

# The Phaedo: The Death of Socrates

by Sophia



## WHAT'S COVERED

In the *Apology*, Socrates is (wrongfully) convicted of denying the gods and corrupting the youth of Athens and is sentenced to death. In the *Crito*, Socrates is provided with a chance to escape his sentence but chooses not to do so because it would be wrong.

In the *Phaedo*, the sentence is carried out. Socrates is executed by imbibing hemlock (i.e., drinking poison). Before his demise, however, he taught a large group of his students one last time.

In the *Phaedo*, the conversation is about death, although it takes place in a manner that may seem backward. Socrates attempted to console his friends, rather than the other way around. He made a more nuanced argument than he did in the *Apology* regarding why we should not fear death and defined death as the separation of the soul from the body.

This tutorial investigates the death of Socrates in two parts:

1. [A Philosopher Does Not Fear Death](#)
2. [On Souls and Bodies](#)

## 1. A Philosopher Does Not Fear Death

Socrates accepted his death sentence, although he had at least three opportunities to delay it. He considered the topic of suicide (which was taboo at that time) philosophically. One of his students asked him, “*Why do you say...that a man ought not to take his own life, but that the philosopher will be ready to follow the dying?*”. Socrates responded with a religious answer: Our bodies are not our own. It is up to the gods, not us, to decide when and how to end our lives. We don’t have a right to take what belongs to them.

This raises an interesting (and perennial) question: why don’t the gods take better care of those who are under their protection? (Note that, in the *Phaedo*, the student who asked the question was referring to the gods’ protection of Socrates, but the question can also be asked about all of those who serve the gods, e.g., good people.) Since the gods didn’t seem to take good care of good people, why couldn’t Socrates take better care of himself by avoiding (or at least delaying) his death?

Socrates answered by relying on the rationale he developed in the *Apology* and the *Crito*: he does what is right because it is right and because, following his death, he will be judged by the "true" judges, gods who are wise and good. For this reason, a philosopher not only does not fear death (and is willing to die when it is right for him to do so) but can even look forward to it.

## 2. On Souls and Bodies

Why might a philosopher look forward to death? To answer, it is important to recognize what death is. According to Socrates, death is *"the separation of soul and body. And to be dead is the completion of this; when the soul exists in herself, and is released from the body and the body is released from the soul, what is this but death?"*

Socrates challenged his students to consider what a philosopher cares about. He or she is not concerned with sensory pleasure. Instead, the philosopher *"is entirely concerned with the soul and not with the body."* This establishes that a philosopher doesn't lose anything by resigning his or her body and entering a state of pure soul.

But why think that it is an *advantage* to do so? Why think that a philosopher improves his or her position by doing so? Socrates answered these questions in the following dialectic with the student:

*"What again shall we say of the actual acquirement of knowledge? — is the body, if invited to share in the enquiry, a hinderer or a helper? I mean to say, have sight and hearing any truth in them? Are they not, as the poets are always telling us, inaccurate witnesses? and yet, if even they are inaccurate and indistinct, what is to be said of the other senses? — for you will allow that they are the best of them?"*

*Certainly, he replied.*

*Then when does the soul attain truth? — for in attempting to consider anything in company with the body she is obviously deceived.*

*True.*

*Then must not true existence be revealed to her in thought, if at all?*

*Yes.*

*And thought is best when the mind is gathered into herself and none of these things trouble her—neither sounds nor sights nor pain nor any pleasure—when she takes leave of the body and has as little as possible to do with it, when she has no bodily sense or desire, but is aspiring after true being?*

*Certainly.*

*And in this the philosopher dishonours the body; his soul runs away from his body and desires to be alone*

*and by herself?*

*That is true.*

*Well, but there is another thing, Simmias: Is there or is there not an absolute justice?*

*Assuredly there is.*

*And an absolute beauty and absolute good?*

*Of course.*

*But did you ever behold any of them with your eyes?*

*Certainly not.*

*Or did you ever reach them with any other bodily sense? — and I speak not of these alone, but of absolute greatness, and health, and strength, and of the essence or true nature of everything. Has the reality of them ever been perceived by you through the bodily organs? Or rather, is not the nearest approach to the knowledge of their several natures made by him who so orders his intellectual vision as to have the most exact conception of the essence of each thing which he considers?*

*Certainly.*

*And he attains to the purest knowledge of them who goes to each with the mind alone, not introducing or intruding in the act of thought sight or any other sense together with reason, but with the very light of the mind in her own clearness searches into the very truth of each; he who has got rid, as far as he can, of eyes and ears and, so to speak, of the whole body, these being in his opinion distracting elements which when they infect the soul hinder her from acquiring truth and knowledge....”*

What Socrates alluded to in the preceding excerpt from the *Phaedo* is of deep and abiding interest to philosophers: the notion of an *essence*. An essence is what makes a thing what it is.

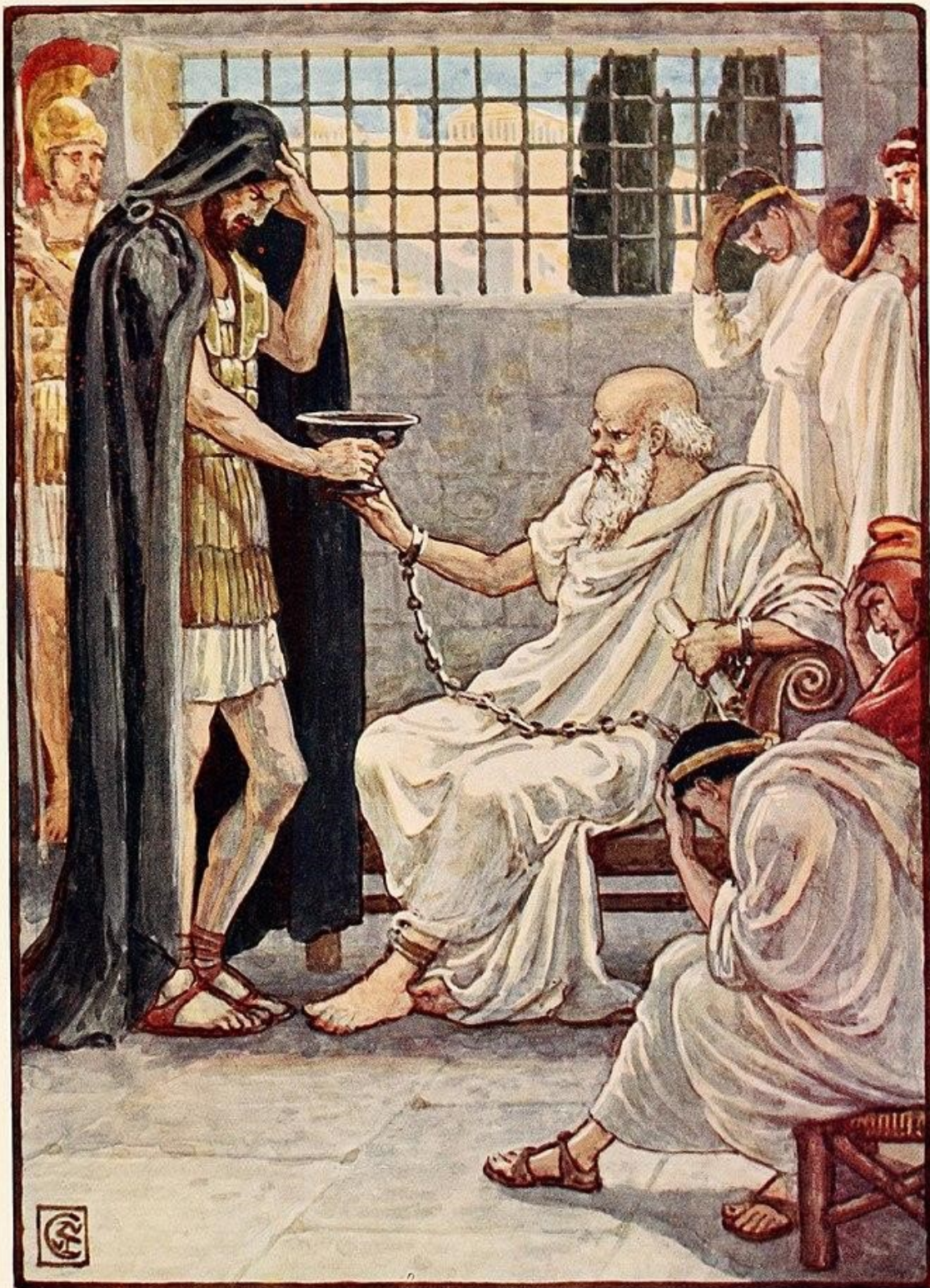
⇒ **EXAMPLE** The essence of humanity is what makes humans human. The essence of justice is what makes just acts just.

This is what Socrates meant when he mentioned “absolute justice.” *This* is the philosopher’s genuine interest. We know when an act is obviously just, and we know when an act is obviously unjust. However, to make true judgments in difficult cases (i.e., cases in which it is not obvious), we must know justice as it truly is. We must know the essence of justice *independent* of any particular act or just person.

In this endeavor, the empirical world may sometimes get in the way. We cannot access humanity in general, only individual humans. Socrates maintained that, without these individual cases clouding our vision, we might get a clear view of humanity in its pure form, justice in its absolute form, etc. This is a topic about which Socrates’

student, Plato, had *much* to say, as we will see in subsequent tutorials. In death, Socrates believed the questions in which he was most interested would be answered. Having gained this insight, he drank the hemlock with equanimity and took the next step in his philosophical journey: death.





He drank the contents as though it were a draught of wine

This painting, titled *The Death of Socrates* was painted by Jacques-Louis David in 1787. It depicts Socrates, as he accepts the poison hemlock his sentence for being convicted as guilty of denying the gods and corrupting the youth of Athens. Rather than trying to escape his fate, he uses it as a final lesson to his pupils. The medium for the painting was oil on canvas and can be found in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, NY.



## SUMMARY

In the *Phaedo*, Socrates instructed his pupils regarding death. Although human beings have no right to end their own lives (because our lives are the property of the gods), the **philosopher does not fear death**. He or she is not afraid to do what is right and, therefore, has nothing to fear from the "true" judges he or she will face in the afterlife. Death is a separation of the **soul and body**, but the philosopher's primary interest is to cultivate the former. Without a body to impede the soul's progress, we may see things as they truly are.

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