Sense-experience and the Argument for Recollection in Plato’s Phaedo

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Introduction

At Phaedo 65a9ff., in the course of his description of the philosopher’s ‘practice of death’, Socrates maintains that the senses are a hindrance to the philosopher in his pursuit of truth and wisdom (φρόνημα), and that it is only by means of pure reason, or reasoning without the aid of the senses (αὐτῇ καθ’ αὐτήν εἰληφνεῖ τῇ διανοίᾳ χρώμενος (66a1-2)), that the philosopher, in his present life, can attain knowledge of Forms. We are explicitly told that these Forms – the Just, the Beautiful, the Good, and even Tallness, Health, Strength and all the rest – cannot be seen with the eyes, nor can they be apprehended by any other form of bodily perception (65a4-e5). Accordingly, the true philosopher will ‘as far as possible’ (καθ’ ἄνων δύναται, 64c5; ὅτι μάλιστα, 65c7, 66a4) leave the body behind, rid himself of eyes and ears, and seek truth with reason alone, knowing that the senses, one and all, are deceptive (65b1-7) and that one can never apprehend reality and attain truth and wisdom with the eye (65a9-66a10).

A few pages later, however, in the argument for recollection (72e3-77a5) which forms the second half of the first proof of the immortality of the soul, Socrates claims, apparently in flat contradiction to what he has just said about the worthlessness of the senses to the philosopher in his pursuit of knowledge, that, in fact, it is only through sense-experience, which we all do have right from the very moment of birth, that we recollect the Forms, knowledge of which we acquired in a previous discarnate existence and forgot at the moment of birth.

Taking our knowledge of Equality as an example, Socrates maintains that we know it, and that we derive our conception of it from no other source – indeed, to do so is impossible – than from sight or touch, or from some other one of the senses (74a9-75a7). In such a case, Socrates argues, we recognize the sensible equals, e.g. equal sticks, equal stones, etc., as striving to be like Equality, but succeeding only imperfectly, and it is
impossible for us to do so unless we had previous knowledge of the Form Equality. Thus, since we begin to see, hear and enjoy the use of all the other senses as soon as we are born, our knowledge of Equality must have been acquired before then, and lost at birth. However, later on (δειπνον), by using our senses (ταὶς αισθήμασις χρώμενοι), we recover the knowledge we previously possessed – a process of learning rightly called recollection (75a11-76e8).

These two passages deserve careful study, for they are obviously of crucial importance for any assessment of the roles of reason and sense-experience in Plato’s epistemology and methodology in the Phaedo. Both passages are concerned with the process of attaining knowledge of Forms. On the face of it, the argument for recollection which maintains that it is only through sense-experience that we recollect the Forms seems flatly to contradict the view clearly expressed in the description of the philosopher’s ‘practice of death’, namely that the senses, being deceptive, are a hindrance to the philosopher in his pursuit of knowledge of the Forms, and that the philosopher can only attain this knowledge by the sole use of reason unaided by the senses. Thus it is not uncommonly supposed that the philosopher’s ‘practice of death’ has nothing whatever to do with the argument for recollection in the dialogue, and that unlike the process of learning involved in the acquisition of knowledge in the Meno, the Republic and the Symposium, in the Phaedo Plato is explicitly saying that all perceivers, including newborn infants, do attain knowledge of the Forms involved in their perceptions. As Michael Morgan1 observes:

In the Phaedo the terrain is different. Here any perceivers can have, as a result of his perception, some knowledge of the Forms involved in that perception. No lengthy, elaborate technical education is required to bring the soul to an awareness of the Forms. Simple sense-experience will do. And it must do, in order for Socrates to argue that the soul must exist prenatally knowing the Forms, in such a way that at