

İlham Dilman  
PHILOSOPHY  
AND THE  
PHILOSOPHIC  
LIFE

A Study in Plato's *Phaedo*



# Philosophy and the Philosophic Life

---

A Study in Plato's *Phaedo*

İlham Dilman

*Professor of Philosophy*  
*University College of Swansea*

M  
MACMILLAN

© İlham Dilman 1992

All rights reserved. No reproduction, copy or transmission of this publication may be made without written permission.

No paragraph of this publication may be reproduced, copied or transmitted save with written permission or in accordance with the provisions of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988, or under the terms of any licence permitting limited copying issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency, 33-4 Alfred Place, London WC1E 7DP.

Any person who does any unauthorised act in relation to this publication may be liable to criminal prosecution and civil claims for damages.

First published 1992

Published by  
MACMILLAN ACADEMIC AND PROFESSIONAL LTD  
Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 2XS  
and London  
Companies and representatives  
throughout the world

Printed in Hong Kong

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data  
Dilman, İlham 1930-

Philosophy and the philosophic life : a study in Plato's  
*Phaedo*.

1. Greek philosophy, ancient period. Plato. *Phaedo*

I. Title

184

ISBN 0-333-52960-X

# PHILOSOPHY AND THE PHILOSOPHIC LIFE

*Also by Ilham Dilman*

SENSE AND DELUSION (with D.Z. Phillips)

INDUCTION AND DEDUCTION: A Study in Wittgenstein

\* MATTER AND MIND: Two Essays in Epistemology

\* MORALITY AND THE INNER LIFE: A Study in Plato's *Gorgias*

\* STUDIES IN LANGUAGE AND REASON

FREUD AND HUMAN NATURE

FREUD AND THE MIND

PHILOSOPHY AND LIFE: Essays on John Wisdom (*editor*)

\* QUINE ON ONTOLOGY, NECESSITY AND EXPERIENCE

LOVE AND HUMAN SEPARATENESS

FREUD, INSIGHT AND CHANGE

MIND, BRAIN AND BEHAVIOUR: Discussions of B.F. Skinner  
and J.R. Searle

\* *Also published by Macmillan*

# Acknowledgements

---

I should like to thank Kluwer Academic Publishers for allowing me to use some material from my paper 'Philosophy and Scepticism' in *Philosophy and Life, Essays on John Wisdom*, 1984. This material is included in Chapter 3, Section 4 of the present book. I have also used some material in Chapter 6 from my book *Studies in Language and Reason*, Macmillan 1981, and am grateful to the publisher for allowing me to do so. I should also like to thank Cadwalader, Wickersham & Taft for giving me permission to quote some lines, on pp. 125–6, from the 1973 paperback edition of Eugene O'Neill's play *Long Day's Journey into Night*, published by Jonathan Cape.

# Preface

---

This book is a *philosophical* study of the *Phaedo*. It discusses the main questions that concern Socrates in the dialogue and those raised for me by what he says. My discussion has two aspects to it: (i) elucidation or clarification with a view to understanding the language Socrates uses, what he says and what he is getting at, and (ii) criticism, that is, questioning what Socrates says and considering objections to it. In practice these two tasks involve each other and merge together.

Obviously historical scholarship is relevant to the task of understanding what is being said in the dialogue. My training is philosophical and not that of a classicist. I therefore rely on a knowledge of the history of philosophy and I try to use, as best as I can, what 'cultured flair' I have for philosophical questions. I am not concerned with details of scholarship, but with philosophical questions.

As the title of the book indicates, running through my discussion of the questions of the *Phaedo* is my concern to appreciate Socrates' conception of philosophy as something broader than an intellectual discipline, indeed as a way of life. Socrates speaks of philosophical enquiry as a 'purification of the soul' and a 'preparation for death'. He says that a person who devotes his life to philosophy acquires a 'wisdom' which he equates with virtue. I am far from unsympathetic to these claims but they raise difficulties for me which I discuss in the book. I find a certain inner tension in the way Socrates presents his conception of philosophy as a spiritual discipline. On the one hand he seems to reduce this aspect to something intellectual, while on the other hand he takes a full-blooded view of it. Here I think it is his 'rationalism' that is at fault and that the full-blooded view gives a more accurate expression of what philosophy meant to him. It is as such that I consider it.

Let me explain. The spiritual concerns which he places at the heart of philosophy, as he understood and practised it, seem to go beyond the conceptual clarification and criticism which he practised. So his philosophical questions seem to encompass for him the personal and moral concerns of the individual. But he also at times seems almost to reduce the spiritual to the intellectual. The way he often seems to identify the soul with reason, speak of its

vision as if it were purely a matter of the intellect, thus enables him to represent the spiritual and moral issues on which he holds strong views as falling within the scope of philosophy. All this is brought under what Socrates describes as a 'search for reality', a reality which he sees as constituted by 'the forms'.

I question whether what is so described is 'one thing' and argue that the expression 'coming to know the forms' covers different things which Socrates runs together. I am critical, therefore, of the way Socrates runs together philosophical and spiritual issues. But, at the same time, I believe that there is something right in Socrates' idea that a philosopher's devotion to the critical questions he asks assumes a spiritual dimension when it goes deep. That is, I distinguish between the philosophical and ethico-religious questions with which Socrates is concerned in the *Phaedo*, but I agree with him that a deep concern with philosophical questions can take on a spiritual dimension and touch the life of the person who gives himself to them – as Socrates did. This is encapsulated in what Socrates speaks of as 'viewing things philosophically and not self-assertively'.

Still, there is some danger of taking Socrates' spiritual claims in the dialogue as metaphysical pronouncements. This would, of course, bring them into the fold of philosophy. While I do not deny that there is some metaphysics in the dialogue, I try to separate it from Socrates' spiritual and moral perceptions and give a non-metaphysical reading of the dialogue. The articulation of those perceptions does not need the aid or support of any metaphysics. Indeed, metaphysics, I believe, is simply a mystification of the grammar of the language in which such perceptions are expressed. The task of philosophy is the critical one of elucidating that grammar and demystifying our understanding of it.

The metaphysics we find in the dialogue is sometimes Plato's metaphysics and sometimes ours – that is, what the reader projects onto Socrates' language, the way he reads it. In either case I believe it to be an intrusion. Socrates' spiritual vision and the language in which he expresses it have their life in the life, culture and literature of early Greece and do not stand in need of the support of abstractions constructed by philosophers.

Thus I argue, for instance, that Socrates' dichotomy between body and soul has its life in the ethico-religious language to which he has contributed. It is quite distinct from the Cartesian dualism which has been so influential in philosophical debates about the



nature of the mind: 'the mind and its place in nature', 'the interaction between the mind and the body' and 'our knowledge of other minds'. It is a metaphysical position; the conceptual divorce between body and soul which characterizes Cartesian dualism is a response to certain questions which arise when 'language is like an engine idling' – as Wittgenstein put it. Consequently, the ideas of body and soul so divorced are both, as can be shown, at variance with our actual notions of body and soul and, furthermore, incoherent. This is not true of Socrates' notions of body and soul in the *Phaedo*. His dichotomy, as I try to show, is closely akin to the one between flesh and spirit to be found in the language of Christianity – a living religious language which engages with the life shared by those who are Christians.

There are some metaphysical dichotomies at work in Socrates' thinking, for instance the dualism between sense and reason. Even then, however, when he speaks of 'the senses as necessarily deceptive', we need to distinguish between a metaphysical and a moral claim that he makes. I try to elucidate what the moral claim comes to.

The same is true for the Platonic dichotomy between 'appearance and reality'. I argue that as a metaphysical dichotomy it incorporates a great deal of confusion. But what Plato and Socrates have to say about the distinction between 'appearance and reality' in the context of spiritual concerns and of the way appearances here deceive us is penetrating. We can, in fact, compare what Socrates says with Kierkegaard in *Purity of Heart*.

It is much in this light that I attempt to understand what Socrates has to say about the soul and its immortality. I take his arguments for the immortality of the soul as 'grammatical' contributions which aim to elucidate a language in terms of which certain convictions are expressed. Socrates follows them with a story in which he offers a personal testimony to these convictions. There is, therefore, nothing inconsistent in Socrates' procedure: it isn't as if he first tries to convince his friends by means of arguments and then attempts to strengthen his case by means of a story.

The story takes the form of a myth. Such myths belong to the living language used by Socrates and should not be confused with the myths spun out by the metaphysician. What distinguishes the metaphysician's myths from these others is the fact that they are constructed for spurious purposes and do not engage with the life in which the language to which they purport to give foundations is

rooted. The ethico-religious myths, on the other hand, are part of this language and come into being in the course of its historical development. There is nothing superfluous about them.

The philosopher's task, therefore, as I understand it, is not to criticize or dismantle them, but to try to clarify their meaning. In other words, as I put it in the book, his task is not to demythologize language but to demystify its use – that is, to clear up the metaphysical myths thrown up by our philosophical struggles with the difficulties language raises for us. The language of metaphysics, in contrast with the moral and religious language Socrates uses, has no real life. Socrates' philosophical contribution is to clarify the grammar of the language he uses, doing so in the course of the discussion of the philosophical difficulties he considers.

I believe that philosophical criticism and clarification in this sense, such as I offer in this book, is the best way to appreciate Socrates' ideas. It will also lead to an appreciation of his humanity and wisdom. Socrates does not come out in the *Phaedo* as an idealized figure for me, either as a man or as a philosopher, but as someone from whom one has much to learn on both counts.

May 1990

İLHAM DİLMAN

# Contents

---

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	vii
<i>Preface</i>	ix
1 Argument and Faith in the Dialogue	1
1. Philosophy and Socrates' Faith	1
2. Structure of the Dialogue	3
3. The Logic and Form of Socrates' Arguments	4
4. Summing Up	11
2 Philosophy and Life: 'Purification of the Soul'	13
1. Philosophy as a Spiritual Discipline	13
2. Philosophy and the Self	17
3. Philosophy: A Purification of the Soul?	20
4. Summing Up	27
3 Appearance and Reality: 'Only the Ideal is Real'	28
1. Two Contrasts under One Heading	28
2. Appearance and Empirical Reality: Plato and Kant	30
3. Appearance and Spiritual Reality: Plato and Kant	38
4. Platonic 'Scepticism': 'Only the Ideal is Real'	43
5. Summing Up	49
4 Sense and Reason: 'Imperfection of the Senses'	51
1. Trustworthiness of the Senses	51
2. The Imperfection of Sensible Objects	54
3. The Separate Existence of Platonic Forms	63
4. Summing Up	68

5	Body and Soul: 'The Body as an Obstacle to Knowledge'	70
1.	The Platonic Contrast versus the Cartesian Dichotomy	70
2.	Spiritual Life and the Snares of the Flesh: Tolstoy's 'Father Sergius'	79
3.	Spiritual Values and Human Conduct	86
4.	Philosophic and Popular Virtue	91
5.	Summing Up	98
6	Philosophy and Knowledge: 'Learning as Recollection'	100
1.	Looking Back – Philosophy as a 'Search for Reality'	100
2.	'Learning as Recollection'	104
3.	Forms and Mathematical Discoveries	107
4.	Forms and the Limits of Empiricism	111
5.	Forms and Philosophical Understanding	114
6.	Summing Up	117
7	The Wheel of Time and the Immortality of the Soul	118
1.	Further Problems	118
2.	The Indestructibility of the Soul	120
3.	Eternal Life and the Immortality of the Soul	124
4.	The Wisdom of Philosophy	128
5.	Summing Up	130
	<i>Notes</i>	133
	<i>Bibliography</i>	135
	<i>Index</i>	137

# 1

## Argument and Faith in the Dialogue

---

### 1 PHILOSOPHY AND SOCRATES' FAITH

The *Phaedo* is a philosophical dialogue between Socrates and his friends on the day before his death. Socrates' friends are distressed at Socrates' approaching execution and at the prospect of their having to part forever and they wonder at Socrates' calm and equanimity in the face of his imminent death. They ask him for the secret of his calm and the source of the faith which sustains him. Socrates tells them of his faith in the immortality of the soul and he expounds its contents in the face of philosophical questions and objections which he invites from his friends.

Socrates tells them that he has come to his faith through the practice of philosophy and that from it he has learned not to fear death. He describes it as a 'purification of the soul' and the 'practice of dying'. Indeed he continues to practise it in the discussion he has with his friends on this last day of his life. In this discussion he puts forward arguments for the immortality of the soul and defends it against objections. He makes it clear that if one is to hold such a belief it is important that one should do so because it is the truth and one sees it to be so, and not for the solace or consolation it brings. He describes the latter as believing it 'not philosophically but self-assertively' (90D).<sup>1</sup>

It seems then that putting the truth before the self, not only in this matter but in everything, is what the practice of philosophy means for Socrates. This last day of his life is thus no different for Socrates from any other day of his life. For he has learned to live every day of his life as if it were his last, that is, without any desire or expectation in which the self finds life. What he does on this day in giving himself to philosophical discussion is not different from what he has done on other days of his life. It is remarkable that he should do so and a proof of the genuineness of his love for truth and faith. Indeed its genuineness is so transparent that *Phaedo*,

who relates the events of that day says that it never occurred to him to feel sorry for Socrates:

I felt an absolutely incomprehensible emotion, a sort of curious blend of pleasure and pain combined, as my mind took it in that in a little while my friend was going to die. All of us who were there were affected in much the same way, between laughing and crying (57A).

Socrates' arguments for the immortality of the soul are thus first of all an expression of what death means to him personally and an expression of his fearlessness in the face of it. Because of what it means to him Socrates can see nothing to fear in death. Hence he can carry on as he has always done on this last day of his life. The whole setting of the dialogue emphasizes this proximity of death. Socrates is fully aware of it and yet it makes no difference to his conduct – or rather the difference it makes is no different from the one it has always made. This is something he has achieved personally and he has learned it from the practice of philosophy. It is what is at the centre of the dialogue and is what I set out to understand in this book, through philosophical discussion.

What Socrates has learned is to ask certain kinds of question, not to take things at face value, to find his own way about in the thinking that starts from these questions. Their pursuit means the development and deepening of certain interests which give him a particular orientation towards the issues of life and certain values. It is these which are embodied by what Socrates calls 'the philosophic life'; it is these which he was exposing in the *Gorgias* and continues to give expression to in the *Phaedo*.

Socrates is regarded by many as a 'rationalist' philosopher. Certainly there is much in many Platonic dialogues and not least in the *Phaedo* to give and to support this impression – for instance, the fact that he sets out to *prove* the immortality of the soul, the way he elevates reason above the senses in his epistemology. All the same in his discussion of the spiritual questions which are at the centre of the *Phaedo* his rationalism remains on the surface of his thinking. There is, I believe, a different way of reading his arguments for the immortality of the soul in which they no longer appear as arguments for metaphysical theses, but as ways of developing a conceptual framework or language with a view to articulating his faith and values and criticizing certain established

views and forms of scepticism. This makes Socrates' arguments more of a piece with the stories with which Plato ends the *Gorgias* and the *Phaedo* and which one finds in many of his other dialogues. I doubt that he thought that matters of personal faith are susceptible of proof in the way that mathematical propositions are; nor did he think of his faith as needing metaphysical foundations. He did not regard his 'theory of forms' as providing such foundations.

In short, I believe that Socrates is a critical philosopher concerned to clarify thought, expose its confusions and unauthenticities, to show the intelligibility of spiritual concerns and to throw light on the reality to which these concerns are directed. By the latter I mean the conceptual task of clarifying what the distinction between what is real and what is illusory, deceptive and false comes to within the framework of a life guided by spiritual concerns. Certainly what Socrates called the philosophic life was such a life.

A spiritual life, of course, has its own struggles and ideals, and criticism is part of this struggle, honesty being an ideal which informs such criticism. Philosophy too has its own difficulties and struggles, and criticism is part of the struggle with these difficulties, clarity and honesty being what the philosopher seeks in his struggles. These two concerns and struggles were one for Socrates. This book is an attempt to understand how this could be so.

## 2 STRUCTURE OF THE DIALOGUE

(i) The dialogue begins with an opening section which sets the scene. Cebes then questions Socrates about his belief that one's life is a gift of the gods and that one has no right to do violence to oneself: if life is such a gift, how is it that Socrates believes that one should practise dying all through one's life in the name of philosophy? Is there not a contradiction between Socrates' belief that life is a precious gift and his willingness to let it go? Cebes does not see the difference between being willing to die, even welcoming death, and killing oneself. Yet the difference is one that is susceptible to philosophical mystification. Hence the scope for a search for clarity here.

(ii) This very brief discussion leads Socrates to give an exposition of his conception of the practice of philosophy and how, through it, one can acquire a fearlessness in the face of death

(62E–69D). In these pages Socrates agrees to explain how it is ‘that a man who has really devoted his life to philosophy should be cheerful in the face of death, and confident of finding the greatest blessing in the next world when his life is finished’. We are introduced to such ideas as ‘philosophy as the preparation for death and a practice of dying’, ‘death as the separation of the soul from the body’, ‘the body as a hindrance to knowledge’, ‘the senses as unclear and inaccurate, and not capable of giving us any certainty’, ‘the contrast between sense and reflection’, ‘pure and unadulterated reflection leading to a knowledge of objects that are beyond the reach of the senses’, ‘the contrast between philosophical and popular virtue’.

(iii) Next come Socrates’ arguments for the immortality of the soul, interspersed with various short sections in which objections are raised and answered and Socrates talks about some of his ideas:

1. The Argument from Opposites (69E–72B).
2. The Argument from Recollection (72B–77C).
3. The Argument from the Affinity of the Soul with the Forms (77C–78D).
4. The Purification of the Soul further discussed (78D–84D).
5. Simmias’ and Cebes’ Objections (84D–87E).
6. Misology and Scepticism (89B–90D).
7. Socrates answers Simmias (90E–94E).
8. Socrates answers Cebes: The Argument from the Theory of Forms (94E–107B).

(iv) Socrates’ Story or Myth of the Afterlife (107C–114A).

(v) Description of Socrates bidding his friends farewell and taking the poison administered to him. This is a moving scene in which Plato lets us see Socrates’ simplicity and greatness of soul.

### 3 THE LOGIC AND FORM OF SOCRATES’ ARGUMENTS

As I see them, Socrates’ arguments for the immortality of the soul are in many ways logically primitive, that is, unsophisticated and



even crude, and certainly riddled with fallacies. But this in no way detracts from their philosophical interest. This lies in the philosophical ideas they develop and in the philosophical questions to which these ideas are directed.

In these ideas Socrates is concerned to criticize and reject various philosophical positions. One of these is *empiricism*, namely the view that all our knowledge comes from the senses, that all our concepts are derived from 'sense experience', and that reason plays a subsidiary role in what knowledge we possess. Another one is *scepticism*, namely the view that the knowledge we possess is an illusion or that the reality we claim to know is only appearance. As we shall see, Socrates develops a view which could be expressed in these very same terms; but it should not be confused with such scepticism.

A third position which Socrates combats is *materialism* – at least two forms of it. One is the denial of any spiritual aspect to human life and human aspirations. This is the view that human life is one-dimensional, that it has only one dimension, namely sensuality. Another form of this same materialism is the view that all human relations are based on power and that its exercise is the only good in human life – thus Callicles in the *Gorgias*. The second form of materialism is the one formulated by Simmias. It claims that the soul is an attunement of the body. This is an older version of Hobbesian epiphenomenalism which holds that all states and other manifestations attributed to the soul are reducible to or have their source in states of the body. Thus on this view if, for instance, a man is contemplating a natural scene and is in a state of religious ecstasy this is purely the result of the chemical balance in his body at the time and could, therefore, be induced by drugs. This would be held to be equally true where a man believes he has sinned and is in a state of depression.

Now Socrates' arguments themselves are purely logical and their premises are *a priori*. Hence their conclusions are equally purely *a priori*, they make no claims about what could conceivably be otherwise. They take for granted the contrast between the body and the soul and the idea of death as their separation. They build on these ideas. They are not alternative arguments for the same conclusion; they complement each other and between them purport to establish that the soul is indestructible. They do so in stages:

- (i) The soul *can* exist apart from the body.