exposing the thesis to reasonable counter-arguments. If they fail to disprove the thesis then it is successful in the test. To be accepted, a thesis should be not only backed up by arguments for it, but resistant to arguments against it. If a thesis is backed up by a sound argument and survives the arguments contrary to it, this thesis deserves to be trusted and clung to. However, one should always welcome objections (the reasonable ones) to the thesis. One should constantly verify whether the thesis still holds in face of counter-arguments.

The rejection of traditional explanations and the acceptance of Socrates's new explanation is fundamentally dependent on the adoption of inquiry through *logoi*. In this mode of inquiry, characterized by the opposition of arguments in question-and-answer discussion, the acceptability of an explanation depends on its ability to resist counter-arguments, not on its conformity to what sense-perception tells, like the approach employed by in both pre-socratic physical science and common sense. This difference is important because only inside a context of argumentation or dialectic can putative explanations be rejected on the basis of the requirements for explanation.

3.4 The Method of Hypothesis (Part II)

Here is the second passage on this method:

T11. *Phaedo* 101d3-102a1:

"But if someone were to cling to the hypothesis itself, you would ignore him and not answer until you had managed to consider *its consequences* (τὰ ἀπ' ἐκείνης ὀμμηθέντα) and see whether or not you found them harmonizing with each other. When, however, you

had to give an account of that hypothesis itself, you would do so in the same way, first giving again as another hypothesis whichever higher one seemed best, until you came to something sufficient. But you wouldn't throw together what you were saying all at once, would you, like *those who practise disputation* (ἀντιλογικοί), by holding a conversation about both the starting-point and its consequences, at least if you wanted to discover something real? For those other people undoubtedly give that not a single word, and not a single thought either, because, thanks to their wisdom, they are able *to mix everything together* (ὁμοῦ πάντα κυκῶντες) and still be pleased with themselves. But as for you, if you're one of those who love wisdom, you would, I think, do as I am saying."

The method of hypothesis, in virtue of being a *philosophical* method, is designed to regulate the opposition of arguments in question-and-answer discussion in such a way as to maximally promote the finding of truth and the obtention of knowledge. This method is therefore markedly different from the procedures of the "practitioners of disputation (ἀντιλογικοί)", who are also called "eristics". These people aim primarily at winning the discussion, so they are satisfied with "mixing everything together (ὁμοῦ πάντα κυκῶντες)". Philosophers aim only at truth, so they deal with *logoi* following the method of hypothesis.

According to this method, after hypothesizing the proposition that looks least liable to be refuted, one should *first* examine its consequences (τὰ ἀπ' ἐκείνης ὀρμηθέντα) and only *then* give an account of the hypothesis itself. In examining the consequences of the hypothesis, one should consider whether they harmonize with each other. Since the consequences of the hypothesis are precisely the propositions that harmonize with it, this recommendation means that one should consider whether the propositions that harmonize with the hypothesis also harmonize with each other (see above for the sense of "to harmonize" in this context).¹⁴⁰ Now, in giving an account of the hypothesis itself, one should hypothesize another proposition, the best among the higher ones, so that the account be adequate or sufficient. This probably means that one should hypothesize the proposition that works most adequately as a ground for holding the original hypothesis.

3.5. Truth and falsity in the opposition of arguments

¹⁴⁰ This recommendation probably does not mean to leave out the consideration of whether the consequences harmonize or not with the *propositions for which one has strong, independent evidence*, if such propositions exist.

How can opposition of arguments lead to the discovery of truths and falsities? One may worry that it cannot, for this method of inquiry seems to evaluate a thesis employing only logic, without looking at evidence or addressing reality in any way. For example, we have seen that Socrates' two requirements for explanation are premises on the basis of which traditional explanations are considered false, or not appropriate at least. What evidence is there for these requirements? As a brief reply to this complex issue, one may say that, for Socrates, the relevant truths about certain subject matters (the subject matters that can be approached by the method) are *already in the soul* and need only to be *recollected*, recollection being a process started off by sense-perception and carried out by reasoning. Sense-perception does not provide evidence for what is recollected; it facilitates a state of *aporia* or puzzlement that is a prelude for recollection (see Chapter III, Section 2.1). Following this line of reasoning, we may suppose that Socrates would have recollected the requirements for a cause once he had spent some time searching for causes or explanations with his senses and thereby became puzzled. (This supposition seems to require the existence of the Form of causality, at least if only Forms can be recollected, as appears to be the case in the *Phaedo*).

4. Inquiry and Knowledge in the Final Argument

Socrates rejects traditional explanations and proposes a new model for explanations. This is motivated by the assumption of two requirements for explanation. But there is also a more fundamental reason: the adoption of a new way of inquiry, which contrasts with the one employed in both physical science and common sense.

I have shown that Socrates' method of inquiry is fundamentally characterized by the opposition of arguments in question-and-answer discussions. As for the physicists' method, all we are told is that it is characterized by the employment of the senses. But it is probably safe to suppose that in this method the acceptability of a thesis depends, above all, on its agreement with reports from sense-perception. In Socrates' mode of inquiry, on the other hand, a thesis is accepted if it holds up in the face of opposing arguments (i.e. arguments for the negation of the thesis).¹⁴¹ This

¹⁴¹ See section 3.5 for a brief note on how Socrates can appeal to more than just logical relations when evaluating whether a thesis should be accepted.

contrasting feature of inquiry in *logoi* allows that traditional explanations be rejected for not meeting certain requirements for explanation. Upon these requirements it is possible to build counter-arguments that overcome those explanations, but leave Socrates' proposal standing.

A further contrast involving Socrates' mode of inquiry is found between this mode and eristic, the art of the practitioners of disputation. These people, like Socrates, work with *logoi*, but they seek victory in argument rather than truth. Their procedure is not properly investigative, so they do not care for ordering the discussion in a way that favors the advance toward truth. They "mix everything up", discussing the hypothesis and its consequences at the same time. However, if one is to use arguments not as weapons in a contest but as tools for inquiry (like a philosopher), then one should proceed in an orderly way, by examining first the consequences of the hypothesis and only then providing some sort of argument in support of the hypothesis itself.

In Chapter II I have argued that, besides "pure knowledge", there is an inferior degree of knowledge that can be attained by embodied beings, as long as they practice philosophical inquiry.¹⁴² I suggested that a person can be said to know a thesis "impurely" if, and only if, her thesis has passed unrefuted through a sufficient amount of argumentative tests. Now it has become easier to see how philosophical inquiry can lead to "impure knowledge" as I described it. In the present chapter I have shown that philosophical inquiry, or inquiry through *logoi*, is fundamentally the testing of a thesis against opposing arguments (as well as the formulation of arguments for the thesis). This mode of inquiry is excellent for casting doubt on a proposition, but it cannot ultimately establish that a proposition is true. The best option for a practitioner of this method is to content herself with the strongest thesis, the one which has resisted all counter-arguments so far.

The Socratic *elenchus* is designed to test whether a person that claims to know something actually knows it or not. In the case of the method of hypothesis, however, what is tested is not something that a person claims to know, not even something that she believes in. It is rather an hypothesis. This is not, of course, chosen at random, but is the proposition that one expects to be the strongest or

¹⁴² They should also practice moral purification.

hardest to refute (at this moment expectation is all one can have, for the test it still to be done). If the hypothesis is refuted (fails the test), its proponent is not shown to be any less knowledgeable than presumed. By the repetition of this method with successive hypotheses, one may at some point come across an hypothesis that survives the refutations, a proposition that is therefore worth of belief. By this method one may improve one's epistemic state in relation to a subject. One may start out without knowledge (*episteme*) in any degree and end up with knowledge in some degree. It is the best course available for inquiring into a subject when a teacher is absent (and there is not a more direct route to the truth, as there is not for embodied beings).

How important is this inferior degree of knowledge? No very much if we take literally Socrates' remark in 68a9-b1 that only in Hades philosophers may attain wisdom in a way worth mentioning. But should we? On the one hand, Socrates is faithful to that remark, for he never says that he *knows* that the Forms are the causes. All he says is that if he sticks with this model of explanation he will never fall, never be refuted. On the other hand, this inferior degree of knowledge is the highest and most stable epistemic state that is available to embodied beings and, even more notably, Socrates has been discussing it throughout in the *Phaedo*, so it is obviously very important.

Notice, finally, that Socrates claims that the Forms are the causes, but he does not give an account, not even an hypothesis, of *how* Forms cause their effects. Neither does he put any Form into words by defining the associated quality. He simply presents the outline of a model of explanation. There is still much work to be done in order to fill the blanks. However, this outline is sufficient for his present purpose of showing that the soul is immortal.

It was not the purpose of this chapter to discuss Socrates' ultimate argument for the immortality of the soul in 105b5-107a1, but to study how he inquired into the subject of causes. I would like to close that study by quoting both of Simmias' remarks on the acceptability of the ultimate argument and Socrates' comments on them.

T12. *Phaedo* 107a8-b10:

'Well,' said Simmias, 'on the strength of what has been said I too no longer have any room for doubt. All the same, because of the magnitude of the issues discussed in our arguments, and because of my low regard for human weakness, I'm compelled still to keep some doubt in my mind about what has been said.'

'Yes, not only that, Simmias,' said Socrates, 'but you're right to say so, and, besides, even if you all find the first hypotheses trustworthy, nonetheless you should consider them more clearly. And if you analyze them well enough, you'll follow the argument, I imagine, as far as a human being can follow it up. Should **this** itself become clear, then you won't seek anything further.'

'That's true,' he said.

Simmias says he is going to keep some doubt about the issues discussed, for they are massive and he regards the human abilities insufficient to solve them. Socrates says he is right. He recommends that Simmias and the others present reexamine the argument, even if they, unlike Simmias, fully believe in the first hypotheses. Socrates says that they should test those hypotheses as far as a human being can. In the last sentence by Socrates in T12, I take it that "this" (in bold print above) refers to the fact that the argument was followed as far as possible. Thus the meaning of the sentence is that, if one realizes that he has done all that is possible to find the truth of the matter, he should not seek anything further because doing so would be fruitless and because it would be too arrogant to strive for a wisdom greater than human wisdom.

CONCLUSION

The philosophical discussion in the *Phaedo* begins when Socrates implies that philosophers are willing to die. This raises the question of knowing whether suicide is permissible, to which Socrates responds negatively, arguing that the gods take care of human beings as if these were their properties. As property of the gods, humans are not free to decide for themselves when their lives will end. This reasoning is subject to the following objection: if humans are cared for by the gods, then why are philosophers, supposedly the wisest among humans, willing to die? For the gods are undoubtedly the best supervisors there are, so there would be no benefit in leaving their care. So, the objection goes, only a fool would welcome death; any sensible person would resent dying because it means losing the care of the gods. This objection arises from what seems to be an inconsistency between two of Socrates' claims, the claim that philosophers are willing to die, and the claim that humans live under divine care. Spotting this apparent inconsistency, Socrates' friends, who find the first claim implausible and the second plausible, accuse Socrates of acting foolishly, since he is peculiarly cheerful in the face of his imminent death. Socrates then needs to argue that his cheerfulness in this situation is reasonable, and his defense strategy is as follows. First, he argues that it is not at all implausible that true philosophers are willing to die, because they live practicing death and seeking something that can only be properly obtained, if at all, after death, namely knowledge of Forms. Then, he argues that only true philosophers are truly virtuous and therefore entitled to dwell with the gods after death, so they do not lose anything when they abandon the divine care that they receive while alive. By these two arguments Socrates hopes to show that he, like the true philosophers, among whom he did all

he could to include himself, is justified in facing death cheerfully, and that whoever acts differently proves not to be a philosopher.

The first argument of Socrates' defense is the most interesting for the present study on inquiry and knowledge in the *Phaedo*. In the course of this argument, Socrates asserts that we apparently cannot properly obtain knowledge of Forms because our bodies are an obstacle to doing it. This raises the question of the extent to which we can attain knowledge of Forms during the time that we are embodied. The extent to which we know the Form of a quality is in direct proportion to how adequately we can define that quality. While embodied, we apparently cannot have a fully adequate definition, but we can come close. The more resistant our definition is to refutation, the closest it is to being fully adequate. Therefore we should constantly expose our definition to counter-arguments to see if it still stands; if it does not, we should find a better one. Having a definition of a quality that is immune to all currently known objections and counter-arguments is the farthest we can go toward knowledge of the Form of that quality in this life.

The body deters us from obtaining knowledge of Forms especially if we employ the bodily senses in inquiry, because the senses are neither clear nor accurate. The Forms can only be known if one inquires into them employing reasoning *alone*, that is, without sense-perception. This claim seems to be at odds with Socrates' claim in the Recollection Argument that we come to know the Form of a quality upon *sensing* its instances. The best way to dissolve this apparent incompatibility is to assume that the content that is known through sense-perception is different from content that can only be known through reasoning. The latter content is clearly the definition of the quality at issue, but what is the former?

Recollection in the *Phaedo* is designed to explain the process through which we learn about the *existence* of Forms and thereby get in position to inquire into them. The process is as follows. After sensing a certain amount of a quality's instances we realize that they also instantiate the opposite quality. Sensible things appear in some circumstances (including but not limited to time) F and in other circumstances un-F. This realization puzzles us and thereby invites us to use reasoning to inquire into the question of what F-ness is. This question presupposes that the essence of F-ness *exists* apart from the sensible Fs as something that does

not depend on circumstances to be itself, therefore this is a content we must have come to know in the process. And since we have come to think of the Form of F-ness as independent of circumstances, we also have come to know, in the process, that this Form is *superior* to the instances of F-ness. We are now in position to search for the definition of F-ness. But what is the mode of inquiry appropriate in order to find the definition of F-ness?

The definition of a quality can only be known through reasoning, and through reasoning according to a certain method. This method is fundamentally characterized by the opposition of arguments in question-and-answer discussion, where a definition, or any thesis, is accepted only if it holds up in the face of opposing arguments, that is, arguments for the falsity or inadequacy of the definition, or for the falsity of the thesis.

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