At Phaedo 74 b 7-c 5 Plato provides a crisp but tricky argument for the non-identity of forms with sensible particulars. Although it occurs only as a small part of an extensive argument for the celebrated thesis that knowledge is recollection, recent commentary on the part approaches in quantity and surpasses in controversy that devoted to the main argument. This paper offers an interpretation of Phaedo 74 b 7-c 5 which is completely novel and avoids a number of difficulties facing its competitors.

The passage itself is deceptive in its brevity:

Do not then (T 1) equal stones and sticks sometimes \(\varepsilon\varepsilon\nu\lambda\nu\nu\epsilon\tau\epsilon\), while remaining the same, appear on the one hand to be equal but on the other hand to be unequal \(\tau\phi\nu\mu\varepsilon\nu\lambda\varsigma\varphi\alpha\nu\eta\tau\alpha\iota, \tau\phi\delta\,\sigma\omega\)?

Certainly.

But, now (T 2) have the equals themselves \(\alpha\nu\tau\alpha\,\tau\alpha\,\lambda\varsigma\alpha\) ever seemed to you \(\sigma\nu\) unequal; or (T 2 a) equality \(\varsigma\varsigma\lambda\varsigma\tau\tau\) inequality? No, never \(\alpha\nu\delta\epsilon\psi\nu\rho\omicron\omicron\nu\epsilon\tau\epsilon\), Socrates.

Therefore, (T 3) they are not the same, these equal things \(\tau\alpha\nu\tau\alpha\,\tau\alpha\,\lambda\varsigma\alpha\) and the-equal-itself \(\alpha\nu\tau\alpha\,\tau\alpha\,\lambda\varsigma\alpha\).

What is troublesome about the passage is more easily said than solved. On the one hand, Plato seems to want an argument that proceeds straightforwardly from the principle of identity:

1. All sensible equals sometimes have a certain property P.
2. The-equal-itself never has P.

Therefore,

3. The-equal-itself is different from any sensible equal.

On the other hand, this obviously valid argument is not the one Plato actually gives. For in view of T 2 and T 2 a the argument must be cast as follows:

1’. All sensible equals sometimes have P.
2’. (i) The equals themselves never have P & (ii) Equality never seems to be inequality.

This is evident from the bibliography listed at the end of the paper. I shall give references by author’s name and page number only, including where necessary an opus number in brackets.
From 1' and 2' is said to follow 3'. The-equal-itself is different from any sensible equal. While 3' is clearly the desired conclusion, how it is gotten is anything but transparent. Indeed, as it stands, argument (1')-(3') is invalid unless (i) or (ii) has an interpretation making it valid. Since (1') and (i) share at least the predicate P, suppose we start there.

Commentary has been extremely generous here. The oldest suggestion is Olympiodorus' that "αὐτὰ τὰ ἵσα" refers not to the form the-equal-itself [αὐτὸ τὸ ἵσον] but to the several thoughts or mental representations of the form in various persons' minds. Presumably, Olympiodorus reasoned that the form could appear sometimes equal, sometimes not, only if its mental representation could vary from mind to mind or occasion to occasion of thought. Thus (i) is held to deny this by saying that such mental representations [the αὐτὰ τὰ ἵσα] are all the same [ἵσα]. Unfortunately, the suggestion makes nonsense of T 2 which requires that the equals themselves at no time appear unequal to even one person. This is clearly the impact of "ἵσα" at 74 c 1. Besides this how could Phaedo possibly report on the equality of his and, say, Socrates' mental representation of the form? For these reasons at least the ancient interpretation must be abandoned.

A second suggestion is that Plato understands by "αὐτὰ τὰ ἵσα" the so-called intermediates or mathematical equals. Apart from the risk of even attributing such a doctrine to Plato, the suggestion fails completely to advance the argument. For it now proves, at most, the difference of sensible from mathematical equals or requires that the form αὐτὸ τὸ ἵσον be a mathematical entity. But the latter contradicts the very doctrine that inspired the suggestion, namely, that the mathematical entities comprise an intermediate class between sensible particulars and forms. Moreover, it would be inappropriate for Plato to here introduce a peculiarly mathematical notion of equality, for the argument is part of a larger proof concerning the general

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Footnotes:

1 Olympiodorus, p. 159, 11. 12-15. Wagner, p. 124, adopts the view and attributes it to Stallbaum as well.
2 Geddes, p. 57, also notes this difficulty but proceeds to offer an equally difficult interpretation: that "αὐτὰ τὰ ἵσα" is plural because "referring to more than one application of the one standard of comparison, ἀντὶ τὸ ἵσον." For now, "ἵσαποικωτέ" at 74 c 3 is rendered inexplicable.
3 Burnet, Notes, p. 56, inspired this suggestion, which Bluck [1], p. 67, n. 3, and Hackforth [2], p. 69, n. 2, adopt, by pointung to Euclid's mention of αὐτὰ τὰ ἵσα in his first general axiom.