The passage I am about to discuss (Phaedo 74b7-c6) contains Plato’s proof that equal sticks and stones are not the same as αὐτὸ τὸ ἴσον.

One method of proving that A is non-identical with B is by showing that whereas A possesses a certain attribute, B does not possess it; and it seems clear enough that this is the method of proof which Plato intended to employ at Phaedo 74b-c; i.e., he thought he could show that something is true of equal sticks and stones which is not true of αὐτὸ τὸ ἴσον.

But when he comes to state his second premiss (at 74c1-2), we find that instead of denying that αὐτὸ τὸ ἴσον possesses a certain attribute, it denies (a) that αὐτὰ τὰ ἴσα (plural) possess a certain attribute and (b) that ἴσητες possesses a certain quite different attribute. Thus instead of keeping to the form

All As possess the attribute S
But B does not possess the attribute S:
Therefore B is not to be identified with any A,

Plato’s proof has apparently assumed the form

All As possess the attribute S
But the Cs do not possess the attribute S, nor does D possess the attribute T
Therefore B is not to be identified with any A.

It need hardly be said that any proof of this latter form is quite invalid, unless it be the case that B is a C; and even if B were a C, the second half of the second premiss would still be irrelevant to the proof as a whole. We are therefore faced with the following four tasks: (1) we must try to determine what Plato had in mind when he spoke of αὐτὰ τὰ ἴσα; (2) we must ask whether it is feasible to save the validity of his proof by assuming that αὐτὸ τὸ ἴσον is but one member of the total class of αὐτὰ τὰ ἴσα; (3) we must inquire why Plato brought in αὐτὰ τὰ ἴσα at all instead of keeping to the singular αὐτὸ τὸ ἴσον (as he does without exception elsewhere in the Phaedo); (4) we must ask why the second premiss has two halves, of which the latter is apparently quite irrelevant to the argument.

There remains yet a fifth problem which the interpreter of this

Furthermore, the statement of the argument would (strictly speaking) be incomplete unless the proposition that B is a C were formulated as an explicit premiss.
argument must face, namely: what is the attribute which Plato asserts to belong to equal sticks and stones but not to belong to \( \alpha \nu \tau \alpha \tau \alpha \varepsilon \sigma \alpha \)? Hitherto it has been almost universally assumed that the attribute in question is that of seeming to one man equal but to another man unequal; however, N. R. Murphy (The Interpretation of Plato’s Republic - Oxford, 1951 - p. 111-n. 1) has suggested that \( \tau \omega \mu \varepsilon \nu \varepsilon \sigma \alpha \tau \omega \delta ' \sigma \delta \) at 74b8-9 means ‘equal to one thing but not to another’, and on this interpretation the attribute would be that of ‘seeming equal to one thing but not to another thing’.\(^1\)

Let us take this fifth problem first. Professor R. Hackforth, in the course of his review of Murphy’s book (Classical Review, N.S. vol. 2. (1952), p. 159), objects to Murphy’s interpretation of 74b8-9 that it represents Plato as making the absurd claim that \( \alpha \nu \tau \alpha \tau \alpha \varepsilon \sigma \alpha \) (unlike equal sticks and stones, which are equal to some things but unequal to others) are equal to everything. This is not quite true – what Murphy’s interpretation really implies is that Plato is claiming that \( \alpha \nu \tau \alpha \tau \alpha \varepsilon \sigma \alpha \) seem equal to everything – but even when thus modified, Hackforth’s point has force. For if one knows (as everyone does) that it is not the case that all things are equal to each other, how could it possibly seem to one that something is equal to everything? I have never met anyone to whom such a thing seemed to be the case, nor (to the best of my knowledge) has anyone else. Is it conceivable, therefore, that Plato should seriously have represented Simmias as saying that such a thing seemed the case to him? Yet despite the plausibility of Hackforth’s line of criticism, Murphy’s view is by no means entirely disposed of: for the more usual interpretation of \( \tau \omega \mu \varepsilon \nu \varepsilon \sigma \alpha \tau \omega \delta ' \sigma \delta \) is itself beset by difficulties as great as those which beset Murphy’s.

In the first place, the usual interpretation requires at 74c1 not \( \sigma \omicron \) but a word meaning ‘to anyone’. Otherwise the proof that \( \alpha \nu \tau \alpha \tau \alpha \varepsilon \sigma \omega \) is not to be identified with any of the equal sticks or stones will not be valid even if \( \alpha \nu \tau \alpha \tau \alpha \varepsilon \sigma \omega \) is to be thought of as a member of the total class of \( \alpha \nu \tau \alpha \tau \alpha \varepsilon \sigma \alpha \). For even with this condition fulfilled, the proof will only be valid if what is asserted of \( \alpha \nu \tau \alpha \tau \alpha \varepsilon \sigma \alpha \) in the second premiss is either the contradictory or the contrary of what is asserted of equal sticks and stones in the first premiss; but though ‘never seem to anyone unequal’ stands in the required relation to ‘seem to some equal but to

\(^1\) R. Loriaux (L’Être et la Forme selon Platon, 1955, pp. 18-19) paraphrases the argument at Phaedo 74b-c in such a way as to make it clear that he too takes \( \tau \omega \mu \varepsilon \nu \ldots \tau \omega \delta ' \sigma \delta \) as neuters; however, he makes no attempt to justify his so doing, and in fact seems to be unaware, so far as this point is concerned, that his interpretation is in any way unusual.