

DRAMA, DOGMATISM, AND THE ‘EQUALS’ ARGUMENT IN PLATO’S *PHAEDO*

DAVID C. LEE

1. Introduction

THE *Phaedo* occupies a crucially important position in the attempt to build up a picture of Plato’s philosophical views. Its arguments have been examined minutely numerous times, perhaps more so than those of any other Platonic work. The result is, as might be expected, a proliferation of alternative but equally sophisticated interpretative possibilities, each placing a different construction on the nature of Plato’s commitments and offering a different account of his philosophical development.

A clear division has emerged between two kinds of interpretation. Some take the *Phaedo* to include, as a presupposition deployed as a premiss in arguments, a worked-out and systematic metaphysical theory. Others take the dialogue to be more ambitious, both deducing consequences from the theory and seeking to argue for and justify the theory itself by establishing it on the basis of rational argument. The interpretation with the longer history, which takes the *Phaedo* to be concerned essentially with exposition rather than justification, can be named the ‘traditional’ reading. The interpretation more recently developed, which takes arguments for a metaphysical theory to be a crucial part of the dialogue, can be called the ‘transitional’ reading.¹ On this alternative interpretation, Plato

© David C. Lee 2012

¹ Traditional readers include R. D. Archer-Hind, *Platonos Phaidon* [*Phaidon*] (London, 1883); J. Burnet, *Plato’s Phaedo* [*Phaedo*] (Oxford, 1911); H. Williamson, *The Phaedo of Plato* (London, 1933); W. D. Ross, *Plato’s Theory of Ideas* [*PTI*] (Oxford, 1951); R. S. Bluck, *Plato’s Phaedo* [*Phaedo*] (London, 1955); R. Hackforth, *Plato’s Phaedo* [*Phaedo*] (Cambridge, 1955); J. Brentlinger, ‘Incomplete Predicates and the Two World Theory of the *Phaedo*’ [‘Incomplete’], *Phronesis*, 17 (1972), 61–79; and D. Gallop, *Plato’s Phaedo* [*Phaedo*] (Oxford, 1975). The transitional reading was pioneered by G. M. A. Grube, *Plato’s Thought* [*PT*] (London, 1935), and is more comprehensively adopted by readers such as N. P. White, *Plato on Knowledge and Reality* [*PKR*] (Indianapolis, 1976); D. Bostock, *Plato’s Phaedo* [*Phaedo*] (Oxford, 1986); T. Penner, *The Ascent from Nominalism* [*Nominalism*] (Dordrecht, 1987); G. Fine, *On Ideas: Aristotle’s Criticism of Plato’s Theory of Forms* (Oxford,

intended the *Phaedo* to set out and justify a change from an earlier ‘Socratic’ style of philosophy, which does not make any explicitly metaphysical claims, to a position in which various ontological commitments are to be adopted and their implications investigated. The transitional reading, unlike the traditional reading, takes the *Phaedo* to include an explicit discussion of the details of these new commitments, and to argue that they provide a response to some of the problems raised by Socrates’ questions. This interpretative division particularly takes shape around a disagreement over the correct reading of the ‘equals’ argument, a passage in which the dramatic Socrates argues that our knowledge of equality must be recollected from a previous life.

My aim here is not to draw out the differences between these readings, and to support one over the other, but rather to uncover some important common ground they share. I intend to draw attention to an alternative approach to the *Phaedo*—and to the ‘equals’ argument in particular—which does not share these assumptions. As a result, I will propose a considerably different account of the philosophical structure of the dialogue from the interpretations currently debated. According to this new account, the particular metaphysical theory which is given prominence in different ways by previous interpretations is considerably less detailed and systematic than is generally supposed, and plays a subordinate role in the *Phaedo*.

In Section 2 I examine the reasons typically given for taking a particular metaphysical theory to be a dominant theme of the dialogue, and show that they rest on questionable methodological assumptions about the context in which the *Phaedo* should be read. I argue that there is room for a rival approach to the dialogue, provided it can offer comparable advantages. In Section 3 I assess the accounts of the ‘equals’ argument offered by traditional and transitional interpretations, show that neither is compelling, and put forward an alternative. In Section 4 I confront two objections to my reading, and develop a distinction between dramatic and philosophical levels of argument to answer them. In Sections 5 and 6 I discuss the ‘final’ argument, and make a case for a close connection between the conception of explanation developed there and the conclusion of the ‘equals’ argument. I show in Section 7 that the resulting reading

1993), 332; C. Rowe, *Plato: Phaedo* [*Phaedo*] (Cambridge, 1993); P. Dimas, ‘Recollecting Forms in the *Phaedo*’ [‘Recollecting’], *Phronesis*, 48 (2003), 175–214; and R. M. Dancy, *Plato’s Introduction of Forms* [*PF*] (Cambridge, 2004).

gives new and plausible answers to some difficulties which cause problems for the better-known interpretations. In my conclusion I will argue that the apparent dogmatism and obscurity of the *Phaedo* arises from distorted expectations about the questions the dialogue is attempting to answer. On my approach, a different set of concerns emerges, which have a much clearer correspondence with Plato's discussion, and which also give rise to a distinctive position in the debate about the nature of explanation, which is of increasing interest to current philosophers.

2. Metaphysics in the *Phaedo*

Before discussing the 'equals' argument in detail, my first aim will be to show that in spite of appearances, there is considerable common ground, methodologically as well as substantively, between the two readings of the *Phaedo* which I plan to challenge. The traditional reading takes the dialogue to presuppose a metaphysical theory familiar to Plato's readers, using it as an unquestioned premiss on which arguments for the immortality of the soul can be based. The task of arguing for the theory itself is not attempted, although in the course of the discussion some further aspects of the theory are revealed. On the transitional reading, on the other hand, the dialogue does not merely presuppose but elaborates and argues for a metaphysical theory. This theory is treated as a new development, albeit one which has some continuity with what went before. It therefore attributes a dual purpose to the *Phaedo*: together with its declared aim of defending the immortality of the soul, the arguments also set out and defend a metaphysical theory which supports this conclusion.

One important reason why the metaphysical focus of the *Phaedo* is considered beyond question is that, by the later stages of the dialogue at least, we seem to have strong evidence that Plato takes himself to be in a position to invoke a theory of sense-transcendent entities, assuming that their nature is clearly understood by his audience. One particularly strong example of this is a passage which occurs close to the end of the *Phaedo*, in which Socrates takes up the discussion with his companions on the immortality of the soul for the last time:²

² All translations throughout are my own, unless I have explicitly credited them to others.

‘But,’ he said ‘this is what I mean, nothing new, but those things I never stop talking about, both at other times and in the discussion just now. I’m going to set about showing you the kind of explanation I’m concerned with, that is, I’m going back to those often chattered-about things, and I’ll start from them, by setting down that there is something fine by itself, and good, and large, and all the others. If you grant me these, and agree that they are, I hope to show you the explanation from these and to discover that the soul is immortal.’

‘But of course,’ said Cebes, ‘take these as granted to you, and hurry on your way.’ (Phaedo 100 B 1–C 2)

While the argument within which this passage is situated is the subject of considerable debate, it is none the less widely agreed that in this passage the ‘often chattered-about things’ are abstract metaphysical entities, the Platonic forms.³ If this is so, then it is clearly a task for the interpreter to explain the status of these entities within the dialogue.

Disregarding for a moment any prior expectations we might have, on the basis of reading either the rest of the *Phaedo* or any other Platonic dialogue, how clear is it that this passage must be read this way? Socrates does not explicitly say that the things he is setting down (*ὑποθέμενος*) are forms, nor does he say anything about their characteristics. The word *eidos* is used in this passage, but clearly in a non-technical sense as the ‘kind’ of explanation (*τῆς αἰτίας τὸ εἶδος*) he is looking for. The claim that a particular metaphysical theory is being introduced, that of sense-transcendent, eternally existing, and immutable entities, depends on a particular construal of the expression ‘something fine by itself’ (*τι καλὸν αὐτὸ καθ’ αὐτό*), mentioned together with ‘good, large, and all the others’ at 100 B 6–7. The same expression is picked up later in the argument as ‘the fine

³ The interpreters who explicitly endorse this view include prominent representatives from both traditional and transitional readings, such as Archer-Hind, *Phaidon*, 20; Burnet, *Phaedo*, 110; Grube, *PT*, 18–20; Ross, *PTI*, 28; Bluck, *Phaedo*, 111; Hackforth, *Phaedo*, 142; Brentlinger, ‘Incomplete’, 74; Gallop, *Phaedo*, 182; A. Nehamas, ‘Predication and Forms of Opposites in the *Phaedo*’ [‘Opposites’], *Review of Metaphysics*, 26.3 (1973), 461–91 at 464; G. Vlastos, ‘Reasons and Causes’ [‘Reasons’], repr. in id., *Platonic Studies* (Princeton, 1981), 76–110 at 83–5; Bostock, *Phaedo*, 194; C. Rowe, ‘Explanation in *Phaedo* 99 c 6–102 a 8’ [‘Explanation’], *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 11 (1993), 49–69 at 52, and *Phaedo*, 242; Dancy, *PF*, 300; D. Sedley, ‘Equal Sticks and Stones’ [‘Equal’], in D. Scott (ed.), *Maieusis: Essays in Ancient Philosophy in Honour of Myles Burnyeat* (Oxford, 2007), 68–86 at 74; and R. Sharma, ‘Socrates’ New *Aitia*: Causal and Teleological Explanations in Plato’s *Phaedo*’ [‘Socrates’], *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 36 (2009), 133–77 at 145.

itself' (αὐτὸ τὸ καλόν, C 4–5), 'that fine' (ἐκείνου τοῦ καλοῦ, C 5–6; D 5), and subsequently, 'by the fine' (τῷ καλῷ, D 7; E 2). These may be understood as terms of art indicating a special realm of metaphysical objects, the Platonic forms. But is this metaphysical reading the only possible one?

Further grounds must be sought to determine whether 'the fine', 'that fine', and 'something fine by itself' function as technical terms in the argument. Yet within the *Phaedo* itself, there is no strong reason to suppose that Plato employs a technical vocabulary with a fixed range of senses.⁴ The word *eidōs*, most closely associated with Plato's form theory, is a case in point. Its putatively technical instances (e.g. 103 E 3; 106 D 6) are considerably outnumbered by those in which it is plausibly translated in its ordinary senses of 'appearance', 'image' (73 D; 110 D), 'condition' (87 A; 92 B), and 'kind' or 'sort' (98 A; 110 D). The words *idea* and *morphē* appear late in the *Phaedo*, occurring only after the passage quoted above. Even here, there is disagreement among commentators as to whether these terms are also meant to refer to forms, or to some other metaphysical entities which share some of the properties of forms but not others.⁵ The expression 'auto to . . .', which has the strongest claim to be taken as a technical expression for introducing a form (e.g. 74 A 11–12; 102 D 6), is also found in other instances in which it appears merely to focus attention on a particular thing (e.g. 65 E 7; 96 E 1) or event (e.g. 58 C 6; 95 D 1–2).⁶

⁴ The inference from Plato's terminology to a belief in forms which exist independently of sense-perceptibles is critically examined by G. Fine, 'Separation', repr. in ead., *Plato on Knowledge and Forms: Selected Essays* (Oxford, 2003), 252–300 at 276–7. The terminological evidence put forward for the commonly drawn contrast between forms and particulars, in terms of generality and lack of spatial location, is criticized by V. Harte, 'Plato's Metaphysics', in G. Fine (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Plato* (Oxford, 2008), 191–216.

⁵ As Bluck points out (*Phaedo*, 17 n. 7), the consistent translation of *ἰδέα* as 'form' appears to credit Plato with the view that each soul is itself a form at 104 D 2. This and other problematic cases have created a dispute as to whether there are other sorts of entity besides forms involved in the argument. 'Immanent characters' or 'form-copies' are attributed to Plato by Hackforth, *Phaedo*, 150; Vlastos, 'Reasons', 84; and Rowe, 'Explanation', 65. The distinction is defended at length by D. Devereux, 'Separation and Immanence in Plato's Theory of Forms', repr. in G. Fine (ed.), *Plato 1: Metaphysics and Epistemology* (Oxford, 1999), 192–214.

⁶ For Plato's use of the same expressions in a non-technical sense in the 'Socratic dialogues' see Vlastos, 'Reasons', 83–4. A striking example of this can be found at *Euthph.* 5 D 1–6, in which Euthyphro agrees enthusiastically that there is a ταῦτὸν . . . ἐν πάσῃ πράξει τὸ ὅσιον αὐτὸ αὐτῷ and a τὸ ἀνόσιον . . . ἔχον μίαν ἰδέαν κατὰ τὴν ἀνοσιότητα, although this is not generally taken to invoke a theory of forms, or to indicate

Terminology alone, then, is not sufficient to settle the point. On a ‘ground-up’ approach, which looks for evidence from the dialogue taken by itself, there are no clear indications as to Plato’s intentions at this point. As a result, a different strategy has proved popular, which provides clearer support for the involvement of a particular kind of metaphysical theory. The alternative, ‘top-down’ approach relies on locating the *Phaedo* within a wider framework of a group of dialogues taken to be representative of a certain stage in Plato’s development. This broader approach draws on chronological hypotheses about the likely order of composition of the dialogues, and a philosophical reconstruction of the development of Plato’s thought.⁷ Following the hypothesis which strikes many as the most plausible, it has been supposed that the *Phaedo* belongs to a ‘middle-period’ group of dialogues in which the direct influence of the historical Socrates was receding, and Plato’s own metaphysical and mathematical interests were beginning to assert themselves. This leads to an overall reading of the *Phaedo* in which Plato’s discussions are expected to conform to the metaphysical emphasis which emerges from the ‘top-down’ picture.

None the less, the attempt to impose a framework from which lower-level interpretative questions should be tackled is clearly vulnerable to a challenge about the assumed order of priority. The ‘top-down’ approach holds that we can be more confident about our grasp of the general outline of Plato’s thought than our understanding of particular passages. This is not something which should be straightforwardly granted. It is equally an open question whether

familiarity on Euthyphro’s part with Platonic metaphysics. The terms *εἶδος* and *ἰδέα* also appear in the Hippocratic corpus; Taylor’s attempt to show that in this context they bore a technical sense stemming from the Pythagoreans (A. E. Taylor, *Varia Socratica* (Oxford, 1911)) is criticized by C. M. Gillespie, ‘The Use of *εἶδος* and *ἰδέα* in Hippocrates’, *Classical Quarterly*, 6 (1912), 179–203.

⁷ This systematic approach is set out explicitly in Ross, *PTI*, Hackforth, *Phaedo*, and Bostock, *Phaedo*, who each devote a chapter to sketching out a chronology of Plato’s works, and give an outline theory of his philosophical development. The same approach is implicit in the summaries of the development of Plato’s form theory offered by Bluck, *Phaedo*, 7–18, 182–7; Gallop, *Phaedo*, 93–7; and Dancy, *PF*, 4–11. The chronological and developmental assumptions made by top-down interpreters are stridently challenged by Rowe, ‘Explanation’, 63–6; *Phaedo*, vii; and in ‘Interpreting Plato’, in H. Benson (ed.), *A Companion to Plato* (Oxford, 2009), 13–24. However, Rowe’s own approach is to modify rather than reject the top-down method, and as a result his interpretation of the *Phaedo* yields interpretative options and conclusions which differ less than might be expected from the standard ones (‘Interpreting’, 58; *Phaedo*, 169).

the resources of the *Phaedo* are sufficient to provide any competing 'ground-up' interpretative possibilities taken by itself. If so, this would give us reason to pause before endorsing the metaphysical reading of the 'final argument'. It would also give us reasons for thinking that the systematizing, 'top-down' project is not the only possible method to adopt as a way of approaching particular dialogues.

Moreover, it may not even be the best approach. If interpretative hypotheses are to be judged by their results—particularly in terms of yielding interesting arguments which are plausibly grounded in the text—it is possible that rival hypotheses will have advantages over the metaphysical reading. The emergence of a sophisticated and interesting philosophical position in the *Phaedo* originating from a ground-up approach would show that the top-down strategy is not forced on us by our apparently incomplete understanding of certain ideas involved in the discussion.

3. The 'equal itself'

I now turn to the 'equals' argument, the part of the *Phaedo* which is the main locus of disagreement between the traditional and the transitional views. Although they are both top-down readings, and share important similarities, their conclusions about how this argument should be read bring out the crucial differences between them. It is important to examine these readings to determine whether either is persuasive, and whether there is any further possibility overlooked by both sides.

The 'equals' argument is part of a wider discussion about learning and recollection at 72 E–77 A. In this exchange Socrates sets out his reasons for thinking that 'learning' is in fact the recovery of knowledge we already possess. He begins by claiming that an experience of one thing can remind us of something else previously known, whether the two are similar or dissimilar. He then gets agreement, using the example of equality, that what we come to know is not the same as what is encountered by the senses, the two being dissimilar. From this, he draws the conclusion that we have knowledge regarding equality which is prior to sense-experience, and which must therefore come about through recollecting it from a time before we were born.

The most significant part of this contentious discussion, from the point of view of the rival readings, is Socrates' initial move. He asks his interlocutor, Simmias, whether he agrees that there is such a thing as 'the equal itself':

'Consider, then,' he said, 'whether this is the case: we say, I suppose, that there is something equal. I do not mean a stick equal to a stick or a stone equal to a stone, or anything else of that sort, but something else besides these, the equal itself [*αὐτὸ τὸ ἴσον*]. Do we say it is something or nothing?'

'We do say so, by Zeus,' he said, 'most definitely.' (*Phaedo* 74 A 9–B 1)

The careful distinction Socrates makes between 'the equal itself' and the other equals he mentions, and the enthusiastic agreement of Simmias, most obviously suggest some previously drawn distinction between two fundamentally different sorts of objects.⁸ This impression is encouraged by the phrase 'something else besides these' (*παρὰ ταῦτα ἕτερόν τι*), which seems to make it clear that two very different sorts of things are involved: there is no overlap between the two. Since there is no break in the discussion to clarify what Socrates is proposing, and no sign of hesitation on the part of his interlocutor, this gives us some reason to suppose that Plato is putting his audience in mind of a distinction they are already familiar with.

This initial impression accords well with the traditional reading, which takes Plato's form theory to be an unargued premiss throughout the *Phaedo*. This reading would be confirmed to some degree if the remainder of the argument makes it plausible that a familiar Platonic distinction between forms and sensibles is the one which has just been agreed. However, it has been pointed out that this construal does not make good sense of the way in which the discussion continues. Socrates, as we might expect, contrasts 'the equal itself' with the other equals he has mentioned, making the point that they are 'not the same'. However, he clearly does not regard this as some-

⁸ This is the interpretation adopted by, among others, Ross, *PTI*, 22–5; N. Gulley, 'Plato's Theory of Recollection', *Classical Quarterly*, NS 4 (1954), 194–213; Bluck, *Phaedo*, 64; Hackforth, *Phaedo*, 66, 75; K. W. Mills, 'Plato's *Phaedo*, 74 B 7–c 6' ['Part 1'], *Phronesis*, 2 (1957), 128–47 at 144; D. Tarrant, 'Plato, *Phaedo* 74 A–B' ['74 A–B'], *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, 77 (1957), 124–6 at 124; R. P. Haynes, 'The Form Equality, as a Set of Equals: *Phaedo* 74 B–C' ['Set'], *Phronesis*, 9 (1964), 17–26; J. M. Rist, 'Equals and Intermediates in Plato', *Phronesis*, 4 (1964), 27–37; J. L. Ackrill, 'Anamnesis in the *Phaedo*: Remarks on 73 c–75 c', in E. N. Lee, A. P. D. Mourelatos, and R. Rorty (eds.), *Exegesis and Argument* (Assen, 1973), 177–95 at 191; Gallop, *Phaedo*, 119; A. Nehamas, 'Plato on the Imperfection of the Sensible World' ['Imperfection'], repr. in G. Fine (ed.), *Plato 1: Metaphysics and Epistemology* (Oxford, 1999), 171–91 at 181, and Sedley, 'Equal', 72–3.

thing that Simmias has yet conceded. Instead, he spends some time arguing that the two are in fact distinct and cannot coincide:

'And do we know what it is?'

'Absolutely,' he said.

'From where did we grasp the knowledge of it? Is it from what we were just talking about—having seen either sticks or stones or other such equals, we understood it from these, though it is different from them? Or does it not seem different to you? Consider it this way: don't stones and sticks appear sometimes equal for one [τῶ μὲν ἴσα], but not for another [τῶ δ' οὐ], though they are the same things?'

'Absolutely.'

'What then? Have the equals themselves [αὐτὰ τὰ ἴσα] ever appeared unequal to you, or equality inequality?'

'Never, Socrates.'

'They are therefore not the same [οὐ ταὐτὸν ἄρα ἐστίν],' he said, 'these equal things [ταὐτά . . . τὰ ἴσα] and the equal itself [αὐτὸ τὸ ἴσον].'

'In no way do they seem so to me, Socrates.' (*Phaedo* 74 B 2–C 6)

Leaving aside for the moment the question as to what precise argument Socrates has in mind here, this turn in the conversation presents a problem for the traditional reading. If our initial construal was correct, that equal things and the 'equal itself' are meant to be two fundamentally different kinds of objects, Socrates' question to Simmias about whether they seem different to him (74 B 6–7) is an unexpected digression which calls for an explanation.

Keeping to the traditional view, two possible responses present themselves. The first is that although Simmias has apparently grasped Socrates' distinction, Socrates is portrayed as taking special care to confirm that Simmias really does agree to it, and is not going along with his question without attending to it properly. The second possibility is that the additional disambiguation is not intended for the characters of the drama, but for the reader of the dialogue. Anticipating the possibility that his audience might not immediately make the connection with his form theory, and not yet see that these two sorts of 'equals' really are different, Plato includes a brief digression to spell this out. It is, after all, crucial for Plato to forestall any misunderstanding if his readers are to follow the argument correctly.

Both suggestions fail, however, fully to explain a relevant feature of the passage. The initial construal might lead us to expect a clarification, but not an argument. Socrates raises the possibility that

Simmias may suppose that ‘the equal itself’ is no different from the equal stones and sticks. He then gives a *reason* for thinking that they must be different: the latter have a characteristic that the former does not have. He presents their non-identity as a conclusion, resulting from an inference: they are *therefore* not the same (*οὐ τὰὐτὸν ἄρα ἔστιν*). This puts into question the assumption that ‘the equal itself’ was understood at the outset to be a distinct object of a special kind. If we stand by our initial construal of the agreement between Simmias and Socrates, no argument should be needed: the inference is a tautology and the attempt to persuade is redundant.

Since Socrates is portrayed as giving an argument, rather than drawing out the consequences of a distinction, a natural conclusion to draw is that Plato regards the conclusion of the argument as something controversial which needs to be established. This point accords better with a transitional reading. If a metaphysical theory of forms is not a premiss, but a conclusion of the argument, then it seems clear that Plato’s argument is intended to justify the move to this conclusion from a more intuitively acceptable position. For this reason, transitional readers often challenge a commonly accepted claim that Socrates’ interlocutors, Simmias and Cebes, are portrayed as experienced philosophers who are thoroughly familiar with the theory of forms, and accept it as authoritative.⁹

However, this rival view also regards the argument as involving unstated, but philosophically significant, presuppositions. It proposes a rival context from which the premisses of the ‘equals’ argument are drawn: the definition-seeking enquiries portrayed in the earlier ‘Socratic’ dialogues. Socrates’ search for definitions requires some assumptions about the requirements for a successful definition, which may perhaps have metaphysical implications without explicitly assuming them.¹⁰ It can be argued that the premisses Soc-

⁹ For the claim see e.g. Burnet, *Phaedo*, 33–4, and Gallop, *Phaedo*, 97. For criticisms see Grube, *PT*, 291–4, and Dancy, *PF*, 249.

¹⁰ Exactly what an acceptance of ‘Socratic’ methodology commits its followers to is a matter of disagreement among transitional readers. The most conservative positions, which involve the fewest controversial assumptions, are put forward by Bostock, *Phaedo*, 69–70, and Penner, *Nominalism*, 58. More heavily committed positions are adopted by Dimas, ‘Recollecting’, 183–5, and Dancy, *PF*, 250–2, both of whom hold that Socrates’ requirements for definitions implicitly involve a fairly strong metaphysical commitment to a theory of non-sensible or paradigmatic entities to serve as the objects of definitional enquiries. These implications are not, however, thought to emerge explicitly in earlier dialogues. Rowe takes Plato to steer a middle course, or perhaps to equivocate, between these two extremes: Plato ex-

rates' companions agree to in the equals argument are explicable entirely by their acceptance of the method involved in this activity. Unlike the traditional interpretation, the transitional reading offers to give us an insight into the argumentative basis for Platonic metaphysics. As a result, it has great appeal for those who think Plato would be concerned to support his form theory with a justification, and so it potentially provides a more interesting exegetical approach to the argument, if it can be confirmed persuasively.

However, before considering this reading in any further detail, it is worth asking whether any other options are open. In particular, it is pertinent to question whether the top-down approach is needed, and whether it is right to suppose that some specific set of presuppositions must be involved in the argument. As I have argued, it is an interpretative hypothesis that our reading of particular passages should be guided by a general picture of Plato's metaphysical concerns, not a principle on which all interpretations must be based. The text itself does not give any indication that the argument is meant to be understood on the basis of specific assumptions or premisses provided in other Platonic works. Consequently, we should be wary of assuming that Plato must none the less have intended his readers to supply such details. It may be that all the information we need to make the subject of the discussion intelligible and philosophically serious can be found in the *Phaedo* itself.

Any persuasive reading of the agreement between Socrates and Simmias that the equal itself (*αὐτὸ τὸ ἴσον*) 'is something' at 74 A 12 will need to make Socrates' argument to distinguish it from 'sticks and stones or other such equals' dramatically and philosophically appropriate. Transitional readers suggest that we should assimilate this to a Socratic search for definitions, raising difficulties for the common-sense answers on the basis of elenctic principles familiar to Plato's audience from other dialogues. But instead of expecting that the *Phaedo* will conform to a philosophical agenda shared with other dialogues, we may instead look to the immediate context of the argument in the dialogue itself, and the indications it provides us with. The discussion about learning and recollection is concerned to show that our understanding of equality—the example Socrates chooses—is such that it could not come from sense-

explicitly presupposes only uncontroversial claims about the possibility of definition, according to Rowe (*Phaedo*, 141), but also hints strongly that these claims are more consequential than they appear (ibid. 107).

experience. The positions being compared by Socrates accordingly have a common starting-point: they are attempts to specify what is involved in our understanding of equality. Whatever else may be implicated by the expression ‘the equal itself’, one of its functions is to mark out a place which may be filled in different ways by different theories about what an understanding of equality involves.

The starting-point for an alternative interpretation is to take Socrates’ argument as a clue. The argument is there because it is tempting to identify the sense-perceptible equals and the ‘equal itself’, and it is not obviously wrong to do so. The conception of the ‘equal itself’ shared by the protagonists must be schematic enough to make it possible for them to agree that there is such a thing, while having different theories as to what it is. This allows us to make some inferences. The first is that the discussion of the ‘equal itself’ should not be thought of as directly picking out some specific object, but rather marking out a place for whatever it is that plays the role of accounting for our grasp of equality. This place could be filled by any number of different things—in the initial stage of the discussion, at least—including sense-perceptible equals. A second inference is that the expression ‘equal itself’, if it is not a technical term introduced by a theory, could well invoke a notion which can be understood independently of any particular philosophical framework. Since it is possible to have ideas about the basis of our knowledge about equality without needing to know about Platonic forms or any rules governing a Socratic search for definitions, we are not forced to take either as the tacitly presupposed context for the argument.

4. Dramatic and philosophical structure

The discussion so far has shown that, in the initial stages of the discussion of the ‘equal itself’, there are strong dramatic indications against a particular metaphysical theory being a necessary presupposition of the argument. This observation, however, leaves it open whether more subtle presuppositions are at work. These might consist of a framework of ‘non-separated forms’ of the kind thought to be presupposed by Socrates in the dialogues generally considered to be early. These could involve merely a set of methodological assumptions about unitary ‘objective properties’, or more strongly,

some specific entities to serve as linguistic correlates in answers to the Socratic 'what is *F*?' question.¹¹ This suggestion needs to be taken seriously. Yet in terms of supporting evidence in the dialogue itself, there is little indication that the argument should be read in this way. Nothing in the text clearly points to assumptions of this sort being invoked as premisses in the argument. Nor are there any explicit references to other Platonic dialogues in which the metaphysical or semantic presuppositions in Socrates' practice are put under scrutiny.

The only clear external reference which Plato does make in this part of the dialogue is to the *Meno*'s discussion of teaching, learning, and recollection.¹² The discussion is instigated by Cebes at 72 E 1, who claims that Socrates' frequently expressed opinion that 'for us, learning is in fact nothing other than recollection' gives the basis for an alternative demonstration that our souls exist prior to our birth. In support of this opinion he observes that men will give correct answers if questioned well, which they could not do if they did not have within themselves knowledge and a correct account (*ἐπιστήμη . . . καὶ ὀρθὸς λόγος*, 73 A 9–10). Cebes adds that this is particularly evident if the questioning is done by means of a diagram or something similar. This can hardly fail to put Plato's audience in mind of the *Meno*, and above all, Socrates' questioning of the slave with the aid of a diagram to help him to discover the solution to a geometrical puzzle (*Meno* 82 A–85 B).

While it is true that this passage focuses attention on Socrates' method of questioning his interlocutors, the issue of tacit commitments to properties, meanings, or other philosophical presuppositions involved in this method is not raised. Rather, what is at stake in this part of the *Meno* is the effectiveness of enquiry—and in particular, the Socratic elenchus—as means to knowledge. The question is an urgent one, because at this stage Meno has been persuaded that the opinions imparted to him by others do not in fact constitute knowledge. At the same time, he does not see how knowledge could come about, if not by this method. The demonstration with the slave provides a response to this problem by showing that a person

¹¹ For the former see Dimas, 'Recollecting', 195; Fine, 'Separation', 282; T. Irwin, *Plato's Ethics [Ethics]* (Oxford, 1995), 152; for the latter see Bostock, *Phaedo*, 69–70.

¹² I am grateful to Brad Inwood for emphasizing the importance of this connection, and for prompting me to think about the significance of it in determining the context of the discussion of equality in the *Phaedo*.

can come to apprehend something himself, without being taught through explicit instruction. The point of contact, then, between the *Meno*'s discussion of recollection and the 'equals' argument of the *Phaedo* is that there are instances of learning in which the generally accepted sources of evidence seem insufficient to account for the resulting cognitive achievement. The difference between the two discussions is that the criticism in the *Meno* is directed at 'teaching' in the traditional sense as a hypothetical source for our geometrical knowledge, whereas in the 'equals' argument of the *Phaedo* the source under scrutiny for our understanding of equality is sense-experience in general.

I have argued that the text of the *Phaedo* provides no reason for thinking that the reader must supply a background of philosophical assumptions in order to make sense of the argument. The context of learning and teaching gives the 'equal itself' a perfectly intelligible status in the dialectical exchange which makes good sense of the way the discussion unfolds. Socrates begins by asking Simmias for agreement on the intuitive question as to whether something is required to account for our grasp of equality. This is something distinguishable (*παρὰ ταῦτα ἕτερόν τι*)—at least conceptually—from the equal things which are the subjects of our judgements. Identifying equals as equal is not just to take account of the equal things themselves, but to take account of something *about* them. To agree to this does not yet indicate an engagement with any particular philosophical system. The contrast between equal things and their equality is an intuitive, non-technical idea which does not presuppose any metaphysical conclusions as to what sorts of objects are involved, or set up any sort of framework to constrain the kinds of answers which must be given. Interlocutors of any philosophical persuasion could, up to this point, follow the argument.

On the reading considered so far, Simmias' initial agreement to there being such a thing as the 'equal itself' does not rule out any identification of it with the objects of sense-perception. We should therefore expect an argument from Socrates to get to the conclusion he is after, that the 'equal itself' that figures in our judgement is different from the equals apprehended by the senses. Socrates is indeed portrayed as deploying an argument, asking Simmias at 74 B 7–9 whether he agrees to the premiss that the sense-perceptible equals mentioned appear 'equal for one [*τῷ μὲν ἴσα*], but not for another [*τῷ δ' οὐ*']'. From this, and from the further premiss at 74 C

1–2 that 'the equals themselves never appeared to you to be unequal, nor equality inequality [*ἀδτὰ τὰ ἴσα ἔστιν ὅτε ἀνισά σοι ἐφάνη, ἢ ἢ ἰσότης ἀνισότης*]', it is inferred that the sense-perceptible equals cannot be the equal itself (*ἀδτὸ τὸ ἴσον*), which is grasped by our understanding.

This creates considerable ambiguity. In the first instance, we do not know whether Plato meant 'appearing' (*φαίνεται*, 74 B 8; *ἐφάνη*, C 1) to be taken veridically or non-veridically. This makes a difference to the argument, since on the former understanding he would assert that the sticks and stones are 'equal for one but not for another' because they really are so, but on the latter he would assert only that this is how they appear, denying that they are in fact so, or at least suspending judgement on whether they are. Nor do we know whether these pronouns are to be taken as masculine—in which case we would take the point to be the relativity of appearances to different people¹³—or whether to take them as neuter, in which case the relativity would arise from the sticks and stones being equal or unequal in relation to different objects in each case.¹⁴ Relativity of equality to different respects would perhaps have been more naturally expressed by feminine dative pronouns (i.e. *τῇ μὲν ἴσα . . . τῇ*

¹³ Translated this way by Hackforth, *Phaedo*, 69; Bluck, *Phaedo*, 67; R. Loriaux, *Le Phédon de Platon*, 57 A–84 B [*Phédon*] (Namur, 1969), and defended against criticisms by Mills, 'Part 1', and in 'Plato's *Phaedo*, 74 B 7–C 6, Part 2' ['Part 2'], *Phronesis*, 3 (1958), 40–58; Penner, *Nominalism*, 58; Fine, *On Ideas*, 331–2 n. 26; Irwin, *Ethics*, 374 n. 13; and Dimas, 'Recollecting', 196–7. A point in favour of this interpretation is the parallel between the personal datives and the personal dative (*σοι*) for Simmias at 74 C 1. The support it provides is, however, limited by the fact that the variability of equal sticks and stones to different people is contrasted with the constancy of the equals themselves to the same person, Simmias. The invalidity in the argument introduced by this shift can be mitigated by supposing that Simmias is 'a representative of humanity in general' (Mills, 'Part 2', 50).

¹⁴ This alternative construal was originally proposed by N. R. Murphy, *The Interpretation of Plato's Republic* (Oxford, 1951), 111 n. 1, and developed in detail by G. E. L. Owen, 'Logic and Metaphysics in Some Earlier Works of Aristotle', in I. Düring and G. E. L. Owen (eds.), *Aristotle and Plato in the Mid-Fourth Century* (Gothenburg, 1960), 163–90 at 175. It has been adopted and defended by Nehamas, 'Imperfection', 190; White, *PKR*, 66–7; Bostock, *Phaedo*, 73–8; and Rowe, *Phaedo*, 169. This interpretation derives its force from Murphy's point that the masculine construal of the pronouns does not provide a strong enough premiss from which to derive any conclusions about the deficiency of sensibles, since the most that could be concluded is that at least one of the two observers had made a mistake. If, however, the premiss is to be taken as establishing that equal sticks and stones really do exhibit relativity or compresence of some kind, the neuter reading of the pronouns appears more plausible (White, *PKR*, 80 n. 18). An explicitly top-down argument for the same conclusion is given by Bostock, *Phaedo*, 77.

δ' οὐ), but this has been defended as a possible reading of the pronouns, if taken as datives of the indefinite article.¹⁵

Top-down interpreters may well object at this point that the limited resources available on the ground-up approach are insufficient to provide an interpretation of the argument as a whole, effectively ruling it out. Socrates' allusion to the deficiency of sense-perceptible equals is made briefly and is given no further explanation. While the argument called for at this point in the dialogue seems to require some very specific complaint to be made against sense-perceptibles, the brief and cryptic nature of Socrates' remarks makes it extremely difficult to see what this complaint is meant to be. As a result, the inferential basis for the argument is left very seriously underdetermined on the ground-up approach.

To add to the difficulty, there are also textual issues to reckon with. According to one manuscript family, Socrates asks whether sticks and stones 'appear sometimes equal for one, but not for another [τῶ μὲν ἴσα . . . τῶ δ' οὐ]'. Alternatively, two manuscript families have a different text, 'equal at one time, but not at another [τότε μὲν ἴσα . . . τότε δ' οὐ]'.¹⁶ Lacking any contextual information on which to determine the actual basis of the argument, and having no criteria to arbitrate between the two alternative readings of the text, the ground-up reading appears at a serious disadvantage in comparison with its top-down rivals.

Before considering a possible response to this objection, it is useful to consider a second point relevant to determining the best approach to the dialogue. I quote from 65 D–E, where Socrates is asking Simmias about whether the separation of the soul from the body is something to be feared, or something that the philosopher

¹⁵ See Mills, 'Part 1', 133–4. This reading is defended by Haynes, 'Set', 20–1. It has not won wider support, although commentators disagree on whether it is merely unlikely, or whether it is impermissible as a reading of the Greek, as is asserted by Gallop, *Phaedo*, 122.

¹⁶ The former reading is to be found in the Clarke manuscript (B) in Oxford. It was adopted in Burnet's OCT edition, and subsequently by a majority of commentators. The latter reading is found in the Venice manuscript (T) and the Vienna manuscript (W). There is evidence that the existence of both of these alternative readings was known in different manuscript traditions (Burnet, *Phaedo*, ad 74 B 8–9; Loriaux, *Phédon*, 139; E. A. Duke *et al.*, revised OCT, ad loc.). This suggests that both versions of the text were known at least by late antiquity, making it practically impossible to recover the original text, or to trace a mechanism of corruption. Those who follow the latter tradition for the text of this passage include Tarrant, '74 A–B', 125; W. Verdenius, 'Notes on Plato's *Phaedo*', *Mnemosyne*, 4 (1958), 193–243 at 209–10; Dancy, *PF*, 267; and Sedley, 'Equal', 79–81.

has already practised in pursuing the knowledge of certain kinds of things:

'What about these sorts of things, Simmias? Do we say that there is something, the just itself, or not [τι εἶναι δίκαιον αὐτό]?'

'We do indeed, by Zeus.'

'And fine, and good [καλόν γέ τι καὶ ἀγαθόν]?'

'Of course.'

'And did you ever see something of this sort with your eyes?'

'Never,' he said.

'But then did you grasp them by some other bodily sense? I speak of all of them, about largeness, strength, health, and the others, and—in a word—the being of all such things, what each one essentially is [περὶ . . . τῆς οὐσίας ὃ τυγχάνει ἕκαστον ὄν]. Is the truest [aspect] of them studied via the body, or are matters thus: whoever of us is prepared most of all and as carefully as possible to fix his mind on each thing that he investigates, this man would come the closest to knowledge of each?'

'Of course.'

(*Phaedo* 65 D 4–E 5)

This concession on Simmias' part, which anticipates the conclusion of the 'equals' argument, apparently presents a further problem for the neutral conception of the 'equal itself', and for the ground-up approach more generally. Socrates explicitly introduces a philosophically significant claim, that 'the being of all such things' can be apprehended only in isolation from the senses. The introduction of this point, without any supporting argument in the immediate context, seems to support the view that Plato assumes, on the part of his audience, an awareness of the reasoning behind this claim. Taken in this way, it provides a clear reason to think that the top-down approach is the correct one. Moreover, since this evidence is drawn from within the dialogue itself, it is not vulnerable to the criticism about circularity made against top-down interpretations in Section 2.

Both of these objections are worth taking seriously, and both are equally problematic for the ground-up project's attempt to work at the level of the individual dialogue as far as possible. However, it is important to notice that these objections pull in different directions. The first insists forcefully on the need to provide a philosophically weighty argument for an interpretation of the 'equals' argument, and criticizes the neutral approach for its inability to identify a basis for the inference, and its failure to provide a context to help resolve the textual difficulties. This focus is particularly important for tran-

sitional readers, who see the *Phaedo* as playing the crucial role in justifying a move from Socratic enquiries to Platonic metaphysics.

The second objection, by contrast, emphasizes the fact that Socrates and Simmias explicitly attribute a controversial characteristic to the entities they are discussing—that of sense-transcendence—in advance of any argument. This seems to mark a sharp discontinuity between the *Phaedo* and the Socratic enquiries which might otherwise be taken as a plausible background against which to interpret the dialogue. Considered in this light, this part of the *Phaedo* seems to demonstrate that Plato's focus is on drawing out the implications of a philosophical position which has already become a firm conviction, rather than on discussing the nature and extent of his new ontological commitments, and providing arguments to support them. For this reason, many traditional readers do not agree with transitional readers that it is an urgent task to identify one specific basis on which the 'equals' argument rests, as Plato's justification for his theory. Some have gone further, stressing the openness of this passage to different interpretations, hinting that Plato may not have meant to single out any particular one of a cluster of deficiencies connected to sense-perceptible things.¹⁷

The countervailing pressures exerted by these objections elicit responses which open up further interpretative possibilities. While traditional readers give reasons to be wary about according a crucial turning-point status to the 'equals' argument, transitional readers in turn argue the case for disputing the significance of Simmias' earlier agreement with Socrates. They point out that Simmias' acceptance of the claim about sense-transcendence without argument at 65 D does not show that Plato expects his audience to react in the same way. It is, perhaps, conceivable that Plato is expecting his readers already to be familiar with a complex metaphysical theory, and to accept it without argument, but this is not the only way to understand this part of the dialogue. The point treated as a secure premiss at an earlier stage in the dialogue is very closely related to a conclusion which will be argued for later in the discussion about

¹⁷ A very limited discussion of the 'equals' argument is the norm in older commentaries, e.g. Ross, *PTI*, 23–4; Bluck, *Phaedo*, 63; and Hackforth, *Phaedo*, 75–6, as is the opinion that the problems in the transmission of the text are not philosophically significant, e.g. Burnet, *Phaedo*, 56; Loriaux, *Phédon*, 142–3. For the suggestion that it is not essential to the argument to identify any specific defect in sense-perceptibles see Gallop, *Phaedo*, 123, and for criticism see G. Fine, 'Review of Plato's *Phaedo*. Translated by David Gallop', *Philosophical Review*, 86 (1977), 101–5.

equality. This gives us reason to pause before drawing any conclusions from Simmias' agreement. The fact that Socrates' point is unsupported at its first appearance does not show that it has the status of a first principle. Since it is possible for Plato to revisit an earlier claim and back it up with an argument, a decision of this kind ought to be made on the basis of the dialogue as a whole.

An alternative way to approach this passage, then, is to make a distinction between the dramatic presentation of key ideas in the dialogue and their philosophical exposition, in terms of their justificatory structure. This needs to be further explored. When interpreting a Platonic dialogue such as the *Phaedo*, it is important to decide whether the particular setting of the conversation and the identity of the interlocutors have any significance for the philosophical content Plato is trying to convey. One possibility is that these dramatic details are simply a pretext for the presentation of arguments, which could equally well be set out directly with no loss of content. 'Socrates' represents the philosophical position Plato wishes to establish, and his interlocutor personifies the responses Plato expects from his audience, or rather, the responses and objections which Plato wishes to bring up and address. An alternative possibility is to suppose that some purpose is served by dramatizing an interaction between two different standpoints, which may differ in terms of priorities and commitments, and also in terms of philosophical sophistication and engagement.

On this latter supposition, the author's own standpoint need not be wholly identifiable with any of those taken up by his characters. Dramatic differences might reflect important differences in the features Plato wishes to emphasize in the particular philosophical position—or positions—he is interested in. The dramatic Socrates might argue a claim in one way to an intelligent interlocutor who shares his beliefs, but switch to defending the claim in a very different way when confronted with an opponent who is dogmatic, sceptical, or openly hostile. The varying dynamics of each Socratic conversation can be used to develop different aspects of a philosophical position, especially those aspects which are not easily conveyed in abstract discourse. This dramatic device allows certain points to be scrutinized in detail while others are left in the background, depending on the way in which the interlocutors' interests are depicted.

Accepting a distinction between the dramatic and the philosophi-

cal structure of the dialogue allows transitional readers to respond to the objection brought against them on the basis of 65 D–E. But it also affords an opportunity for the ground-up view to respond to the challenge that it has no sufficiently detailed reconstruction to offer for the ‘equals’ argument at 74 B–C. If we are willing to accept the suggestion that the philosophical agenda of the *Phaedo* is pursued in a more subtle manner than first appears, we will also be receptive to a general distinction between the dramatic structure of the dialogue on the one hand, and the underlying philosophical engagement between Plato and his audience on the other. This leads us to form more complex expectations about the discussion between Socrates and his interlocutors. We should regard them as characters with their own commitments and motivations, whose reactions may deliberately—as a matter of authorial intention—diverge from those of the audience in some respects.¹⁸

In particular, our expectations about the equals argument may be different from those transitional readers who take this to be a straightforward attempt to persuade the reader to accept a particular metaphysical theory. By supposing that the task of the interpreter is to reconstruct a specific argument at this point, we risk mistaking an ‘intra-textual’ argument, aimed at persuading the dramatic interlocutor, Simmias, for an ‘extra-textual’ argument, designed to persuade his audience. Plato might have reasons for presenting only an outline of an argument at this stage, pending later clarification. Accordingly, when Simmias is persuaded by an argument that strikes us as obscure and elliptical on the basis of the discussion so far, we should not automatically assume that we are meant to refer to material elsewhere in Plato’s dialogues to provide the missing explanation and justification. Instead, we can postpone

¹⁸ This point is not put in quite this way by transitional readers, but it seems to capture the thinking behind their reading of this earlier part of the Socrates–Simmias discussion. Penner, *Nominalism*, 58, comes close to making the distinction between dramatic and argumentative structures in his rebuttal of the traditional view: ‘Socrates . . . offers Simmias a chance to take back the thesis that there exist Forms, and then offers him an argument to show that Forms do indeed exist.’ Dimas, ‘Recollecting’, 185, is perhaps closer still to making this distinction, in his assertion that the ‘theoretical commitments of the interlocutors cannot settle the question whether Socrates and Simmias introduce the *ἴσος* as a Platonic form or in the innocuous sense we have been used to from the shorter Socratic dialogues’. A separation between the dramatic and the philosophical for this part of the *Phaedo* also seems to be assumed by White, *PKR*, 66; Bostock, *Phaedo*, 195; and Dancy, *PF*, 250.

this move, and continue the dialogue in the expectation that our concerns will be addressed there.

5. The final argument

The top-down reading of the *Phaedo* involves the assumption that Plato presupposes knowledge of either a theory or a method on the part of his audience, and expects them to apply it in their engagement with the dialogue. The case for adopting such a reading is, at best, inconclusive according to the discussion so far. However, there is still work to be done before a ground-up reading can be considered a serious rival to this approach. Specifically, more positive support is needed to sustain the thesis that the philosophical content of the dialogue is independent of any collection of metaphysical doctrines, introduced into the dialogue either by argument or by presupposition. Equally, more needs to be said about the way in which the 'equals' argument can be read in the anticipatory way described, presenting the audience with conclusions for which the argumentative basis is still to be set out.

On these points it is helpful to turn to the later stages of the dialogue, specifically to the final argument at 95 A–107 B. Both traditional and transitional readers agree that a distinctively metaphysical position has been established at this stage in the dialogue. Accordingly, it is a crucial test for the ground-up reading to see how far it can go independently of any such commitment, taking the argument as a free-standing philosophical discussion.

The argument itself arises from an objection brought up by Cebes, that even if Socrates' conclusions are accepted up to this stage, he has established only that the soul is longer-lasting than the body, and that its existence prior to its association with the body provides no guarantee that it will remain in existence when it is separated from the body again. Socrates' answer to Cebes centres on the passage I quoted at the start of Section 2, in which Socrates says that he will set down that there is 'something fine by itself, and good, and large, and all the others' (*ὑποθέμενος εἶναι τι καλὸν αὐτὸ καθ' αὐτὸ καὶ μέγα καὶ τὰλλα πάντα*, 100 B 5–7), and hopes to 'discover on this basis that the soul is immortal'.

Previously, I noted that nothing in the passage itself necessitates the view that Socrates is dealing with an established theory of sense-

transcendent Platonic forms. Following the approach I have adopted, we can consider the possibility that Socrates is portrayed as appealing to the more philosophically neutral claim that there is something which is implicated in some way by our judgements that things are fine, good, large, and so on. On this view, we do not confront any questions about the sources we need to look to in order to fill out the details and argumentative basis of the theory, whether internal to the *Phaedo* or external to it. This is for the straightforward reason that, as yet, no theory has been invoked. Instead, there is an intuitive acceptance that our talk and thought about ‘fine’, ‘good’, ‘large’ involves something whose status is yet to be clarified.

To see whether this reading can make good sense of the course of the discussion in the final argument, we are required to consider the way in which it develops. Socrates’ response to Cebes’ objection calls for, as he puts it, ‘a thorough handling of the explanation for coming-to-be and perishing’ (*περὶ γενέσεως καὶ φθορᾶς τῆν αἰτίαν διαπραγματεύσασθαι*, 95 E 10–96 A 1).¹⁹ Prior to the passage under discussion in which Socrates announces his own approach to his topic, he gives an account of his own previous enquiries into explanation. Having become dissatisfied with the mechanical explanations offered by earlier enquirers into nature, and similar common-sense explanations of various properties and relations, Socrates accuses these earlier enquirers of a failure to draw the distinction between a real explanation (*τί ἐστι τὸ αἴτιον τῷ ὄντι*) and a contributory factor, ‘that without which the explanation would not be an explanation’ (*ἐκεῖνο ἄνευ οὗ τὸ αἴτιον οὐκ ἂν ποτ’ εἴη αἴτιον*, 99 B 2–4).

Socrates goes on to say that, having been unable to find any explanations of this kind either on his own or by learning from others, he instead pursued an alternative course. There is considerable debate about the precise interpretation of the obscure nautical metaphor used by Socrates, who describes this method as a ‘se-

¹⁹ There has been considerable discussion about whether the *αἴτια* of the final argument should be taken as an ‘explanation’, regarding this as a broad metaphysical notion potentially involving events, processes, states of affairs, or linguistic correlates such as propositions, or whether it should be taken as a ‘cause’, more narrowly regarded as some entity responsible for something, leaving out questions of the mechanism by which it operates. Advocates for both can be found, and for a range of intermediate positions. As will become clear, I do not think it is necessary to settle this issue in order to understand this part of the dialogue, and so I have opted for the word ‘explanation’ as the more neutral of the two, intending to close off as few interpretative options as possible.

cond sailing' (δεύτερον πλοῦν, 99 D 1).²⁰ Whatever detailed account should be given of it, there are strong indications that the approach in question is meant to be a cautious and commonsensical one, rather than the bold course of metaphysical innovation typically imputed to him. Socrates says that what he is about to discuss is 'nothing new' (οὐδὲν καινόν, 100 B 1), but only those things he 'never stops talking about' (οὐδὲν πέπαυμαι λέγων, B 2–3).²¹ The view is one which he holds 'straightforwardly, untechnically, and perhaps naïvely' (ἀπλῶς καὶ ἀτέχνως καὶ ἴσως εὐήθως ἔχω παρ' ἑμαυτῶ, D 3–4), giving what seems to him to be the 'safest reply to give myself and others' (D 3–9). It is described as something which someone would hold through fear of facing opposed views (101 A 5–6; B 5; D 1), through inexperience (D 2), and by choosing one's words cautiously (C 1–2). He contrasts it with the 'wise explanations' (τὰς αἰτίας τὰς σοφάς, C 10) and 'subtleties' (κομψείας, 101 C 8) of others.

It is just about possible to read some of these disclaimers as ironical. Playful references to the 'wisdom' of his opponents is, after all, a Socratic habit familiar from other dialogues. However, it is more difficult to see the point of irony when it comes to describing an elaborate and controversial theory in such deflationary terms. Moreover, such a reading does nothing to explain the reaction of Echeocrates, the hearer of *Phaedo's* narrative. He interrupts at this point to say of Socrates that 'it seems that he said these things wonderfully clearly, even to a man of limited intelligence [σμικρὸν νοῦν ἔχοντι]' (102 A 4–6). If this is taken as the description of a sophisti-

²⁰ Although it is agreed by commentators that the expression is a proverbial one, there remains a dispute about whether a 'second sailing' involved a change of destination, or a different method for reaching the same destination. Evidence for both interpretations is provided in Burnet, *Phaedo*, 108. Discussion of the precise meaning of the expression is generally subordinated to the question as to how the metaphor should be interpreted, particularly with regard to Socrates' disappointed hope of finding satisfactory teleological explanations in Anaxagoras. The long-standing view that Socrates is announcing his intention to pursue teleological explanation in a new way was criticized by Vlastos, 'Reasons', 82–3, and revived by D. Wiggins, 'Teleology and the Good in Plato's *Phaedo*' ['Teleology'], *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 4 (1986), 1–18. Both positions have attracted supporters, while compromise views are held by Gallop, *Phaedo*, 177, and Rowe, 'Explanation', 68–9.

²¹ Grube, *PT*, 293–4, takes this to be a reference just to the foregoing discussion in the *Phaedo*, but this seems unlikely given that it is closely paralleled by Socrates' earlier description of 'something fine, and good, and every such thing' as 'the things we are always chattering about' (εἰ μὲν ἔστιν ἃ θρυλούμεν ἀεί, 76 D 7–8). Grube's criticism was directed against Burnet's theory of a Pythagorean origin for the theory of forms, and it seems likely that he embraced this implausible view as a way to avoid an even less plausible one.

cated metaphysical theory, we cannot help but find this dramatic reception rather perverse.²² This provides strong motivation for an alternative reading, which takes Socrates' starting-point to be the more modest one of eliciting agreement that *something*—as yet unspecified—is needed to explain the presence of fineness in things.

The agreement between Socrates and Cebes that there is 'something fine by itself, and good, and large, and all the others' leads to the following exchange:

'Consider then,' he said, 'whether you think the same as me on what comes next after this. It seems to me that if something is fine, other than the fine itself [*αὐτὸ τὸ καλὸν*], it is not fine by anything other than by sharing in that fine, and I say the same of everything. Do you agree to an explanation of this kind?'

'I agree,' he said.

(*Phaedo* 100c 3–8)

On the metaphysical readings I have been challenging, the Socrates of the *Phaedo* here is supposed to be ruling out all other theories of explanation, including the view that fineness can be explained by the materialistic factors proposed by his predecessors, and declaring as the only sufficient alternative a metaphysical theory which is carried over from an earlier discussion and unquestioningly accepted by his interlocutors. This seems implausibly abrupt, and wholly at odds with the dramatic indications which precede it.

It is much more plausible to look for a way for Socrates to take this step without needing to suppose that he is putting up any specific and controversial theory of explanation for acceptance at this point. This creates a strong case for the ground-up view, on which Socrates is merely formulating a platitude: whatever it is that fineness consists in is the explanation for something's being fine. This is a general schema to which *any* explanatory theory ought to conform. 'The fine itself' is not some specific entity, introduced as part of a rival theory of explanation which supplants all others. It is, rather, a general label for whatever it is that fits the description sketched

²² Nehamas, 'Opposites', 477, takes the disclaimers as false modesty, since the 'theory introduces a vast ontological apparatus which is necessary for its formulation and application'. But in response to such views Rowe ('Explanation', 50) aptly comments, 'we have the odd situation that what readers and commentators currently regard as one of the obscurest parts of the dialogue (and perhaps even of Plato) is actually received by its fictional audiences as a plain statement of things which could not reasonably be disputed by anyone'. None the less, Rowe's own reading of the final argument, in my view, is not notably more successful in addressing this problem than those he criticizes.

out by their search for an explanation for cases of fineness. The real work is still to be done: Socrates and Cebes need to investigate what this 'fine itself' is. At this point in the discussion, their agreement is neutral as to the nature of whatever it is that, ultimately, provides the explanation.

The proposed interpretation also gives us a very different understanding of Socrates' description of this procedure at 100A 3–4, that of 'setting down, on each occasion, the *logos* I judge to be the strongest [*ὑποθέμενος ἐκάστοτε λόγον ὃν ἂν κρίνω ἔρρωμενέστατον εἶναι*]'. On a metaphysical reading, it is the strength of Socrates' *logos* which is the key to its safety. The theory of forms is unsurpassed in meeting explanatory criteria its rivals cannot.

On my view, however, the strength and safety of a *logos* are in competition with each other, instead of going together. What makes Socrates think he has 'the safest answer to give myself and others', and 'by holding to this, I think I will never be thrown', is that he refuses to endorse the ambitious claims made by others. Socrates sticks to the non-committal formula that there is *something* explanatory, connected with the things whose fineness needs to be explained in some as yet undetermined way (100D 5–6).²³ He confines himself to the 'safe' formula that fine things get to be fine by this, 'the fine itself' (*ὅτι τῷ καλῷ τὰ καλὰ γίγνεται καλά*, E 2–3)—whatever it may turn out to be.

6. Socrates' conception of explanation

There are a number of advantages in taking Socrates' and Cebes' starting-point to be the agreement that there must be something in terms of which an explanation can be given, which has yet to

²³ Reading, with the majority of manuscripts, *εἴτε παρουσία εἴτε κοινωνία εἴτε ὅπη δὴ καὶ ὅπως προσγενομένη*. There is some uncertainty as to whether *προσγενομένη* could have been part of the original text, as it agrees grammatically with *παρουσία* and *κοινωνία* rather than *ἐκείνου τοῦ καλοῦ*, as we might have expected on grounds of sense. The correct reading could instead be *προσγενομένου*, as Ueberweg conjectured, or *προσαγορευομένη*, a reading which was suggested by Wyttienbach, endorsed by Burnet, and which possibly has papyrus support (but see the revised OCT ad loc. for doubts about this). Although the point is not significant for my interpretation, I agree with Bluck, *Phaedo*, 115, in supposing that grammatical attraction adequately explains Plato's writing *προσγενομένη*, and that the text can be translated as 'either by presence, or by communion, or whatever way and manner [the fine itself] is attached'.

be satisfactorily identified. Firstly, it gives a good reading of the text. There is a point to Socrates' saying that he will set down on each occasion the *logos* he judges the strongest, since there are some situations—like the present one—in which the best available *logos* is not very strong at all. Secondly, it also avoids resorting, implausibly, to irony to explain Socrates' claim to have adopted his position through inexperience and timidity. Finally, it allows us to take straightforwardly Socrates' description of his position as simple and untechnical, in contrast to the apparent sophistication of his rivals.

It must be conceded, though, that this agreement by itself does not seem to be a promising basis on which to build any serious philosophical conclusions. Moreover, I have insisted in my reading of the 'equals' argument that no substantial claims about the 'fine itself'—that it is identifiable with, or reducible to, sense-perceptible fine things, for example—have yet, from the point of view of Plato's audience, been refuted. Consequently, such claims cannot properly be presupposed in the final argument.

This raises an important question. However plausible a construal of the text the ground-up reading might provide, it still remains unclear how Socrates will go on to establish the more substantial conclusions which follow. Most interpreters take these weighty claims to require an equally weighty metaphysical position as a secure platform from which to argue. There is still work to be done, then, to show that my neutral understanding of the final argument's starting-point can form any adequate basis for the distinction which follows.

My suggestion is that Socrates takes himself and his adversaries to accept a common starting-point—that there must be something which accounts for the fineness of fine things. The ground for their divergence has not yet become apparent, but it is clear that there is one. Where his rivals push ahead and lay claim to have identified the explanations by appealing to material or sense-perceptible factors—'having a beautiful colour, or shape, or something else of that sort' (*χρῶμα εὐανθές ἔχον ἢ σχῆμα ἢ ἄλλο ὁτιοῦν τῶν τοιούτων*, 100 D 1–2)—Socrates declares himself unpersuaded that they have found the *real* explanation.

This raises the issue as to the nature of Socrates' dissatisfaction with the explanations based on materialistic or sense-perceptible factors, and Cebes' reasons for sharing this dissatisfaction. Socra-

tes had earlier described the sort of explanation he once accepted in the following terms:

'I used to consider it sufficient, that whenever some large man stands next to a small one, he appears larger because of a head [*ἀπὸ τῆς τῆς κεφαλῆς*], and also a horse compared with a horse. And even more clearly than these, it seemed to me that ten are more than eight because two are added to them, and that a double cubit is greater than a cubit because it exceeds it by half [of itself].' (*Phaedo* 96 D 8–E 4)

Socrates had also described other explanations he now says he can no longer accept: that in cases of addition 'the one to which something has been added has come to be two' or that both together 'come to be two because of the adding of one to the other' (96 E 8–97 A 2); and that in cases of division, that 'it, the division, is in turn the explanation of one's becoming two' (97 A 6–8). Addressing the first example, Socrates now gives his reasons: he 'would not accept it if anyone said that one man was larger than another by a head, and that the smaller is smaller by the same thing' (100 E 8–101 A 1). He would be afraid of meeting an opposed account, an *ἐναντίος λόγος*, that 'firstly, it is by the very same thing that the larger is larger and the smaller smaller, and then that it is by a head, though it is a small thing, that the larger is larger' (101 A 6–9).

On the top-down approach adopted by most current interpretations, Socrates has already determined that the correct answer to these explanatory questions is to invoke special, metaphysical entities. Consequently, the complaint he is making here is that his opponents have invoked the wrong *sorts* of entities—ordinary, sense-perceptible ones—in their unsuccessful attempt to provide explanations. If this is indeed Socrates' position, his refutation needs to be decisive and completely general in order to leave the field clear for his own preferred alternative, the form theory. We must suppose that the specific examples chosen are not in themselves significant: they merely illustrate an overarching refutation, one which rules out *a priori* all explanatory theories which do not involve forms. By drawing their answers from the realm of sense-perceptible, material factors, Socrates' predecessors are defeated from the start.

This immediately brings up a difficulty. Since the text itself does not provide any systematic argumentative basis for Socrates' conclusions, this reading forces us to supply one on his behalf. Most

interpreters conclude that although he does not explicitly say so, Socrates must be committed to the premiss that any entity put forward as an explanation must, as a matter of stipulation, have both a necessary and a sufficient link with the presence of the feature it is meant to explain.²⁴ But this leaves the superiority of the form theory hostage to some controversially strong assumptions. In particular, it is unclear why Socrates would expect his criticisms to have any force against his opponents. Since he is presupposing that all explanatory theories must conform to these highly restrictive criteria, the obvious focus for disagreement is on the appropriateness of the criteria themselves. It then seems surprising that something so crucially important to the argument is neither mentioned nor defended anywhere in the dialogue.

It seems reasonable to take a second look at this passage to see if there is a different way to understand Socrates' position. If Socrates is making the strong claim that he can refute the theories of his predecessors and establish his own theory as the correct one, we will need to go beyond the text in a significant way to provide the necessary support. It is more plausible to take Socrates as making the weaker claim that the correct explanation has not yet been identified, and that his opponents are likely to be wrong in supposing they have already found what they were looking for. On this view, the key fault with the rejected explanations has to do with their arbitrary and unenlightening character: they leave room for puzzlement, which persists even if we are prepared to entertain the possibility that the explanation might be correct. Supposing it is true that Simmias is larger than Socrates 'by a head': why should it be a small thing,²⁵ and not a thing of some other sort, which ex-

²⁴ Thus many commentators are to be found talking of necessary and sufficient causes, or necessary and sufficient conditions for explanation, in connection with the final argument, and making the claim that Socrates thinks he has identified what he was searching for: e.g. Bluck, *Phaedo*, 112–13; Gallop, *Phaedo*, 185–6; Vlastos, 'Reasons', 100–1 n. 64; Bostock, *Phaedo*, 138–9; Wiggins, 'Teleology', 1–18; Rowe, 'Explanation', 53 n. 10; D. Sedley, 'Platonic Causes', *Phronesis*, 43 (1998), 114–32; Fine, 'Separation', 371–9; and Sharma, 'Socrates', 171–2.

²⁵ Socrates' dissatisfaction with such explanations by opposites is anticipated earlier in the dialogue, in his discussion of the 'slavish' explanation of courage at 68 D. It is irrational (*ἀλογον*), he says, to try to explain someone's courage in the face of death as the result of fear of facing some greater evil. A similar difficulty is noted in the case of apparent temperance at 68 E–69 A. The abstinence from some pleasures occurs because people are in the grip of others, and to call this 'temperance' would lead to the paradoxical conclusion that it is in some sense because of indiscipline that people are temperate. Socrates does not rule out these accounts of the virtues *a*

plains largeness in this particular case? And can it really be this and nothing else that makes Simmias taller than Socrates, when, in a comparison with Phaedo, the very same factor can now be cited to explain Simmias' shortness?

These objections rest on a thought which is intuitively appealing, and has considerable philosophical interest. Plato makes Socrates put forward the view that real explanation leads to insight and understanding. He seems to connect this with a conception of explanation that modern philosophers would regard as a modal notion, that the *explanans* must track the *explanandum* in relevant counterfactual situations. Socrates thinks that this rules out the tenuous and contingent connections of material or sense-perceptible factors as serious candidates. We can imagine Simmias remaining exactly as he is, and yet not being taller than Socrates, if Socrates had been slightly different in height. It then seems reasonable to say that Simmias' head is incidental to his tallness relative to Socrates: in the imaginary case, the head remains unchanged, but the situation it purportedly explains no longer obtains. This thought might have led Plato to conclude, reasonably, that Simmias' head has little to do with explaining his relative tallness. Its presence is compatible with both this state of affairs and its opposite.

Defenders of such explanations may insist that Plato wrongly ignores the possibility that an explanation can be a genuine one, without the state of affairs it explains always obtaining: explanations are subject to a *ceteris paribus* condition. Simmias' head does account for his tallness relative to Socrates, provided everything else remains the same. Yet it seems reasonable to reply on Plato's behalf that this would be to postpone the problem, not to solve it. On the modified view, it is now the *ceteris paribus* stipulation, not Simmias' head, which is fundamental to the explanation. If we make our explanation conditional on the stipulation that the situation must remain the same—at least in this key respect, that Simmias must remain taller than Socrates—the purported explanation seems redundant: it is the stipulation, not Simmias' head, that is doing the real work. But if we dispense with the stipulation, any of the factors introduced by Socrates' opponents seem to be open to the objection that they are compatible with the absence of what they supposedly

priori: his doubts about them are stated in a carefully nuanced way (69 A 6–E 4), and his own account is presented as a personal view (κατὰ τὴν ἑμὴν δόξαν, 69 D 1).

explain. Hence Socrates, in his current position, thinks it is a mistake to offer anything more informative by way of explanation than a platitude: Simmias is taller by tallness, whatever that may be.

This also gives us a different way to interpret Socrates' earlier discussion of Anaxagoras at 97 B–99 C, which many have tried to see as the vital key to unlock the mystery of Socrates' new approach:

'But once I heard someone reading, as he said, a book by Anaxagoras, saying that understanding [*νοῦς*] is the agent of order and the explanation for everything. I was pleased by this explanation, and it seemed to me that it was in some way good for understanding to be the explanation for everything. And, I thought, if this is how things are, since understanding orders everything, it will order and place each thing in such a way as would be best.' (*Phaedo* 97 B 8–C 6)

Commentators have debated whether this discussion marks the adoption or renunciation of a teleological criterion for explanation. Teleology, however, is not the real issue. The real significance of Anaxagoras is that he promised to supply something vital in our concept of explanation, in Socrates' view. He took the prospect of Anaxagorean teleology seriously because, as he says, if explanations of this kind were forthcoming, he was 'prepared to yearn no longer for any other kind of explanation [*παρεσκευάσμην ὡς οὐκέτι ποθεσόμενος αἰτίας ἄλλο εἶδος*]' (98 A 1–2). The point is not that any genuine explanations must have this particular structure, that of a teleological account, but rather that they would put an end to Socrates' feeling of dissatisfaction. Explanations of this satisfying kind are contrasted with the materialistic ones Anaxagoras actually provided, which invite further investigation rather than foreclosing it.

On my reading, then, the final argument stakes out a much more tentative—and more open—position than the one typically read into the *Phaedo* at this point. Rather than rejecting explanations by way of material or sense-based factors as mistaken in principle, Socrates gives reasons for thinking that these factors do not, in fact, fit a satisfactory conception of explanation. From this point of view, such explanations are, at best, only part of a fuller and more enlightening account. Moreover this philosophical position is, as far as I can tell, a defensible and interesting one. It presents a thesis about the connection between explanation and understanding which has points of contact with wider philosophical concerns.

7. Explanation and equality

There is a great deal more to be said about the final argument, but the primary reason for considering it in such detail here is to provide illumination and support for the ground-up reading of the 'equals' argument I put forward earlier. It remains to bring about a reconciliation between the dramatic and philosophical levels of the dialogue, and to show that this approach provides satisfying answers to some puzzles and difficulties which arise on more standard approaches. This final part of my case will bring to completion my account of the 'equals' argument, and its place within a ground-up reading of the *Phaedo*.

The primary difficulty of the 'equals' argument, according to previous interpretations, is to find the basis on which a metaphysical theory—the existence of the Platonic forms—is established. Traditional and transitional readers give different answers to this question, although both rely on the top-down assumption that the argument must be understood in the context of doctrines or assumptions drawn from other Platonic works, and both take a metaphysical focus to be a crucial theme of the *Phaedo*. Yet such readings lead to serious problems in making sense of the 'equals' argument, which can be avoided by the adoption of the alternative, ground-up approach I have argued for.

Against the traditional reading, I have argued that no explicitly metaphysical claims need to be assumed at the outset of the discussion of equality, and that there are strong dramatic indications that Plato did not expect his audience to assume them. Against the transitional reading, I have argued that a methodological framework of Socratic assumptions which constrains the scope of an acceptable definition, pieced together from other dialogues, is not necessary to understand the basis of Simmias' agreement with Socrates. On the reading I propose, the discussion proceeds at a more intuitive level, and does not rely on any specific background drawn from other Platonic works.

This neutral approach, which stresses the partial grasp Simmias and Socrates have on their subject-matter, is helpful in explaining some features of their exchange which are difficult to account for on more mainstream readings. The unusual expression 'the equal itself', on this view, is not used by Socrates and Simmias directly

to refer to an entity of a certain special sort, nor to a meaning associated with a Socratic definition, but rather to pick out something indirectly by means of an important role it has in a philosophical account of equality. This outline characterization, although specific in one respect, also leaves many details unspecified. In particular, it does not determine whether this ‘equal’ is unitary or composite, or even what sort of ontological category it falls into.

This indeterminacy provides a plausible way to account for the notoriously problematic introduction of the plural expression ‘the equals themselves’ (*ἀτὰ τὰ ἴσα*) at 74 C 1, at a crucial point in the argument.²⁶ The indirect way of identifying the subject of the conversation makes it possible to see how ‘the equals themselves’ arises quite naturally by attraction from the context. This is not, however, an instance of grammatical attraction, as some have supposed.²⁷ If we move from discussing equal things, as Socrates does, to what it is about each of the things which makes them equal, it is quite natural to consider the role in question as something distinct and individual for each of the equal things in question.

It also gives the expression ‘the equals themselves’ an intelligible connection with the ‘equal itself’ which precedes it at 74 A 12 and follows it at C 4–5. The variation from one expression to the other counts against the idea that Socrates and Simmias are committed to a definite identification of an object with any specific features. Since nothing has been agreed, beyond the need for something to occupy the role, their terminology reflects the indeterminacy about whether what they are considering is simple or compound.

On previous interpretations, which typically read the ‘equals’ argument as concerned primarily with Platonic metaphysics, the crucial question is assumed to be whether the ‘equals themselves’ are meant to be identified with, or contrasted with, the Platonic form of equality. Neither option, however, is particularly attractive. If the ‘equals themselves’ are just to be identified with the form of equality, why did Plato risk generating confusion by using different expressions in the course of a single argument? This is a particularly pressing question given that the supposedly incidental shift is made in the course of the attempt to draw a contrast between sense-

²⁶ It might be that the plural has arisen by a copyist’s error or over-zealous correction, as Bostock conjectures (*Phaedo*, 82–3), but this is made unlikely by the parallel instance in *Parm.* 129 B 1 of ‘the likes themselves’ (*ἀτὰ τὰ ὅμοια*).

²⁷ e.g. Dancy, *PF*, 271.

perceptible equals (ταῦτα τὰ ἴσα, 74 C 4) and the 'equal itself'. On the other hand, if the 'equals themselves' are distinct from the form, it is difficult to see what sort of objects Plato might have had in mind or why he introduced them. If a contrast is being drawn between a metaphysical form and sense-perceptible equals, the properties of some third kind of entity do not seem relevant to the argument's conclusion.

Going further, I have argued that the schematic nature of the 'equals' argument is not an accident, but is an indication that the philosophical basis for ruling out sense-perceptible equals as possible candidates for 'the equal itself' is not set out at this stage in the dialogue. From the audience's point of view, no justification for this move is apparent until the connection between the philosophical account of equality—or anything else—and the notion of explanation is introduced. As a result, the agreement between Socrates and Simmias takes place at a dramatic level—Simmias has his own reasons for ruling out certain kinds of options, which are independent of those Plato will later present to his audience. The metaphysical reading which motivates the search for a detailed reconstruction of the 'equals' argument, to justify the move from Socratic definitions to Platonic metaphysics, is in my view a distortion introduced by top-down assumptions about the context.

Later in the *Phaedo*, Socrates defends the claim that the explanation of coming to be and ceasing to be in general (περὶ γενέσεως καὶ φθορᾶς τῆν αἰτίαν, 95 E 10) cannot be done within the framework of material or sense-perceptible factors, since they do not provide sufficient resources for genuine explanations. The deficiency of such factors is not the result of one simple failing, such as appearing different to different observers, manifesting relative rather than absolute properties, having a property in one respect and not in others, or exhibiting different properties in different contexts. The deliberately vague formula in the 'equals' argument—whether it is that the sense-perceptibles are 'equal for one, but not for another', or whether it is that the sense-perceptibles are 'equal at one time, but not at another'—both foreshadows the problem and leaves it open for the detailed discussion which comes later.

One further problem which besets metaphysical readings of the 'equals' argument is to make sense of the summary of the argument Socrates offers shortly after:

‘Then, therefore,’ he said ‘do matters stand this way for us, Simmias? If indeed there are these things we’re always chattering about, something fine and good, and every such thing, and if we refer all our perceptions to this, recovering the thing of ours that was there before, and we compare these [perceptions] with it, it is necessary that, just as there are these things, so our soul must be there before we are born. But if there are no such things [εἰ δὲ μὴ ἔστι ταῦτα], this argument will be in vain? Do matters stand this way: it is equally necessary that there are these things and that our soul is there even before we are born, and that if they are not there, nor is [our soul before we are born] there?’ (*Phaedo* 76 D 7–E 7)

Read straightforwardly, Socrates’ remarks suggest that the existence of the ‘fine and good, and every such thing’ is an assumption up for debate, on which the argument rests, not something which the foregoing argument has demonstrated, or something which can be taken as self-evident.²⁸

Moreover, Socrates makes a similar concession at the conclusion of the final argument, when he draws the conclusion that the soul is immortal and does not perish when death occurs. Simmias comments that he necessarily ‘feels some residual doubt as to what has been said’, and Socrates replies:

‘Not only that, Simmias,’ said Socrates ‘you are right about these things—but even the primary suppositions, although you accept them [τάς γε ὑποθέσεις τὰς πρώτας, καὶ εἰ πιστὰ ὑμῖν εἶσιν], are to be examined more clearly. If you go through them sufficiently, it seems to me, you will follow the argument to the greatest extent that a man can follow it. And when that becomes clear, you will seek nothing further.’ (*Phaedo* 107 B 4–9)

²⁸ Dimas, ‘Recollecting’, 176–7, replies on behalf of metaphysical readers that the response of Simmias corrects the misleading summary of the position given by Socrates, and in doing so confirms that the existence of forms has been established by the argument. He cites Grube’s translation of the crucial remark: ‘it is opportune that our argument comes to the conclusion that our soul existed before we are born, and equally so that reality of which you are now speaking’ (*Phaedo* 76 E 9–77 A 2). However, Grube’s translation is misleadingly precise. It takes ‘equally so’ (τὸ ὁμοίως εἶναι) to imply that the two claims are equally shown to be true, not just that they are on an equal footing. Yet this latter reading would confirm rather than correct what Socrates has just said, and it is taken by Hackforth, *Phaedo*, 73, and Gallop, *Phaedo*, 25, as the intended one. It is true that Simmias goes on to say that he is convinced that ‘all such things are in the fullest possible way [εἶναι ὡς οἶόν τε μάλιστα], fine and good and all the others you were just talking about’ (77 A 3–5), and it could be argued that it is this conviction that he describes as having been ‘proved’ (ἀποδείκται, A 5). But it seems more likely that Simmias is referring to the prenatal existence of the soul, since both he and Cebes go on to say that while they accept this part of the argument, the counterpart claim, the post-mortem existence of the soul, has not yet been proved (οὐδὲ αὐτῷ μοι δοκεῖ . . . ἀποδείχθαι, 77 B 2–3, cf. C 2).

On the metaphysical reading, Socrates can only be understood to be referring to the special entities he has introduced in the dialogue. But then his attitude towards them in these comments is very puzzling. Since so much of the argument of the *Phaedo* has been based on them, he can hardly suppose that it is open to an opponent simply to reject them, nullifying the whole of the discussion. If the form theory is so vulnerable, it is very strange that he says nothing in their defence, simply relying on his companions' uncritical belief in them. Yet at the other extreme, if the existence of these entities has been demonstrated by an argument taken by Plato to be valid, it is difficult to see why Socrates should be made to qualify his remarks in this way, misleadingly suggesting that the question of their existence is still open.

As long as we make the assumption that the *Phaedo*'s central pre-occupations are metaphysical, these reservations must inevitably generate problems. This makes it reasonable to look at an alternative. On the view I have advocated, Plato's primary concern is not with building a metaphysical theory, but with looking for adequate explanations. If metaphysics is involved, it is secondary to this aim, motivated by the inadequacy of more parsimonious resources, and is crucially limited to the exigencies of his explanatory concerns. Although the Socrates of the *Phaedo* does not venture to give any detailed account of the items he deems necessary, it is clear that they require him to go beyond anything the senses reveal. He ventures in this direction reluctantly, and in contrast to the enthusiasm of his companions, he stresses the difficulties at every step.

In the final argument, Socrates declares himself dissatisfied with the stopgap 'explanations' of his predecessors, criticizing them for their arbitrary character and their failure to provide the enlightenment that Socrates takes to be characteristic of genuine explanations. He thinks it is insufficient to single out one particular material factor, because this leaves us unable to say why it is this, rather than another one, which does the explanatory work. Moreover, when we think of relevant counterfactual situations in which the proposed explanatory factor is still present, the situation it is required to explain may no longer obtain. This shows, on his view, that the real explanation is more likely to lie elsewhere.

If Plato structures his argument in the way I have described, it is notable that a great deal depends on the claim that there are explanations to be found, and the claim that they have the features

Socrates attributes to them. This suggests a different understanding of what Socrates has in mind when he encourages Simmias and Cebes to examine the ‘primary suppositions’ more clearly, and why he makes the prenatal existence of the soul depend on there being a ‘fine and good, and every such thing’. It is much more difficult to imagine doing without the notion of explanation than it is to imagine doing without a metaphysical theory of forms. And it is even more difficult to imagine that the things for which an explanation is being sought—finesse and goodness, among others—do not in fact have the kind of objective basis which gives rise to the explanatory demand in the first place. Plato, however, regards this as the only serious alternative to Socrates’ conclusions, and he thinks it is worth drawing his audience’s attention to it as an option. If, on the other hand, we continue to believe that there are such objective realities, the pressure of argument will drive us towards the Socratic kind of explanations which do not, as others do, rest on an arbitrary and unexplained basis. And this in turn will expose the inadequacy of traditional epistemological theories to account for our grasp of finesse, or equality, or anything else which cannot straightforwardly arise from sense-experience.

8. Conclusion

I have tried to show that a plausible and philosophically interesting message emerges from the *Phaedo* when approached on its own terms, unburdened by assumptions involved in a general theory of Plato’s development and interests. In my view, many of the present dissatisfactions with the dialogue arise from distorted expectations about the kinds of questions Plato should be concerned with. It is no surprise, then, that Plato’s limited engagement with these questions, and his unwillingness to provide clear and precise answers to them, leads to charges of dogmatism and obscurity. My alternative to this top-down approach yields a more positive view of Plato’s project in the *Phaedo*. Starting from the questions that the dialogue does address, a picture of Plato’s philosophical concerns can be built up which is rather different from that of more mainstream approaches. As a result, the issues which the *Phaedo* treats as important are to be identified and assessed in their own right.

My reading of the *Phaedo* takes the argumentative structure and the narrative structure of the dialogue as complementary. These elements are integrated in Plato's writing, but can be separated in interpretation. In this way, the contribution made by both philosophical and dramatic structure can be seen as Plato's plan to build up and defend an overall position. According to the case I have made, the earlier stages of the dialogue bring up a series of claims which the dramatic characters receive sympathetically for reasons of their own. As the discussion progresses, more and more of the argumentative justification is shared with the audience, and in the final argument the crucial connection to the notion of explanation is made. While the engagement between Socrates and his companions dictates the structure of the discussion in the initial stages of the dialogue, the argumentative engagement with the audience becomes increasingly prominent as the discussion advances. By the end of the dialogue the reader is in a position to appreciate the philosophical case in support of the claims that were introduced to the audience at the beginning.

On my reading of the *Phaedo*, then, the dialogue gives us both more and less than mainstream approaches suppose. It offers less, in that it does not attempt the task of presenting a worked-out and systematic metaphysical theory, of the kind generally thought to set the agenda for a collection of Plato's dialogues typically grouped together by interpreters. It offers more, however, in that it shows how a concern with explanation, recognizably connected to the definition-seeking enquiries of the Socrates portrayed in other dialogues, can be developed into a powerful argument against the adequacy of generally accepted ways of accounting for knowledge. It also offers serious reflections on the nature of explanation itself, and argues for some constraints on any theory which is to count as properly explanatory. Read in this way, the dialogue justifies a decisive step away from theories which deal primarily with sense-perceptibles, and it points the way towards the development of a theory of a different kind. Working out the precise details of this theory was a task which would continue to preoccupy Plato for the remainder of his philosophical career.

St John's College, Oxford

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Ackrill, J. L., 'Anamnesis in the *Phaedo*: Remarks on 73 c–75 c', in E. N. Lee, A. P. D. Mourelatos, and R. Rorty (eds.), *Exegesis and Argument* (Assen, 1973), 177–95.
- Archer-Hind, R. D., *Platonos Phaidon [Phaidon]* (London, 1883).
- Bluck, R. S., *Plato's Phaedo [Phaedo]* (London, 1955).
- Bostock, D., *Plato's Phaedo [Phaedo]* (Oxford, 1986).
- Brentlinger, J., 'Incomplete Predicates and the Two World Theory of the *Phaedo*' ['Incomplete'], *Phronesis*, 17 (1972), 61–79.
- Burnet, J., *Platonis opera*, vol. i (Oxford, 1903).
- *Plato's Phaedo [Phaedo]* (Oxford, 1911).
- Dancy, R. M., *Plato's Introduction of Forms [PF]* (Cambridge, 2004).
- Devereux, D., 'Separation and Immanence in Plato's Theory of Forms', repr. in G. Fine (ed.), *Plato 1: Metaphysics and Epistemology* (Oxford, 1999), 192–214.
- Dimas, P., 'Recollecting Forms in the *Phaedo*' ['Recollecting'], *Phronesis*, 48 (2003), 175–214.
- Duke, E. A., Hicken, W. F., Nicoll, W. S. M., Robinson, D. M., and Strachan, J. C. G., *Platonis opera*, i, *tetralogias I–II continens* [revised OCT] (Oxford, 1995).
- Fine, G., *On Ideas: Aristotle's Criticism of Plato's Theory of Forms* (Oxford, 1993).
- 'Review of Plato's *Phaedo*. Translated by David Gallop', *Philosophical Review*, 86 (1977), 101–5.
- 'Separation', repr. in ead., *Plato on Knowledge and Forms: Selected Essays* (Oxford, 2003), 252–300.
- Gallop, D., *Plato's Phaedo [Phaedo]* (Oxford, 1975).
- Gillespie, C. M., 'The Use of *εἶδος* and *ἰδέα* in Hippocrates', *Classical Quarterly*, 6 (1912), 179–203.
- Grube, G. M. A., *Plato's Thought [PT]* (London, 1935).
- Gulley, N., 'Plato's Theory of Recollection', *Classical Quarterly*, NS 4 (1954), 194–213.
- Hackforth, R., *Plato's Phaedo [Phaedo]* (Cambridge, 1955).
- Harte, V., 'Plato's Metaphysics', in G. Fine (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Plato* (Oxford, 2008), 191–216.
- Haynes, R. P., 'The Form Equality, as a Set of Equals: *Phaedo* 74 B–C' ['Set'], *Phronesis*, 9 (1964), 17–26.
- Irwin, T., *Plato's Ethics [Ethics]* (Oxford, 1995).
- Loriaux, R., *Le Phédon de Platon, 57 A–84 B [Phédon]* (Namur, 1969).
- Mills, K. W., 'Plato's *Phaedo*, 74 B 7–C 6' ['Part 1'], *Phronesis*, 2 (1957), 128–47.

- 'Plato's *Phaedo*, 74 B 7–C 6, Part 2' ['Part 2'], *Phronesis*, 3 (1958), 40–58.
- Murphy, N. R., *The Interpretation of Plato's Republic* (Oxford, 1951).
- Nehamas, A., 'Plato on the Imperfection of the Sensible World' ['Imperfection'], repr. in G. Fine (ed.), *Plato 1: Metaphysics and Epistemology* (Oxford, 1999), 171–91.
- 'Predication and Forms of Opposites in the *Phaedo*' ['Opposites'], *Review of Metaphysics*, 26.3 (1973), 461–91.
- Owen, G. E. L., 'Logic and Metaphysics in Some Earlier Works of Aristotle', in I. Düring and G. E. L. Owen (eds.), *Aristotle and Plato in the Mid-Fourth Century* (Gothenburg, 1960), 163–90.
- Penner, T., *The Ascent from Nominalism [Nominalism]* (Dordrecht, 1987).
- Rist, J. M., 'Equals and Intermediates in Plato', *Phronesis*, 4 (1964), 27–37.
- Ross, W. D., *Plato's Theory of Ideas [PTI]* (Oxford, 1951).
- Rowe, C., 'Explanation in *Phaedo* 99 c 6–102 a 8' ['Explanation'], *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 11 (1993), 49–69.
- 'Interpreting Plato', in H. Benson (ed.), *A Companion to Plato* (Oxford, 2009), 13–24.
- *Plato: Phaedo [Phaedo]* (Cambridge, 1993).
- Sedley, D., 'Equal Sticks and Stones' ['Equal'], in D. Scott (ed.), *Maieusis: Essays in Ancient Philosophy in Honour of Myles Burnyeat* (Oxford, 2007), 68–86.
- 'Platonic Causes', *Phronesis*, 43 (1998), 114–32.
- Sharma, R., 'Socrates' New *Aitia*: Causal and Teleological Explanations in Plato's *Phaedo*' ['Socrates'], *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 36 (2009), 133–77.
- Tarrant, D., 'Plato, *Phaedo* 74 A–B' ['74 A–B'], *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, 77 (1957), 124–6.
- Taylor, A. E., *Varia Socratica* (Oxford, 1911).
- Verdenius, W., 'Notes on Plato's *Phaedo*', *Mnemosyne*, 4 (1958), 193–243.
- Vlastos, G., 'Reasons and Causes' ['Reasons'], repr. in id., *Platonic Studies* (Princeton, 1981), 76–110.
- White, N. P., *Plato on Knowledge and Reality [PKR]* (Indianapolis, 1976).
- Wiggins, D., 'Teleology and the Good in Plato's *Phaedo*' ['Teleology'], *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 4 (1986), 1–18.
- Williamson, H., *The Phaedo of Plato* (London, 1933).

OXFORD STUDIES
IN ANCIENT
PHILOSOPHY

EDITOR: BRAD INWOOD

VOLUME XLIV

SUMMER 2013

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS