

Study Guide on Plato's *Phaedo*

Part I: 57a – 88c

"I want to make my argument before you, my judges, as to why I think that a man who has truly spent his life in philosophy is probably right to be of good cheer in the face of death and to be very hopeful that after death he will attain the greatest blessings yonder" (63e¹). What is Socrates' argument? How does Socrates justify these claims?

Argument from opposites (70e ff.)

- Is there a problem with this initial argument? Is Socrates assuming what he is trying to prove?
- Consider the principle (see 71a: "So we have sufficiently established that all things come to be in this way, opposites from opposites?"):
 - The principle is that things come to be from their opposites. Does the principle stand?
 - What kinds of examples does Socrates give? Are they all valid? Are there any things or kinds of things which do not uphold this principle?
- Consider the application of this principle:
 - Does the principle apply to life and death? "Do you not say that to be dead is the opposite of being alive?" (71d).
 - Is there an opposite of existence? What is "non-existence"?

Argument from recollection (72e ff.)

- How does the argument from equality lead toward the claim regarding the immortality of the soul?
- Does the argument follow?

Argument from visible and invisible (79a ff.)

- Why begin with "two kinds of existences, the visible and the invisible" (79a)?
- What are Socrates' examples in this argument?

¹ John M. Cooper, editor. *Plato: Complete Works*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co, 1997. (All references in parentheses are to the standard Stephanus pagination for Plato's dialogues.)



Why does Socrates claim that those who practice philosophy prepare for dying (64a)?

Is the soul destroyed (70a)? Consider the arguments given in support of the claim.

Socrates defines death at 64c: "Is it [death] anything else than the separation of the soul from the body?" Why does Simmias agree so readily? Is this obvious?

According to Socrates, how does the philosopher regard the pleasures of the body? Why?

What objections do Simmias and Cebes give to Socrates after his encouragement (86a ff.)?

What do we make of Socrates writing poetry (60d)? A poet, he says, "if he is to be a poet, must compose fables, not arguments. Being no teller of fables myself, I took the stories I knew and had at hand, the fables of Aesop, and I versified the first ones I came across" (61b).

Why, according to Socrates, must the philosopher "more than other men [free] the soul from association with the body" (65a)?

What reasons does Socrates give for believing that there is such a thing as the Just itself? The Beautiful itself? The Good itself? (65d ff.)



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Part II: 88c – 118a

What is “misology”? How exactly does it arise? How is one to guard against it?

- Why is Socrates concerned about his friends becoming misologues (89d)?
 - How does the subject of misology arise (see 88d–89c)?
 - How does misology itself arise (90b–d)?
- What is the remedy for misology (90d ff.)? Among other things, Socrates states: “we must take courage and be eager to attain soundness” (90e). What exactly is his counsel?

Consider Socrates’ response to Simmias:

- Note that Echecrates says, “the statement that the soul is some kind of harmony has a remarkable hold on me” (88d). Why might understanding the soul as a harmony sound initially plausible?
- How does Socrates respond? (See 92a ff.)
 - How does Socrates argue that the soul rules (94b)?
 - How do opposites reenter the dialogue (94b ff.)?

What does Socrates mean by the “old method of investigation,” and what is his new one (97c)?

Consider Socrates’ response to Cebes:

- Why does the problem Cebes raises “[require] a thorough investigation of the cause of generation and destruction” and “an account of [Socrates’] experience in these matters” (96a)? In other words, what does the discussion of natural science, Anaxagoras, and “Mind” have to do with Socrates’ argument?
- How does “sharing” or “participation” relate to the argument (100c)?
- Does it seem correct that “everything that is bigger is made bigger by nothing else than Bigness, and that is the cause of its being bigger, [etc.]” (101a)? How should we account for bigness and smallness?
- What is the point of the discussion of hot, cold, fire, and snow (103c ff.)?



- When Socrates concludes that at death, the “deathless part goes away safe and indestructible” (106e), Simmias responds that he is “bound still to have some private misgivings about what [they] have said” (107b). What others misgivings are left to be considered?

Why does Socrates end the discussion the way he does (107d-115a)? What does the story (*mythos*) add to the foregoing account (*logos*)?

What is the central teaching of the *Phaedo*?

Suggested use: This study guide includes a few questions and observations about Plato’s *Phaedo*. Among possible uses, one could consider these comments while reading the work; or one could use them as starting points for a classroom discussion.

